

23 September 2026

Cursory summit highlights US-Japan asymmetries

Key takeaways

- Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae held a brief meeting with US President Donald Trump on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting in New York.
- While Takaichi celebrated the strength of the bilateral relationship, the summit underscored Tokyo's limited leverage over the United States – whether regarding US hostility to international institutions or Trump's pursuit of an understanding with China – even as Japan's strategic reliance on the US has grown.
- The upshot is that Tokyo is unlikely to join middle-power alignments that would directly challenge the United States.

Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae is already on her way back to Tokyo after a brief visit to New York City that featured a thirty-five-minute meeting with US President Donald Trump and her first speech to the UN General Assembly.

The meeting, which the Japanese government wanted to secure before Trump's summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping, was the first between the two leaders since March, when Takaichi also sought to meet with the US president before his visit to China. While Takaichi said in a press conference late Tuesday that the bilateral meeting "demonstrates the strength of the US-Japan alliance to the world, especially given the increasingly severe security environment in Asia," the impact of the meeting was likely limited.

While the official readout of the session noted agreement on advancing economic security cooperation – particularly related to AI, semiconductors, and critical minerals – it is once again conspicuous that a US-Japan leaders' summit appears to have talked around the major issues in the bilateral relationship. The two governments are facing host-nation support talks that have to be concluded ahead of Japan's FY2027. The US

government has not publicly voiced expectations for Japan's defense spending, but the question looms as the Takaichi government prepares its mid-term defense spending plan (and next year's budget). Although Japanese officials noted that Trump did not say anything specific about Japan's defense spending, US views on Japan's defense spending relative to other allies remain a potential source of tension. Meanwhile, Trump's treasury secretary has been leaning heavily on Tokyo to adjust its macroeconomic policies, a subject that was reportedly discussed by Takaichi and Trump. The two sides appear to be steadily implementing their trade and investment agreement – though no new projects were announced Tuesday – and the possibility of friction over implementation of the investment framework remains. Finally, Takaichi has also faced domestic pressure to challenge US sanctions on International Criminal Court (ICC) officials, including its president Akane Tomoko, a Japanese national, which the prime minister reportedly did in her meeting.

But beyond these lingering sources of bilateral friction, the meeting demonstrates that the US-Japan relationship under the second Trump administration continues to be defined by an asymmetry of need that has reduced Japan's leverage in the relationship. Japan's conception of itself as a "frontline state" facing three nuclear-armed neighbors that have deepened their ties and its dependence on the US as a market for Japanese goods and investment mean that Tokyo needs US support more than ever. As Japanese elites have concluded, at least in the near term Japan has no "plan B" to the US-Japan alliance. However, the Trump administration has shown in multiple ways that the alliance with Japan does not have nearly as much importance as it had for past administrations, including the first Trump administration. The administration's attention has been more focused on the Western Hemisphere and the Middle East, as exemplified by its redeployment of military assets from East Asia to the Middle East in support of the war against Iran. Meanwhile, whereas the first Trump administration was to a considerable extent organized around competition with China, the president's interest in some kind of understanding with Xi – not to mention measures by the administration to scale back federal support for scientific research, slash foreign aid, and otherwise weaken US sources of soft power – suggests that great power competition is not in fact the second Trump administration's organizing principle. Finally, the second Trump administration has been characterized by wavering commitment to traditional US alliances and Trump's hostility to the very international institutions defended by Takaichi in her UN speech Tuesday. As a result, Japan's leaders are unable to avoid playing the supplicant, trying to convince Washington to commit to the US-Japan alliance despite these significant headwinds, notwithstanding the rhetoric about a "golden age" for the US-Japan relationship.

Takaichi and her predecessor, Ishiba Shigeru, have tried to paper this over through optics-heavy summitry. On Tuesday, Takaichi conspicuously referred to Trump by his first name multiple times, long considered the benchmark for friendship between Japanese prime ministers and US presidents, even as Trump referred to Takaichi only as the prime minister, using neither her first name nor her last name. This type of "flattery diplomacy" may have averted some of the more dire possible outcomes – higher US tariffs or an abrupt drawdown of US forces in Japan – but the deeper sources

of insecurity remain. The perfunctory meeting on Tuesday suggests that there are diminishing returns to this kind of personal diplomacy with Trump; the face-to-face meetings may only serve to highlight the degree to which there is a fundamental gap between how Tokyo and Washington view the world instead of the robustness of cooperation between the allies to maintain global order.

The result is that while Japan is often grouped with the other middle powers, sharing a commitment to the maintenance of an international rules-based order, Tokyo is necessarily constrained from taking steps to uphold it that might place it at odds with the US. Even as Takaichi offered a robust statement of Japan's commitment to "the maintenance and development of a free and open international order based on the rule of law" at the UN General Assembly following her meeting with Trump – including a defense of international judicial bodies – she and other Japanese leaders will be careful to avoid direct criticism of Trump and the US, in contrast to some of Takaichi's middle power peers. Tokyo may work around the US in pursuing multilateral initiatives, particularly in its own region such as the Partnership on Wide Energy and Resources Resilience Asia (POWERR Asia), but it is unlikely to participate in gestures, rhetorical or otherwise, that target the US directly. This has resulted in some domestic grumbling – Takaichi has faced criticism including from within the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) for not doing more to defend ICC President Akane – but unless and until the Japanese public tires of these compromises, the Japanese government will have little incentive to change course.

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