

English

# Why Tokyo Must Reject Ottawa's Risky Diplomatic Reset With Beijing

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*Japans statsminister Sanae Takaichi under presentasjonen av sin andre regjering i Tokyo. Foto: Cabinet Public Affairs Office / Wikimedia Commons. 18. februar 2026.*

As Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi arrives in Ottawa this week for the most senior diplomatic visit by a Chinese official in years, Prime Minister Mark Carney's government is betting that it can reset relations with Beijing and transform China into a "strategic partner." This comes despite, or perhaps because of, warnings from China's ambassador to Canada that parliamentarians should avoid visiting Taiwan. For Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae, now navigating her own fraught relationship with Beijing, Canada's accommodative approach offers not a model to emulate but a cautionary tale of what happens when middle powers mistake appeasement for engagement.

The temptations facing Tokyo are real. After Takaichi sent condolences to the Chinese people following the tragic Shanxi coal mine disaster on May 16 that killed 87 miners, some observers noted echoes of a more cooperative era. When the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami struck on March 11, 2011, then-Chinese President Hu Jintao

offered not just condolences but tangible assistance including fuel supplies and material aid and personally visited the devastated Tohoku region. Those gestures, during a period of relative Sino-Japanese cooperation, stand in stark contrast to today's deteriorating relationship.

Since Takaichi's [November 7, 2025 statement](#) that "any attempt to alter Taiwan's status by force would require Japan's Self-Defense Forces to respond in accordance with our constitutional obligations and alliance commitments," Beijing has unleashed a relentless pressure campaign. The Chinese government has amplified its disinformation operations, imposed economic coercion on Japanese businesses operating in China, and demanded Tokyo "correct its erroneous stance." Yet Takaichi's statement represented no policy change whatsoever, it merely articulated what has been Japan's position for decades, consistent with the [2015 U.S.-Japan Defense Guidelines](#) and [Japan's 2022 National Security Strategy](#).

The question facing Tokyo is whether building diplomatic bridges with Beijing requires walking back this matter-of-fact statement. The answer must be an unequivocal no. To understand why, policymakers should revisit a remarkable document that reveals much about how authoritarian states weaponize diplomatic engagement: the June 20, 1989 letter from President George H.W. Bush to Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, written mere weeks after the Tiananmen Square massacre.

In that letter declassified years later Bush emphasized the importance of maintaining the U.S.-China relationship even as American public opinion recoiled from the violence inflicted on peaceful demonstrators. Bush wrote with "genuine friendship" about preserving ties that "are in the fundamental interests of both countries," and stressed his commitment to avoiding actions that would "see destroyed this relationship that you and I have worked hard to build." He asked Deng to remember "the principles on which my young country was founded," including "freedom of speech, freedom of assemblage, freedom from arbitrary authority," before expressing his dismay at the "turmoil and the bloodshed" of June 1989.

What's striking about Bush's letter is not just its tone of accommodation during a moment that should have prompted decisive condemnation, but what it revealed about China's strategic approach. As Ian Johnson notes in his Foreign Affairs essay "[Xi's Age of Stagnation: The Great Walling-Off of China](#)," the Chinese Communist Party has consistently sought to exploit Western powers' desire for engagement to avoid accountability for its domestic repression and international coercion. Johnson observes that the Xi Jinping government has created "its own universe of mobile phone apps and software, an impressive feat but one that is aimed at insulating Chinese people from the outside world rather than connecting them to it."

This walling-off extends to diplomacy itself. As Johnson documents, "Chinese leaders shuns debate and feels no compulsion to explain itself." The party survived the post-Tiananmen era not by adapting its fundamental approach but by using economic



growth and market access as tools to discourage criticism and punish countries that crossed Beijing's red lines. The pattern has only intensified under Xi, who has overseen what Johnson calls "a strategy of accelerating government intervention in Chinese life" while pursuing "total control" that "has set the country on a path of slower growth and created multiplying pockets of dissatisfaction."

Canada's current approach dangerously echoes Bush's 1989 mistake. By welcoming Wang Yi without securing any meaningful concessions on the issues that deteriorated the relationship including Beijing's arbitrary detention of Canadian citizens Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor, its election interference operations documented in multiple intelligence reports, and its ambassador's brazen warnings to elected officials, Ottawa is signaling that accommodation rather than principle guides Canadian policy. This reset appears driven less by a realistic assessment of Chinese behavior than by anti-Trump sentiment and a misguided belief that distance from Washington will somehow reverse Canada's economic malaise. Carney's government seems to have forgotten that Canada's economic challenges stem not from insufficient engagement with Beijing but from [decades of underinvestment in productivity, innovation, and competitiveness](#) according to the OECD's Economic survey on Canada in May 2025. Drawing closer ties with an increasingly stagnant Chinese economy will not resolve. As Richard K. Betts and Stephen Biddle argue in their Foreign Affairs essay "[The Price of Strategic Incoherence in Iran](#)," democratic governments often fail to align their foreign policy means with stated ends, resulting in "goal displacement, when the tactical requirements of complex combat operations achieve immediate military objectives without serving the higher strategic and political purpose."

Canada's China policy suffers from precisely this incoherence. Carney has placed the tactical goal of securing diplomatic meetings has displaced the strategic purpose of establishing a relationship based on mutual respect and reciprocity. The result, as Zongyuan Zoe Liu details in "[What the Iran War Means for China: Beijing Fears American Volatility More Than American Power](#)," is that authoritarian states like China have learned that middle powers desperate for engagement will accept symbolic gestures while Beijing continues its coercive behavior unabated.

For Japan, the stakes are immeasurably higher than for Canada. As Johnson notes, Japan's economic sustainability remains tied to its relationship with China. Decoupling is simply not realistic, which is why Tokyo has emphasized resilience and economic security rather than comprehensive separation. Yet Beijing views Japan as the most capable middle power in the region, with the resources and alliance relationships, particularly with the United States, to prevent peaceful or military reunification with Taiwan on Beijing's terms and to complicate what the CCP sees as its rightful return to Asian centrality.

This perception explains Beijing's outsized reaction to Takaichi's November statement. Chinese foreign policy theorist Qin Yaqing of the China Foreign Affairs University and author of [A Relational Theory of World Politics](#), has articulated a vision of international



relations defined not by power balances but by hierarchical relationships, a modern articulation of the tributary system that governed East Asian international relations for centuries. In this framework, Japan's willingness to explicitly articulate its security interests regarding Taiwan represents not merely a policy position but an act of insubordination against the regional order Beijing seeks to establish.

Beijing fears that if Japan, a country that has recognized the People's Republic of China as the sole legal government of China since 1972 and adhered to the "One China" policy for five decades can openly discuss contingency planning for a Taiwan scenario, other middle powers will feel emboldened to do the same. This would contribute to an erosion of Beijing's interpretation of the One China policy, which functions as a diplomatic shackle preventing countries from building substantive relations with Taiwan without first securing Beijing's approval.

The experiences of Lithuania, Australia, South Korea, and Japan itself demonstrate what happens when countries cross Beijing's red lines or take actions that the CCP perceives as potentially damaging to the party's legitimacy. As documented in the [2020 Australian Strategic Policy Institute \(ASPI\) report](#) cited by Johnson, China has deployed 152 cases of economic coercion against 27 countries between 2010 and 2020, with a "marked acceleration after 2018" involving "trade restrictions, blocks on investment, tourism bans, arbitrary detention, state-issued threats, and restrictions on official engagement."

So how should Prime Minister Takaichi engage with China without backtracking from her principled November statement? Three approaches offer a path forward:

First, Tokyo should pursue "[hardened engagement](#)", a framework that maintains economic and diplomatic relationships where interests align while building resilience against coercion and deepening security cooperation with like-minded partners. As I argued in this policy brief for the Asia-Pacific Foundation entitled [Canada Strategic Choices for Middle Powers Navigating U.S.-China Competition](#), this approach "accepts interdependence as a reality but also refuses to allow interdependence to become a vulnerability that constrains sovereign decision-making." Concretely, this means Japan should continue participating in technical dialogues on climate change, pandemic preparedness, and regional economic integration while simultaneously accelerating efforts to diversify supply chains in critical sectors and strengthen the Quad partnership with Australia, India, and the United States.

Second, Takaichi should leverage multilateral frameworks to engage Beijing rather than pursuing the bilateral accommodations Canada has chosen. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), ASEAN-centered forums, and trilateral mechanisms involving South Korea provide venues where Japan can engage Chinese counterparts without appearing to seek Beijing's favor bilaterally. This approach allows middle powers to diversify their economic partnerships while building resilience against coercion. For Japan, this means working through institutions where Beijing must also



consider the interests of multiple stakeholders, reducing China's ability to single out Tokyo for punishment.

Third, Tokyo should articulate a positive vision for regional order that includes space for Chinese participation while defending core principles. Rather than simply reacting to Chinese pressure, Japan should proactively champion a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" that emphasizes rule of law, peaceful dispute resolution, and freedom of navigation, principles that theoretically align with China's stated support for international law, even as Beijing's actions contradict these commitments. This approach recognizes what [Ashley Tellis notes](#) in his analysis of U.S.-India relations: that "substantial American investment in partner capacity does not guarantee alignment when partners perceive divergent interests." Rather than assuming China will eventually embrace the current order, Japan should work to shape an evolving regional architecture that accommodates China's legitimate interests while constraining its revisionist ambitions.

What Prime Minister Takaichi must avoid is the Canadian model of accommodation driven by anti-American sentiment and a misguided belief that distance from Washington enhances sovereignty. As Betts and Biddle observe in their Iran analysis, "middle powers dependent on U.S. security guarantees" face "acute" dilemmas, but "the solution is not to hedge away from commitments." Instead, "allies that contribute deployable capabilities, share intelligence burdens, host critical infrastructure, and coordinate on technology standards make themselves harder to abandon—even for transactional U.S. administrations."

This insight is particularly relevant as questions persist about the reliability of American extended deterrence under various future administrations. Rather than seeking to appease Beijing out of fear that Washington might prove an unreliable partner, Japan should double down on making itself indispensable to the United States and other partners. Tokyo's recent decision to increase defense spending to 2% plus of GDP, its leadership in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership after America's withdrawal, and its bilateral security partnerships across the Indo-Pacific all serve this strategic objective.

The danger of the Canadian approach is that it mistakes tactical engagement for strategic success. As Liu notes in her Foreign Affairs analysis, "hardened engagement also requires intellectual seriousness about China's perspectives, even when disagreeing with them." This does not mean accepting Beijing's framework for regional order, but rather understanding that "the disconnect between official rhetoric emphasizing win-win co-operation and empirical patterns of coercive behaviour" reveals a regime that views diplomatic accommodation as weakness to be exploited rather than as a basis for genuine compromise.

Prime Minister Takaichi's condolences to the Chinese people after the Shanxi mine disaster represented appropriate humanitarian diplomacy—one people expressing sympathy for another people's suffering. But humanitarian gestures should not be



confused with strategic concessions. The test of Japan's China policy will be whether Tokyo can maintain people-to-people connections, economic interdependence in non-strategic sectors, and dialogues on global challenges while refusing to back down from its core security interests.

Johnson's warning about "neijuan", a term meaning "involution" that refers to life "twisting inward without real progress" applies not just to China's domestic stagnation but to the broader regional dynamic. If middle powers like Japan allow Beijing to dictate the terms of engagement, accepting that any explicit articulation of legitimate security interests constitutes an unacceptable provocation, then the entire region will experience its own form of involution: endless diplomatic theater that mistakes the absence of open conflict for genuine stability.

The Bush letter to Deng Xiaoping after Tiananmen should serve as a historical warning, not a diplomatic model. Bush's emphasis on preserving the relationship at all costs, his reluctance to impose meaningful consequences for the massacre of peaceful demonstrators, and his hope that engagement would gradually liberalize China's political system all proved tragically mistaken. The party survived not because it adapted to Western expectations but because it learned to exploit Western powers' desire for engagement as a tool to avoid accountability.

Prime Minister Takaichi faces a choice between two paths: the accommodative approach Canada has chosen, which sacrifices principle for the illusion of improved relations, or the hardened engagement that acknowledges Beijing's importance while defending Japan's sovereignty and security interests. The latter path requires patience, resilience, and a willingness to accept that Beijing may impose costs in the short term. But it is the only approach consistent with Japan's interests, values, and responsibilities as a leading middle power in an increasingly contested region.

As Wang Yi receives a warm welcome in Ottawa this week, Tokyo should take note, not as an example to emulate but as a reminder of what happens when democracies confuse accommodation with wisdom. China's pressure campaign against Japan will continue regardless of Tokyo's diplomatic posture, because Beijing's objective is not merely better relations but the establishment of an Asian order in which middle powers defer to Chinese preferences as a matter of course. The question is not whether Japan should engage China, it must, but whether it will do so from a position of principle or supplication. Prime Minister Takaichi has already chosen the former path with her November statement. Now she must have the courage to stay on it, knowing that true partnerships cannot be built on the foundation of diplomatic cowardice.

