

Zoltán VÖRÖS – Dávid GYÖRGYI:
The expected China (and foreign) policy of the new Japanese Prime Minister¹

Executive Summary

- In the China-Japan relationship, periods of rapprochement and estrangement have alternated depending on global political and economic conditions – alongside past disagreements and nationalist aspirations that have always been in the background, as well as global geopolitical interests and rivalries.
- We can expect the newly elected Sanae Takaichi to continue Abe's work and Abenomics, but it remains to be seen how effective and strong a leader she will be in this more fragile political situation and amidst economic problems.
- Takaichi has been critical of China throughout her career, approaching the relationship between the two sides primarily on ideological grounds, not only reviving past disputes but also bringing up the issue of Taiwan.
- Japan and the Takaichi government may find a supporter in Trump for this critical stance, but trade and economic interests require a much more balanced, pragmatic China policy, which could also be important for Tokyo due to the unpredictability of American foreign and economic policy moves.
- The rivalry between the two sides will manifest not only in the relationship between the two countries but also at the regional, Indo-Pacific level.

With the arrival of the new Japanese Prime Minister, a government that is more ambitious and ideological on a foreign policy level has come to lead Japan. With the election of Sanae Takaichi, Japan, led by her mentor and role model Shinzō Abe, could return, albeit in a fundamentally different geopolitical context. The analysis primarily focuses on the country's expected China policy at a time when an alignment of interests was also on the agenda. However, Takaichi's hardline, conservative approach could also lead to an escalation of conflicts, while the two powers are rivals for influence both regionally and globally.

1. The Pattern of Japan-China Relations

Japanese-Chinese relations were frozen for decades following the Japanese occupation and World War II, but they pragmatically developed in parallel, not independently of each other, along with the establishment of trade relations and global processes. Tensions between the parties persist today due to, on the one hand, differing interpretations of past events, and on the other hand, competition between the two sides regarding regional aspirations. A certain opposition can also be observed at the global level, where actors are rivals, for example, in terms of development policies.² The Japan-China rivalry can be traced back to the late 19th century, to the First Sino-Japanese War, when Japan acquired Taiwan from imperial China and gained influence over Korea. The conflict between the two sides was further deepened by the Second Sino-Japanese War,

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² GORECZKY, Péter: [Versengés és együttműködés: Kína és Japán gazdasági kapcsolatai](#). [Competition and Cooperation: Economic Relations Between China and Japan]. *KKI Elemzések*, 2018/4.; TARRÓSY, István: A kínai „Övezet és Út

during which Japan not only occupied part of China but also committed mass atrocities against the Chinese population, leaving China behind only after its surrender in World War II. Southeast Asia faced similar oppression during World War II while Japan was working to establish the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.³

The true normalization of relations began in the 1970s, when, following international developments and seeing the American rapprochement as well, Japan officially recognized the People's Republic of China – opening a new chapter in the history of the two countries. This easing was due to global political changes and the end of China's isolation, but it was also linked to the economic opening that began in the 1980s. In the 2000s, the opportunities offered by the Chinese economy were attractive to the Japanese economy and companies as well, and in the late 2010s, changes in American foreign policy, but in a broader context, global processes, made rapprochement possible.

During these periods, the parties also signed four strategic documents that still define Japanese-Chinese relations today:

- The 1972 Joint Communiqué, which recognized the People's Republic of China,⁴
- the 1978 Japan-China Treaty of Peace and Friendship⁵ institutionalized relations between the two countries.⁶ This document was based on the principles of peaceful cooperation, mutual non-aggression, and non-interference, and the move strengthened the doctrine of then Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda, which stated that Japan did not wish to be a military power and did not intend to defend its interests with military means, but rather sought to define itself as an economic and cooperative power in the region,
- the 1998 Joint Declaration, which primarily aimed to improve bilateral relations between the two countries,⁷
- and the 2008 Joint Statement, which addressed cooperation opportunities regarding common challenges existing at the regional level (e.g., climate change).⁸

In addition to the documents, it's worth highlighting the discussions on strengthening and deepening economic relations, which are taking place at the regional level. Since 2012, we can talk about the potential establishment of a planned free trade agreement, the China-Japan-South Korea Free Trade Agreement (CJSKFTA)⁹ – the discussions stalled early on, but in March 2025, at their latest trilateral meeting, which was prompted by uncertainty created by US trade policy, the parties agreed to continue joint thinking. Here, the states issued a joint declaration in support of regional and global trade.¹⁰

The US tariff policy is concerning for all three countries: China is a key target of US policy, Japan has faced tariffs of 25 and then 15 percent¹¹, and in the case of South Korea, not only tariffs but also problems

Kezdeményezés" és Kelet-Afrika: geopolitikai térnyerés, infrastruktúra, függőség, [China's "Belt and Road Initiative" and East Africa: Geopolitical Expansion, Infrastructure, Dependence], *Területi Statisztika*, 59(6), 669-692.

³ LÉVAI, Dániel: Roosevelt és Truman: a második világháborús amerikai külpolitikai tervezés és valóság Kelet-Ázsia kontextusában, [Roosevelt and Truman: American Foreign Policy Planning and Reality in the Context of East Asia During World War II], *Külügyi Szemle*, 22(4) 7-27.

⁴ MOFA JAPAN: [Joint Communiqué of the Government of Japan and the Government of the People's Republic of China](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 1972.02.29. [online, 2025.10.21]

⁵ UN Treaties: [Japan and China - Treaty of Peace and Friendship](#). Signed at Beijing on 12 August 1978. [online, 2025.10.21]

⁶ UN Treaties: [Japan and China - Treaty of Peace and Friendship](#). Signed at Beijing on 12 August 1978. [online, 2025.10.21]

⁷ MOFA JAPAN: [Japan-China Joint Declaration On Building a Partnership of Friendship and Cooperation for Peace and Development](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 1998.11.26. [online, 2025.10.21]

⁸ MOFA PRC: [China-Japan Joint Statement on All-round Promotion of Strategic Relationship of Mutual Benefit](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC, 2008.05.22. [online, 2025.10.21]

⁹ CHIANG, Min-Hua: The Potential of China-Japan-South Korea Free Trade Agreement. *East Asia*, 30, 199–216. (2013).

¹⁰ [South Korea, China, Japan agree to promote regional trade as Trump tariffs loom](#), *Reuters*, 2025.03.30. [online, 2025.10.21]

¹¹ BHARADE, Aditi: [Japan's tariff negotiator says the US's reciprocal tariffs will be lowered by next week](#), *Business Insider*, 2025.09.09. [online, 2025.10.21]

with US-South Korean investments have generated tension¹² – cooperation could therefore be logical for maintaining economic and trade relations, as these countries are also key trading partners with each other. This is also evidenced by the latest trade data published in October 2025, which show that Japan's exports increased by 4.2 percent in September compared to the previous year, as strong shipments to Asia offset the decline in exports to the United States. Japan's exports to Asia jumped 9.2 percent compared to the same period last year, and while exports to the United States decreased by 13.3 percent, exports to China increased by 5.8 percent.¹³

Alongside periods of rapprochement, tensions related to the past also periodically intensified, such as in the 1980s, primarily due to nationalist-toned educational reforms¹⁴ and visits to the Yasukuni Shrine.¹⁵ These visits became regular during the term of Junichiro Koizumi (2001-2006). During this period, the duality of relations between the two countries was also evident. While nationalist tensions increased and the two countries suspended mutual state visits between 2002 and 2006¹⁶, economic ties deepened and numerous Japanese companies invested in China due to its pragmatic and open economic policy. The early 2010s were also a tense period. Tensions flared up again alongside Japan's already chaotic domestic politics, and the territorial dispute between the two countries in the East China Sea escalated: in 2010 and 2011, the Japanese Coast Guard detained several Chinese fishermen¹⁷, and then in September 2012, the Japanese government nationalized the Minami-Kojima, Kita-Kojima, and Uotsuri Islands located in the disputed area, purchasing them from their owner.¹⁸ The political instability was not helped by the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011, and relations reached a new low.

It can be said that the relationship between the two countries, overshadowed by historical events, is clearly defined by trade and economic interests. "The two economies are highly complementary, their differing industrial and technological capabilities generate trade and investment opportunities for each other"¹⁹, but the competition for influence in regional and global processes has also created rivalry between the parties, which is further exacerbated by territorial disputes in the East China Sea.

Rivalry is also reinforced by institutional-alliance systems, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialog (QUAD), whose official aim is not to counter China, but in Beijing, the cooperation was definitely interpreted in this way.²⁰

In summary, it can be said that the relationship between the two sides has alternated between periods of rapprochement and estrangement depending on global political and economic conditions, largely based on US foreign policy considerations – alongside historical grievances and nationalist aspirations that have always been in the background. In the case of Japan and China, we must discuss two major economic players, overlapping regional and global strategic interests, and an uneasy past that defines all these relationships – a past that the changing world order²¹ could even reinterpret, as evidenced by some

¹² NG, Kelly - LEE, Hosu: [Firms will hesitate to invest in US after raid - S Korea president](#), BBC, 2025.09.11. [online, 2025.10.21]

¹³ KAGEYAMA, Yuri: [Japan's exports and imports grow in September despite Trump's tariffs](#), ABC News, 2025.10.22. [online, 2025.10.22]

¹⁴ For example, under Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone's leadership, a nationalist approach was taken to soften the language regarding Japanese aggression during World War II by rewriting textbooks. SELDEN, Mark - NOZAKI, Yoshiko: [Japanese Textbook Controversies, Nationalism, and Historical Memory: Intra- and Inter-national Conflicts](#). *Asia-Pacific Journal – Japan Focus*, 7(24). [online, 2025.10.21]

¹⁵ The Yasukuni Shrine is a controversial Tokyo shrine established by Japan to commemorate Japanese soldiers who died since 1853, and it also honors World War II war criminals. [Yasukuni Shrine](#), *Britannica*. [online, 2025.10.21]

¹⁶ HE, Yinan: 40 Years in Paradox: Post-normalisation Sino-Japanese relations, *China perspectives*, 2013(4) 7-16.

¹⁷ WAKATSUKI, Yoko: [Japan arrests Chinese fisherman after 7-hour chase](#), CNN, 2011.12.20. [online, 2025.10.21]

¹⁸ [Japan government 'reaches deal to buy' disputed islands](#), BBC, 2012.09.05. [online, 2025.10.21]

¹⁹ GORECZKY, Péter: [Versengés és együttműködés: Kína és Japán gazdasági kapcsolatai](#). [Competition and Cooperation: Economic Relations Between China and Japan]. *KKI Elemzések*, 2018/4. 7.

²⁰ CSENGER, Ádám: [A Négyoldalú Biztonsági Párbeszéd \(Quad\)](#), [The Quadrilateral Security Dialog (Quad)], *Geopolitika*, 2018.07.20. [online, 2025.10.21]

²¹ Lásd: VÖRÖS, Zoltán – TARRÓSY, István (szerk.): *Átalakuló világrend. Az unipoláris pillanat vége? [A changing world order. The end of the unipolar moment?]* Budapest: Ludovika Könyvkiadó, 2024.

rapprochement between Japan and China within the framework of a trilateral China-Japan-South Korea meeting, at least in light of US foreign policy.²²

2. Japan led by Shinzō Abe

Shinzō Abe, who served as prime minister twice, left a lasting legacy on Japanese politics, characterized by his economic reforms known as *Abenomics* in domestic policy, his recognition of the threat posed by China in foreign policy, and his emphasis on freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific region. In addition to all of this, his role is also prominent because he was both a conservative nationalist and, in some respects, an advocate for change and modernization – for example, by increasing women's participation in the labour market, addressing deep-seated dilemmas within Japanese society.

His first term was short; he resigned in 2007 after being elected in 2006 due to health reasons. However, he publicly acknowledged that relations with China needed to be improved and sought to organize a possible summit with Hu Jintao, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China and President of China. The meeting took place in October 2006 following a Chinese invitation, and the parties emphasized a return to normalizing relations.²³ After a period of absence and a chaotic period in Japanese domestic politics that saw five prime ministers come and go, he returned in 2012 and served as the country's (longest-reigning) prime minister until 2020, when he resigned again.

Abe's China policy in his second term was replaced by value-based diplomacy that is more critical of China. One of the reasons for the change was that while the Chinese economy was a quarter the size of Japan's in 2000, by 2010, its East Asian neighbor had surpassed the island nation's economy. The day after his second appointment, he published an article on Project Syndicate advocating for cooperation between four democratic states – Australia, Japan, India, and the United States – with the goal of free navigation in the Indo-Pacific region.²⁴ One of Abe's first steps was to strengthen Japan's defense policy. In 2013, he adopted the country's first National Security Strategy and established the National Security Council based on the American model. Furthermore, in July 2014, Abe approved²⁵ a reinterpretation of Article 9 of the Constitution.²⁶ This new interpretation allows Japan to exercise the right of "collective self-defense" in certain cases and take military action if one of its allies is attacked. In September 2015, the Japanese Diet officially adopted the reinterpretation by passing a series of laws that allow the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) to provide material support to allies participating in international conflicts.

Abe didn't stop at reinterpreting the Constitution; the Three Principles on Arms Exports Ban²⁷, adopted in 1967, were replaced by the Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology, officially allowing the sale of weapons and self-defense equipment to "like-minded" countries and allies.²⁸

The Japanese steps were not only generated by China, but the directions of Chinese foreign policy played a prominent role in all of this. Indeed, Chinese foreign policy has become more assertive in Southeast Asia, engaging in conflicts with fishermen, research vessels preparing for raw material extraction, and also with American warships in an attempt to control the sea.²⁹ Southeast Asia is also a region of paramount importance for Japanese politics and the economy in terms of supply chains and trade

²² [South Korea, China, Japan agree to promote regional trade as Trump tariffs loom](#), Reuters, 2025.03.30. [online, 2025.10.21]

²³ MOFA JAPAN: [Japan-China Joint Press Statement](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2006.10.08. [online, 2025.10.21]

²⁴ ABE, Shinzō: [Asia's Democratic Security Diamond](#), Project Syndicate, 2012.12.27. [online, 2025.10.21]

²⁵ [Japan cabinet approves landmark military change](#), BBC, 2014.07.01. [online, 2025.10.21]

²⁶ Article 9 of the peace constitution established after World War II states that Japan renounces war and prohibits the maintenance of armed forces – laying the foundation for Japan's pacifist policy.

²⁷ The law prohibited exports to countries in the communist bloc, to countries subject to an arms embargo under UN Security Council resolutions, and to countries that had participated in or were close to international conflicts. MOFA JAPAN: [Japan's Policies on the Control of Arms Exports](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, n.d. [online, 2025.10.21]

²⁸ MOFA JAPAN: [The Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, n.d. [online, 2025.10.21]

²⁹ MEZEI, Tibor: [A dél-kínai-tengeri vita az amerikai-kínai rivalizálás kontextusában](#), [The South China Sea dispute in the context of US-China rivalry], MKI Elemzés, 2023/50. [online, 2025.11.01]

routes, and Japan has taken several steps to compete with Chinese dominance through alternative proposals and initiatives. The Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (PQI)³⁰ initiative is a direct challenger and alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Asia.

In 2016, aligning with Abe's cycle-opening regional analysis in Project Syndicate, the Japanese government announced the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP)³¹, whose main goals were to protect fundamental values (rule of law, freedom of navigation, etc.), achieve economic prosperity, and demonstrate a commitment to peace and stability (building maritime law enforcement capabilities, etc.). The revival of the QUAD is also a result of this approach.

While a large part of Abe's second term was about rivalry with China, and economic relations began to weaken and decline during this period³², signs of rapprochement also appeared by the end of the 2010s: economic relations began to improve, and in 2018, Abe made an official visit to Beijing, which could be attributed to the changing face of American foreign policy³³ – once again indicating how much the relationship between the two countries is determined by American policy.

Shinzō Abe's role was also decisive in domestic politics, but the success of the economic reforms he introduced is, if possible, even more controversial. He announced his famous economic program, *Abenomics*, in 2013. His economic stimulus program was based on the "Three Arrows" direction:

- monetary easing by the Bank of Japan,
- fiscal stimulus through government spending,
- and structural reforms.

The aim of economic policy was to shake up Japan's stagnant economy, which Abe sought to achieve by expanding the money supply, increasing government spending, and implementing labor market and regulatory reforms. *Abenomics* initially achieved success in raising stock prices, weakening the yen to boost exports, and generating moderate economic growth. However, structural reforms, particularly in the areas of the labor market and corporate governance, have not yielded the expected results. Despite striving to increase women's participation (*Womenomics*) and liberalize the agricultural sector, Japan's demographic decline and high debt remained serious obstacles.³⁴ *Abenomics* has therefore only been partially successful; although it stabilized the economy and improved the employment rate, it failed to achieve the long-term transformation that would have brought stable economic growth to the country.

Abe's resignation ushered in another period of instability, with the Russo-Ukrainian War posing a challenge for Japan under Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and American tariffs under the presidency of Shigeru Ishiba. In 2022, Kishida had three documents adopted aimed at revitalizing and strengthening Japanese security policy: a new National Security Strategy, a new National Defense Strategy, and a Defense Buildup Program were adopted.³⁵ These documents and the trade with Southeast Asian states were clearly created in response to the People's Republic of China, which is pursuing an increasingly assertive foreign policy. His successor's idea was to create an "Asian NATO"³⁶, but the decline of Trump's foreign policy and the economy shook confidence in him and he resigned. The question is in what direction the Takaichi government will proceed with its relations with China.

³⁰ WORLD BANK: [Quality Infrastructure Investment](#), World Bank, n.d. [online, 2025.10.21]

³¹ MOFA JAPAN: [Free and Open Indo-Pacific](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, n.d. [online, 2025.11.01]

³² GORECZKY, Péter: [Kína és Japán az USA-nak köszönhetően közeledik egymáshoz](#), [China and Japan are drawing closer thanks to the USA], Kitekintő, 2018.02.27. [online, 2025.10.21]

³³ GORECZKY, Péter: [Kína és Japán az USA-nak köszönhetően közeledik egymáshoz](#), [China and Japan are drawing closer thanks to the USA], Kitekintő, 2018.02.27. [online, 2025.10.21]

³⁴ CRAWFORD, Mark: [Abe's Womenomics Policy, 2013-2020: Tokenism, Gradualism, or Failed Strategy?](#) Asia-Pacific Journal – Japan Focus, 19(4). [online, 2025.11.01]

³⁵ All three documents were adopted in 2022, primarily in response to doctrinal changes, highlighting capabilities for response operations and increased defense spending. MOD JAPAN: [Defense Policy, Ministry of Defense](#), n.d. [online, 2025.10.21]

³⁶ Before his election, Ishiba shared his views on Japanese foreign policy and spoke there about the need to create an "Asian NATO". [Shigeru Ishiba on Japan's New Security Era: The Future of Japan's Foreign Policy](#), Hudson Institute, 2024.09.25. [online, 2025.11.01]

3. The new Japanese leadership – Abe 2.0?

On October 21, 2025, the Japanese parliament elected Sanae Takaichi by a simple majority, with 237 votes in the House of Representatives and 125 votes in the House of Councillors, making her the country's first female prime minister who will have to address the challenges facing the East Asian nation in a transforming international environment. Following the resignation of former Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba in September 2024, the question of the country's leader came up again, and Takaichi, who had been elected leader of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) shortly before, was given the mandate. Sanae Takaichi is not an unknown figure in Japanese domestic politics, yet her appointment as prime minister is somewhat surprising in a conservative, patriarchal society. Takaichi is a strongly nationalist, sometimes considered assertive in security policy, ultra-conservative politician – but this latter characteristic should be understood in the context of Japanese, not international, circumstances: that is, security is her priority, she is critical of China, she values US-Japan relations, and it also means she believes in state intervention and is quite generous in providing social welfare programs.³⁷ In addition to all of this, she is conservative regarding same-sex marriage, the recognition of spouses having separate surnames, and female inheritance within the imperial house.

She has spoken out several times on topics considered taboo in Japan, such as the war or migration³⁸, but based on his past work and life, we can expect a continuation of Abe's policies and *Abenomics* from her. This means that amending Article 9 of the Constitution will likely remain a topic, and it seems her already critical stance toward China will be evident in her approach to Taiwan as well.

In addition to all of this, the new Japanese Prime Minister trusts in the partnership with the United States – however, this will be an exciting question regarding the changing structures, considering that in his final years, Abe himself moved closer to Beijing after many years of critical statements – primarily due to Washington's foreign policy, which has become even more difficult for Tokyo to maintain in the current trade war.

This is supported by the fact that Takaichi, like Abe, is a member of the revisionist, ultra-nationalist Nippon Kaigi – an interest and lobbying group whose goal is the complete rewriting of Article 9 of the constitution, along with numerous other constitutional points.³⁹ Her election as prime minister also means that Japan will continue its conservative, right-wing approach – in some respects even further to the right on the spectrum, as Takaichi is considered by many LDP politicians to belong to the party's extreme wing⁴⁰, and she formed an alliance with the right-wing populist Japan Innovation Party, which is considered by many to be neoliberal-populist, during coalition talks.⁴¹

The politician, who is known as "Iron Lady" in Japanese public life, models herself after Margaret Thatcher, which foreshadows her economic plans and ideas, although it is questionable how effective and strong-handed she will be as a leader in this more fragile political situation amidst economic problems.

4. Current Interests – Japan's Expected Foreign Policy Toward China

From China's perspective, the election of Sanae Takaichi is not necessarily reassuring, not only because of Japan's uncertainty and shift to the right, but also due to the prime minister herself. In 2021, she also supported rewriting Article 9 of the constitution⁴² to define the Self-Defense Forces as a national army and is an active supporter of increasing defense spending. In addition to all of this, she supported the

³⁷ HALE, Erin: [Who is Sanae Takaichi, Japan's 'Iron Lady' and first female prime minister?](#) *Aljazeera*, 2025.10.21. [online, 2025.10.21]

³⁸ MUZAFFAR, Maroosha: [Who is Japan's first female prime minister? Sanae Takaichi in her own words](#), *Independent*, 2025.10.22. [online, 2025.10.22]

³⁹ YOSHIFUMI, Tawara – BROOKS, William – PENGQIAO, Lu – YAMAGUCHI, Tomomi. What Is the Aim of Nippon Kaigi, the Ultra-Right Organization That Supports Japan's Abe Administration? *Asia-Pacific Journal* 15(21), 2017.

⁴⁰ JOHNSTON, Eric: [Sanae Takaichi unveils LDP president bid with call for party's rebirth](#), *The Japan Times*, 2025.09.09. [online, 2025.10.21]

⁴¹ Takaichi's economic policy ideas and the coalition partner's views do not necessarily align on the role of the state in the economy.

⁴² [LDP's Takaichi seeks Japan's possession of "nat'l defense forces"](#), *Kyodo News*, 2021.08.26. [online, 2025.10.21]



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deployment of American medium-range missiles in Japan⁴³, visited Taiwan in April 2025 and met with President Lai Ching-te⁴⁴, and reiterated Abe's statement that "a Taiwan emergency is a Japanese emergency".⁴⁵

So, at first glance, we can talk about a clear approach towards the US and a worsening of relations with China, but in the background, it's worth examining further aspects as well, because in the changing international environment, the "Abesita" foreign policy may not be sustainable. This is largely thanks to Washington's foreign policy: Japan was able to secure 15 percent tariffs for itself, compared to the previously imposed 25 percent, by agreeing to a 550 billion USD investment package that Japan is required to invest in various financial forms during Trump's term.⁴⁶

On October 28, 2025, Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi received Donald J. Trump, the American president, who arrived in Tokyo as one of the stops on his Asian diplomatic tour. The meeting between the two sides, in addition to touching on this somewhat uncomfortable topic for Japan, namely the investment package, was held in a cheerful atmosphere, with mutual praise. For Takaichi, the commitment could pose difficulties alongside other planned expenditures, but none of that was apparent at this meeting: they reaffirmed their commitments and Japan is also willing to further trade cooperation: they will purchase more rice and soybeans, and also open their market to American vehicles.⁴⁷ As Trump put it, "She [Takaichi] was a great ally and friend of Abe, who was my friend... He was one of the best... I know they were very close, and I think philosophically they were close, which is very good"⁴⁸, he clarified, suggesting that the close relationship between the two sides during the Abe era could return.

The new prime minister is therefore committed to cooperation with the United States, but economic and trade relations are not so clear-cut despite the statements made at the meeting: certain agreements, such as opening the market to American vehicles, could specifically harm the Japanese automotive industry, and it seems from economic cooperation that relations with regional players, including China, will remain essential for Tokyo.

So, Japan is likely to remain critical of Chinese foreign policy, but a pragmatic economic policy could still be important for Tokyo due to the unpredictability of US foreign and economic policy moves, as breaking away from Chinese markets is not a realistic alternative – at most, Japan might be "interested in the diversification of supply chains and manufacturing locations".⁴⁹ The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs reacted very quickly to Takaichi's election, stating in a statement that they hope she will respect the four strategic documents and the political obligations arising from them on major issues, including history and Taiwan.⁵⁰ The reason for Takaichi's shift in Chinese foreign policy is because, as an ultra-conservative politician, she has always been critical of China and Chinese foreign policy activities and has sought to support Japan-Taiwan relations, and she was a regular visitor to the Yasukuni Shrine.

In this situation, we can talk about the following possible consequences:

- This pragmatic approach definitely allows for Japan to try and reduce its dependence on Chinese markets – which could even mean imposing tariffs on smaller, already strained products or product

⁴³ CSIS: [Previewing Japan's Leadership Election and Implications for U.S.-Japan Relations](#), CSIS, 2021.09.28. [online, 2025.10.21]

⁴⁴ MACT: [President Lai meets Japanese Diet Member and former Minister of State for Economic Security Takaichi Sanae\(excerpt cross-strait relations\)](#), Mainland Affairs Council of Taiwan, 2025.04.28. [online, 2025.10.21]

⁴⁵ POLLMANN, Mina: [How Will a Takaichi Administration Approach Japan's Taiwan Policy?](#), *The Diplomat*, 2025.10.08. [online, 2025.10.21]

⁴⁶ DESROCHERS, Daniel - LEFEBVRE, Ben - HAWKINS, Ari: [Trump wants Japan to fund his government's ambitious spending. What's in it for them?](#), *Politico*, 2025.10.03. [online, 2025.10.21]

⁴⁷ ZURCHER, Anthony - KHALIL, Shaimaa: [Rare earths, Nobel nomination and cheers: Trump ends Japan leg of Asia tour](#), *BBC*, 2025.10.28. [online, 2025.11.01]

⁴⁸ ZURCHER, Anthony - KHALIL, Shaimaa: [Rare earths, Nobel nomination and cheers: Trump ends Japan leg of Asia tour](#), *BBC*, 2025.10.28. [online, 2025.11.01]

⁴⁹ GORECZKY, Péter: [Decoupling or diversification? Dilemmas of India, Japan, and Australia in shaping economic relations with China](#), KKI Policy Brief, 2021(29). [online, 2025.10.21]

⁵⁰ [China Urges Japan To "Honor Commitments" As It Seeks To "Advance Ties" Under New PM Sanae Takaichi](#), *The Eurasian Times*, 2025.10.21. [online, 2025.10.21]

groups (such as the market for seafood disputed in connection with the contaminated water from Fukushima), but there is no chance of trade relations being completely severed.

- Japan will be interested in further building and strengthening the alliance systems – and will therefore be willing to fulfill the economic commitments expected by the Americans (such as the 550 billion USD investment). This will likely manifest in further arms cooperation with the United States, and it is also likely that domestic capabilities will increase, and even the emergence of European actors could become a reality.⁵¹ American arms purchases were already discussed during the two countries' consultations in the summer of 2025⁵², and the American side confirmed at the October meeting that Japan would, among other things, purchase additional weapons⁵³, but there has been no confirmation from Tokyo on this matter so far.

Regarding following Abe's line, we need to talk not only about the economy but also about the regional-global worldview. Alongside *Abenomics*, Japan's geopolitical interests have also strengthened and are being represented more forcefully. The Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy adopted back in 2016 was partly created in response to China and prioritized the freedom of navigation in the broader region across two oceans, the Pacific and the Indian Ocean, focusing on Southeast Asia but also highlighting the economic opportunities in South Asia and Africa.⁵⁴ Regarding regional security challenges and Japan's assessment of them, it will be necessary to monitor not only the Southeast Asian region but the entire Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, in addition to arms imports, we can likely expect to discuss Japanese financial and military support directed toward this area. In this context, it might also be worth closely monitoring Japanese foreign policy regarding other major powers in the region, such as India and Australia – even in the context of more significant economic cooperation.

Regarding regional presence, it can be said that:

- Monitoring regional waters and trade routes, with a greater presence and military exercises, could characterize Japanese military policy, and it also appears within this regional context that the Taiwan issue seems to be a key concern for Takaichi at the moment. However, Tokyo is not expected to take any steps that would jeopardize trade relations with China,
- And looking a bit further afield from the region, Japan's global role could also become more important, considering not only the naval base in Djibouti but also the competition between Japan and China highlighted in the analysis, as well as the economic potential of the African continent. In this regard, development policies can be interesting, which have been running in parallel, learning from each other, but with changes in Japanese foreign policy, for example, the importance of TICAD (Tokyo International Conference on African Development) in Africa could also increase, continuing the race with China and FOCAC (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation), once again highlighting that Japanese foreign policy steps could increasingly be defined by steps and a race against China in the future.

5. Conclusion

Although Abe's follower, Sanae Takaichi, must address the structural challenges of the Japanese economy, resolve domestic political instability, and preserve the country's strategic autonomy in a fundamentally changed and uncertain international environment. Her premiership is undoubtedly historic, and her hardline stance could leave its mark on Japanese-Chinese relations, with the next period potentially being defined by the duality of historical disagreements and economic ties. Her more critical statements and stance toward China could be overridden by economic and trade considerations. Furthermore, we have

⁵¹ MARRONE, Alessandro: [The New Partnership among Italy, Japan and the UK on the Global Combat Air Programme \(GCAP\)](#), Istituto Affari Internazionali, 25(3), 2025. [online, 2025.11.01]

⁵² JOHNSON, Jesse - TANG, Francis: [Trump says Tokyo agreed to buy U.S. defense gear, but questions remain](#), *The Japan Times*, 2025.07.24. [online, 2025.11.01]

⁵³ WATSON, Kathryn - WALSH, Joe: [Trump touts "very fair" trade deal with Japan as he meets new Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi](#), *CBSNews*, 2025.10.28. [online, 2025.11.01]

⁵⁴ MOFA JAPAN: [Free and Open Indo-Pacific](#), *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, n.d. [online, 2025.11.01]



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seen that global events have already impacted the fluctuating quality of the relationship between the two sides, and American foreign policy is currently critical of China.

For Tokyo, maintaining autonomy and pursuing a balanced foreign policy could be a primary consideration – the question is whether it's possible to combine Takaichi's ideological approach with at least pragmatic elements, if not completely abandon it. For decades, Japanese foreign policy has been defined by its alliance with Washington, guaranteeing security but limiting the possibility of developing independent maneuverability. The direction of American foreign policy during Trump's second term, the containment of China's global rise and assertive actions in the region, and the parallel militarization of the Indo-Pacific region are forcing the Japanese leadership to take a more active stance on foreign policy events – a situation where economic interests require regional stability and pragmatic cooperation with China, while security considerations necessitate close cooperation with the United States. Takaichi's political rhetoric so far has been strongly ideological, focusing on national identity, constitutional reform, and strengthening regional defense capabilities. This approach, as we have seen, aligns well with the historical narrative of the Japanese right wing, but it generates conflict due to the real power dynamics in the region – specifically, the events in the East China Sea and the Taiwan Strait should be highlighted here, where rhetorical confrontation could lead to escalation. A pragmatic approach, meaning preserving and maintaining the increasingly important regional economic relationships, participating in and taking on a role in regional-multilateral forums, would allow Japan to assert its own regional interests, maintain the security guaranteed by US cooperation, and avoid becoming economically vulnerable. The Japan-China relationship is not just a geopolitical issue, but also an economic one. While reducing dependence on China may be a goal for Tokyo regarding the deep integration between the two sides, jeopardizing trade relations cannot be an option. An overly ideologically based foreign policy could harm the country's trade interests and technological position.

The "two-faced" policy of recent years (security guarantees from Washington, economic pragmatism with Beijing) is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain, and Japan will need to develop an autonomous, balanced foreign policy. By moderating its ideological approach, this could allow the island nation to define its own interests amidst the competition between the two superpowers and be able to shape the political structure of the region.



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Publisher:

John Lukacs Institute for Strategy and Politics
Eötvös József Research Centre
Ludovika University of Public Service

Editors:

Gábor Csizmazia, Viktor Eszterhai, Balázs Tárnok

ISSN: 3094-1148

Professional Reviewer:
The editors

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