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Takaichi on the spot as Beijing charms moderates

Key takeaways

- Former foreign minister Iwaya Takeshi, leading a delegation to China, met with senior government officials in the highest level contact for a senior Japanese politician since tensions began worsening last year.
- Beijing may be looking to both stabilize the relationship with Japan while placing the blame for the friction solely on Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae and her "new militarism."
- Takaichi could face increasingly visible pressure domestically to stabilize the situation diplomatically, though a more robust settlement is unlikely.

Nearly eleven months after Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae triggered a new round of tensions with China when she noted that a Taiwan contingency could trigger a "situation threatening Japan's survival" that would justify the exercise of collective self-defense, her government continues to face a war of nerves with Beijing. Official contact between Tokyo and Beijing has been all but suspended, other than a handful of brief ministerial interactions. China has continued to use various tools from its economic coercion toolkit to pressure Japan. And Xi Jinping and other senior Chinese leaders have used a variety of venues – including most recently the UN General Assembly and Xi's bilateral summit with US President Donald Trump – to warn of the "new militarism" being pursued by the Takaichi government. Indeed, Japanese government sources revealed that Xi warned Trump about Takaichi Japan's "new militarism" during their summit last week, though Trump told Takaichi when they spoke last weekend that he had defended her from Xi's charges.

However, Beijing may be making some subtle adjustments in its approach to Japan. While the Chinese government remains unmistakably hostile towards Takaichi – for example, a Foreign Ministry spokesman recently referred to Takaichi only by name,

without using her title, a conspicuous departure from convention – Beijing may also be looking for ways to isolate Takaichi domestically. Earlier this week, China hosted Iwaya Takeshi, formerly foreign minister under Ishiba Shigeru, who was heading a delegation of business leaders in his capacity as president of the Japan Association for the Promotion of International Trade. Iwaya met with both Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Vice Premier He Lifeng, essentially making this the first high-level contact between senior Chinese government officials and a prominent Japanese lawmaker (though not a government official).

This delegation had been scheduled to visit in June, under the leadership of the late Kōno Yōhei, who died shortly before its departure. The delay – and the replacement of Kōno with Iwaya – was fortuitous for Beijing, in that by agreeing to schedule meetings for Iwaya with senior officials the Chinese government gained an opportunity to isolate Takaichi domestically. The message appears to be that it is only Takaichi to blame for the friction between the two governments; China is still willing to talk with business leaders and friendly politicians like Iwaya and a delegation of lawmakers from the Japan–China Friendship Parliamentarians' Union who visited China last month and saw senior Communist Party officials (though not government). Thus, even as Wang and He met with Iwaya, they had harsh words for the Japanese government. Wang, for example, said, “The most urgent task for the Japanese side is to promptly correct the erroneous words and actions of its leaders regarding the Taiwan issue.” He, meanwhile, criticized politicians who have tried to “justify militarism” and challenge China on Taiwan.

By taking this approach to Iwaya, Beijing may be pursuing a few aims simultaneously. First, they may be seeking to stabilize the situation with Tokyo enough so that China can extend an invitation to Takaichi to attend the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Shenzhen in November – not doing so would likely lead to criticism of China and perhaps even non-attendance by other leaders in solidarity – without conceding that her remarks last year were correct. There have been some hints that Beijing might be willing to tolerate “revision” of her remarks instead of “retraction,” though it is unclear precisely what this would entail.

Second, Beijing may be looking to reassure Japanese businesses about doing business in China, particularly as its domestic economy slows. A recent survey found a 22.4% drop in the number of Japanese firms with a presence in China since 2024, a shift that was not necessarily a response to friction over the past year – US tariffs, Chinese economic conditions, and competition in the Chinese market from local firms are all factors – but which could nevertheless be weighing on decision-making by Japanese companies. Beijing will likely use a delegation by business federation Keidanren in November to deliver similar reassuring messages to Japanese business leaders.

Finally, while friendly gestures towards politicians like Iwaya, who have a track record of emphasizing the importance of constructive ties between Japan and China, may not fundamentally shift the balance of opinion within the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) away from Takaichi, they may nevertheless lead some lawmakers to question her diplomatic performance in the year leading up to the 2027 LDP leadership election,

particularly with a recent poll showing that a solid majority wants her to do more improve the relationship. Beijing would likely welcome Hayashi Yoshimasa, a past head of the Japan–China Friendship Parliamentarians' Union and currently the senior lawmaker best positioned to run against Takaichi next year, as prime minister. To be sure, China's ability to engineer change within the LDP is negligible; Iwaya and Hayashi have both been tarred as "traitors" by online rightists for their work on behalf of better relations with China, and overt friendship towards these politicians would likely backfire. But it is conceivable that Beijing could continue to look for opportunities to single out Takaichi as a singular obstacle to better relations.

It is less clear what Takaichi herself will do in response to these signals from Beijing. While a straightforward retraction of her comments remains impossible – having argued that she was merely restating prevailing policy, not making a new policy, retracting would mean a victory for Beijing's pressure campaign – she may have an opportunity to at least temporarily stabilize the situation. This could have the added benefit of winning favor for Takaichi with Trump, who reportedly urged Xi to talk with Takaichi and is engaged in his own diplomatic campaign to reduce tensions with China. Of course, her mentor Abe Shinzō offers a precedent, since he committed to a thaw with Beijing after several years of tensions following his return to power in 2012. To this end, it is notable that Imai Takaya, who as Abe's private secretary played an instrumental role in engineering the thaw and who is now a part-time adviser to Takaichi, publicly criticized her language about a Taiwan contingency and urged her to take a more strategic, long-term view and "not rely on the US for everything." Imai's public remonstrations could be part of a more concerted effort to encourage the prime minister to find a diplomatic path forward.

If Takaichi were to pursue some kind of diplomatic maneuver to stabilize the situation – and it is by no means guaranteed that she will, thus far not having shown the same pragmatic flexibility as her mentor – any diplomatic progress is likely to be halting. Takaichi, looking ahead to the LDP leadership election, may be careful not to alienate China hawks in her base. Meanwhile, Beijing will be closely watching what the Takaichi government includes in its revision of the three national security documents for signs of the next steps in the development of Japan's "new militarism." Notwithstanding the hopes of China-friendly politicians like Iwaya or realists like Imai, the political foundation for a more durable rapprochement may still be absent.

Tobias Harris
Founder and Principal
Japan Foresight LLC
tobias@japanforesight.com
+1.847.738.4048

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