

Japan's rightward shift puts it on a collision course with China

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I underestimated Japan's determination to ruffle China's feathers. In a [November 2023 column](#), I argued that the apparently cordial meeting between President Xi Jinping and then US president Joe Biden in the US unsettled Japan, which wanted to attain its goal of becoming a "normal country" again.

In [a column last December](#), I said Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's hardened position against China – exemplified by her November 7 speech saying China's forceful takeover of Taiwan could pose an existential threat to Japan and suggesting her country might have to intervene militarily together with the US – was a small part of the great power politics between Washington and Beijing.

I still believe that. However, I didn't expect that Takaichi, a relative unknown in Japanese politics until she won the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leadership race last year and [became Japan's prime minister](#), could have mustered such popular support so quickly that she won the hastily called House of Representatives election on February 8 [by a landslide](#).

That election victory handed Takaichi and the LDP a parliamentary majority of more than two-thirds. This was the first time since World War II that one party managed to win more than two-thirds of the lower house on its own.

The geopolitical connotation of these events could not be clearer. Japan refuses to accept Chinese dominance over East Asia – let alone its rise to global prominence – without engaging in at least one test confrontation with Beijing.

One can see in these developments how US global retrenchment under Trump is taking shape in East Asia. As laid out in the Trump administration's new [National Defence Strategy](#), Washington is reconfiguring its geopolitical rivalry with China by letting its allies take up more of the burden. In short, the US appears to be returning to the approach to world affairs it pursued between the two world wars.

In this global shift, Tokyo seems to have perceived a window of opportunity to assert itself. Takaichi has already made it known that she would seek "understanding" from the US and Japan's neighbours before making future visits to the [Yasukuni Shrine](#).

She also intends to pursue revision of [Japan's constitution](#) to re-arm the country and possible reconsideration of its three [non-nuclear principles](#).

With her domestic political position resoundingly secured, the way appears clear for Takaichi and her right-leaning retinue to attempt to rewrite the history of Japan's militarist past, assert the country's right to have a military like other "normal" countries and possibly even aspire to have [its own nuclear weapons](#).

The seismic transformation in Japan's political landscape has sparked serious concern in Beijing. Takaichi's declaration on Taiwan in November, her refusal to [retract those comments](#) and the LDP's landslide victory all add to Beijing's perception of Japan as a country that has never really repented for its militarist past and is now determined to block China's rise.

This episode has roused deep historical grievances over Imperial Japan's invasions. It has also sharpened a core conviction of Beijing's: that China's rise as a global power must translate into exercising a degree of influence over Japan comparable to that held by the US since 1945. Japan's resistance to this prospect is fierce, as illustrated by the recent election result.

Japan dominated East Asia militarily and economically from the late 19th century until 1945, when it was forced to surrender unconditionally at the end of World War II. Throughout most of the post-war era, it remained the world's second-largest economy, a position Japan [lost to China](#) as recently as 2010.

As a result, a proud Tokyo has made up its mind to rebuff Chinese regional hegemony, leveraging its alliance with Washington as its primary strategic counterweight. In turn, Beijing is determined to subdue what it sees as [an unpunished aggressor](#) and a present-day obstacle to its rightful ascendancy. It aims to make Japan submit, both to avenge the past and remove a major hindrance to its rise in the world.

Trump has so far stood by his administration's focus on geopolitical reorientation, playing Beijing and Tokyo off each other in a less-than-subtle way. He has repeatedly called Xi a "[good friend](#)", and of late he has admitted to hearing out the Chinese leader's concerns over Washington's [arms sales to Taiwan](#).

However, he has also weighed in on Japan's domestic politics and openly expressed a preference for Takaichi to win after the latter announced the snap election. After the election, he immediately praised her for her landslide victory, wishing her "great success in passing your conservative, peace through strength agenda".

Washington's strategic adjustment appears to involve using Japan as a means of "letting the tiger out of its cage" against China – a move Beijing fully recognises. Yet

China seems content to go along with it, confident that it possesses greater capacity than Japan to pursue “peace through strength”.

At the Munich Security Conference earlier this month, Foreign Minister Wang Yi warned Japan not to bet against China, saying that, “If you try gambling again, the loss will be faster and more devastating [than in World War II]”. Last Tuesday, Beijing [added](#) 20 Japanese entities to its export control list, with another 20 put on a watch list, thereby widening the scope of China’s diplomatic tightening and increasing its economic pressure on Japan. The measures took effect immediately.

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