

Weekly China Insight

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China-Japan tensions escalate over Takaichi's Taiwan remarks

Throughout November, China and Japan have been engaged in an escalating diplomatic confrontation. The spat stems from new Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's statement made in front of the Japanese parliament that a Taiwan crisis between Beijing and Taipei could be considered a "survival-threatening situation" for Japan. The language, under Japan's security laws passed during the Shinzo Abe era, could justify military mobilization and involvement of Japan's defense forces. Takaichi's suggestion that Tokyo could respond militarily if China used force against Taiwan is a break from Japan's traditional strategic ambiguity.

Beijing immediately condemned the remarks, calling them a grave violation of the one-China principle and interference in China's internal affairs. The situation worsened this week, when the Japanese defense ministry confirmed plans to deploy a surface-to-air missile unit on Yonaguni Island, just 110 kilometers from Taiwan's east coast.

For Beijing, Japan's military readiness and political support for Taiwan represent a direct challenge to its sovereignty claims and strategic buffer zone. Takaichi's remarks matters deeply to Beijing because Taiwan is at the heart of its core national interests. For the Chinese leadership, the one-China principle is non-negotiable, and any foreign official position that suggests support for Taiwan's autonomy is viewed as an existential threat to the legitimacy of the Chinese state and Chinese Communist Party. Takaichi's stance also reawakens deep historical grievances in China related to Japanese wartime aggression against China before and during the WWII and Japan's colonial rule over Taiwan between 1895 and 1945.

China reacts to Takaichi's Taiwan remarks with diplomatic and economic campaigns

Beijing has launched a wide-ranging campaign aimed at imposing both reputational and economic costs on Japan, including public rebukes, consumer-driven boycotts, travel advisories, and implicit trade threats.

At the diplomatic level, China summoned Japan's ambassador and publicly demanded a retraction of Takaichi's remarks. When Japan refused, Beijing accused Tokyo of "challenging the post-war order" and "reviving militarism." On 20 November, the Chinese foreign ministry declared that conditions were no longer suitable to hold scheduled trilateral meetings with Japan and South Korea, citing Tokyo's "extremely erroneous" comments as having damaged the basis for cooperation.

Economically, China targeted Japan's tourism and seafood sectors. A travel advisory urged Chinese citizens to avoid visiting Japan for personal safety. Several Chinese airlines offered

ticket refunds for Japan-bound flights, and two Japanese films set for release in China were postponed. Beijing has also reportedly re-imposed a ban on Japanese seafood imports.

In addition, China conducted coast guard patrols through waters around the Japanese-administered, disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and sent three PLA Navy warships through the Osumi Strait near Japan's Kyushu and Ryukyu Islands. The Chinese defense ministry warned Japan would “pay a painful price” if it “crossed the line” on Taiwan.

China's response reflects a coordinated strategy to isolate and pressure Tokyo that public Taiwan-related statements by foreign leaders that deviate from the one-China principle can trigger swift reputational and commercial consequences.

Trump walks a diplomatic tightrope as China and Japan clash over Taiwan

On 24 November, US President Donald Trump called Chinese President Xi Jinping, before speaking with Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi hours later. During his call with Trump, Xi emphasized China's position on Taiwan, framing Taiwan's “return to China” as a pillar of the post-WWII international order and urged Washington to help uphold those wartime outcomes, warning against the revival of Japanese militarism.

During the Trump-Takaichi call, Trump reportedly urged Takaichi not to escalate the dispute with China further. However, Trump made no public statements on Taiwan and instead highlighted trade and cooperation in his summary of both calls.

Trump's dual outreach reflects the fact that he doesn't want the Sino-Japanese dispute to undermine the fragile trade détente Washington just reached with Beijing. Beijing sees Japan's Taiwan stance not just as a bilateral dispute, but as part of a larger geopolitical alignment – especially with the US – that threatens to undermine Chinese reunification ambitions, erode regional deterrence, and embolden Taiwan's pro-independence elements.