



INDIA'S WORLD

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS • INDIAN INTERESTS

June 30, 2026

THE ARCHITECTURE OF MIDDLE-POWER AGENCY AND THE IMPERATIVES FOR THE TAKAICHI ADMINISTRATION

Stephen R. Nagy

*Copyright © 2026 by India's World. All Rights Reserved. To request permission to distribute or reprint this article, please visit [Indiasworld.in/privacy-policy](https://indiasworld.in/privacy-policy). Source URL:
<https://indiasworld.in/the-architecture-of-middle-power-agency-and-the-imperatives-for-the-takaichi-administration/>*

THE ARCHITECTURE OF MIDDLE-POWER AGENCY AND THE IMPERATIVES FOR THE
TAKAICHI ADMINISTRATION



Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi during the formation of her second cabinet | Image source: 内閣広報室 (Cabinet Public Affairs Office of Japan).

Nearly four years after the tragic assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Nara in July 2022, the domestic Japanese discourse surrounding his tenure remains profoundly fractured. Within the archipelago, assessments of his legacy are routinely heavily polarised, divided along the familiar, deeply entrenched fault lines of Abenomics, constitutional revisionism, and the perennial complexities of historical memory. Yet, when we shift our analytical gaze beyond Japan's borders, the conversation has evolved on an entirely different, far more pragmatic track. This divergence between domestic contestation and international appraisal is, in itself, analytically revealing. Within the strategic communities of Washington, Canberra, New Delhi, Ottawa, and increasingly Brussels, Abe is rarely analysed merely as a polarising conservative nationalist (anymore). Instead, he is widely recognised as the

principal architect of a durable strategic vocabulary that has fundamentally reshaped the geopolitical contours of the 21st century.

Understanding this phenomenon requires a disciplined analytical separation of the man's ideological convictions from his tangible statecraft. It is precisely this rigorous distinction that must guide our assessment of Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi, who assumed office in October 2025 and is widely, perhaps too simplistically, read as Abe's direct ideological heir. As Japan navigates a complex 2026 characterised by a second Trump administration in Washington and intensifying structural competition with Beijing, Takaichi inherits a standard, not merely a name.

DECONSTRUCTING AN IMPERFECT LEADER JUDGED BY THE ARCHITECTURE HE BUILT

Any intellectually honest external assessment of Japan's strategic trajectory must begin by acknowledging that Abe was a contested figure for substantive, empirically grounded reasons, not merely partisan ones. His controversial visit to the Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013 drew a rare and highly public rebuke from Japan's indispensable ally, with the US Embassy in Tokyo issuing a [formal statement](#) of "disappointment". His administration's handling of wartime history, the fragile 2015 "comfort women" agreement with South Korea that subsequently unravelled, and the decidedly mixed empirical verdict on the "three arrows" of Abenomics all serve to complicate the hagiography that has steadily grown around him posthumously.

To credit Abe's strategic achievements is not to dismiss or minimise these critiques; rather, it is to argue that his foreign-policy legacy can and must be evaluated on its own distinct terms. That legacy was announced, fittingly, in Washington D.C. In his seminal February 2013 address at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Abe boldly declared, "Japan is back", insisting that Japan "is not, and will never be, a tier-two country". While the line was undeniably rhetorical, it accurately described a genuine, structural reorientation: the systematic conversion of Japan from

a reactive, Yoshida Doctrine-bound trading state into a proactive middle power willing to author regional order rather than merely inhabit it.

THE GLOBAL DEMAND SIGNAL FOR TOKYO'S LEADERSHIP

The first necessary analytical correction in understanding Japan's current geopolitical position concerns the supposed monolith of overseas opinion. In reality, there is no such monolith. Assessments of Abe's tenure range from deeply admiring to sharply critical, and the critical voices are by no means confined to Beijing or Pyongyang. European audiences, in particular, remain uneasy about his revisionist instincts regarding 20th-century history. However, on one fundamental structural point, a broad, overarching consensus does hold. With the conspicuous exceptions of China, Russia, and North Korea, the vast majority of Japan's strategic partners desire *more* Japanese leadership, not less.

This international demand signal directly inverts a deep-seated domestic reflex. The well-worn Japanese proverb that "the nail that sticks up gets hammered down" (出る杭は打たれる – *deru kui wa utareru*) perfectly captured postwar Japan's strong preference for a low-profile, omnidirectional diplomacy. This posture was rationalised for decades by the pacifist constraints of Article 9 of the Constitution and by acute regional sensitivities to any resurgence of Japanese power.

**The defining question for 2026 is
whether Prime Minister Takaichi
will successfully translate her**

inherited rhetoric into independent, institutionalised achievement

However, the contemporary security environment has rendered that minimalist posture strategically costly and increasingly obsolete. Faced with rampant economic coercion, zero-sum technology competition, and the central, defining question of how to manage a powerful, highly assertive China, Japan's partners increasingly regard Tokyo as the experienced, pragmatic practitioner. Japan is viewed as the country that has lived next to a difficult, asymmetric great power for over a century and has developed sophisticated theories and practical mechanisms for managing that relationship without resorting to either capitulation or kinetic war.

THE “FREE AND OPEN INDO-PACIFIC” (FOIP) AS A CONTESTED BUT ENDURING INHERITANCE

Abe's most consequential and enduring bequest to international relations is undeniably conceptual: the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) framework. Its intellectual seeds predate his second premiership, traceable to his visionary August 2007 “Confluence of the Two Seas” address to the Indian Parliament ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan](#)), and it was given its mature, actionable articulation in his August 2016 Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) VI speech in Nairobi. At its core, FOIP envisions the vast maritime expanse stretching from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean as a rules-governed, inclusive commons that no single state can dominate by force or coercion.

The truly remarkable fact about FOIP is its widespread global adoption. Washington formalised its own Indo-Pacific Strategy under successive administrations, and the terminology rapidly migrated into the strategic documents of the Association of

Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the European Union, and India. For a grand strategic concept originated by a Japanese premier to become the shared grammar of global diplomacy is genuinely unprecedented in postwar Japanese history.

However, analytical balance demands acknowledging the intense contestation surrounding the concept. Beijing has consistently and vehemently framed FOIP as an exclusionary containment strategy dressed in the palatable language of liberal institutionalism. This reading has been advanced repeatedly in state-affiliated outlets such as the *Global Times* (環球時報) and in official Chinese Foreign Ministry commentaries, which often describe it as an “Asian NATO”.

Even among Japan’s partners, there has been significant hedging. ASEAN states, fiercely protective of their strategic autonomy, produced their own ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in 2019 precisely to soften the concept’s bloc-like edges and preserve their traditional non-alignment. FOIP succeeded not because it was universally and uncritically embraced, but because it was strategically elastic enough to accommodate divergent national interpretations. This elasticity is a feature of highly skilled concept-entrepreneurship, though one must concede that it occasionally dilutes the framework’s operational meaning.

Abe astutely paired this geopolitical vision with the early scaffolding of what is now universally termed “economic security”. He recognised early that critical dependencies, spanning semiconductors, energy, and critical minerals, must not become vectors of geopolitical coercion. Through initiatives like the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the institutionalisation of the Quad, Japan was genuinely ahead of the curve, and this logic now animates policy planning from Washington to Brussels.

THE CALCULUS OF BEIJING’S ENGAGEMENT AND THE TRUE MEANING OF STRATEGIC RESPECT

The most rhetorically loaded claim in the original framing of Abe’s legacy, that even Chinese President Xi Jinping “respected” Abe, requires highly careful, nuanced handling, as it is easily misread by casual observers. There is absolutely no credible empirical evidence that Beijing liked, supported, or felt affection for Abe. The relationship was fundamentally adversarial, and Chinese state media regularly excoriated him for his historical revisionism and defence posture.

The defensible, analytically rigorous version of this claim is much narrower and far more interesting: Chinese strategic analysts and policymakers came to treat Abe as a serious, predictable, and highly capable interlocutor after two decades in which Japan’s revolving-door premierships had signalled strategic drift and weakness. [Chinese commentary](#) in authoritative outlets like the *People’s Daily* (人民網) shifted gradually from outright dismissiveness toward a posture of wary, calculated engagement, culminating in the cautious 2018 détente and Abe’s official visit to Beijing.

The core analytical point is this: Chinese statecraft systematically rewards legibility and resolve, while it ruthlessly exploits ambiguity and vacillation. Abe offered legibility. He was entirely unambiguous about Japan’s core national interests and red lines, which, paradoxically, made him a more usable and stable partner for Beijing than a weaker, less predictable premier would have been. “Respect” in this context is a term of strategic art, not a synonym for affection. We must vigorously resist inflating it into a personal endorsement, which would fundamentally misstate the ruthless nature of great-power competition.

**The deeper, most enduring lesson
that Shinzo Abe modeled for
Japanese statecraft was not
assertiveness for its own sake, but
rather adaptability**

It is also vital to note that Abe's hard-nosed pragmatism extended to the management of allies as well as rivals. His patient, highly disciplined cultivation of an unpredictable President Donald Trump during his first term, strictly prioritising the structural integrity of the alliance over personal friction or ideological distaste, prefigured the diplomatic discipline that the G7 has had to relearn in subsequent summitry.

Ultimately, the true measure of Abe's statecraft was not its ideological purity, but its structural durability in an era of intensifying great-power competition. As the narrative shifts to the present day, it is precisely this durable architecture that Prime Minister Takaichi must now operationalise. Inheriting Abe's mantle is insufficient; she must translate his pragmatic legacy into actionable policy for a highly volatile 2026. The conceptual scaffolding Abe built, managing a transactional Washington, articulating a proactive vision for the Indo-Pacific, and engaging rivals with unyielding clarity, provides the exact blueprint required for Japan's current challenges. Therefore, rather than merely echoing his rhetoric, Takaichi's administration must actively build upon his foundational strategies. To ensure Japan retains the proactive middle-power agency Abe so painstakingly cultivated, her government must immediately focus on three strategic imperatives that directly bridge his historical vision with today's urgent geopolitical realities.

THREE STRATEGIC IMPERATIVES FOR TAKAICHI BEYOND BORROWED NOMENCLATURE

This complex legacy brings us to the operative question of 2026. Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi inherits Abe's brand, but political brands depreciate rapidly in the unforgiving arena of international affairs. What strategic partners value is demonstrated reliability and institutional capacity, not mere ideological lineage. For the Takaichi administration, three critical priorities immediately follow.

First, she must deepen the US-Japan alliance as a matter of hard substance, not mere sentiment.

This requires sustained, capital-intensive investment in defence-industrial cooperation, advanced technology co-development, and rigorous extended-deterrence dialogues. Crucially, it demands the diplomatic temperament to persist through inevitable friction. The enduring lesson Abe provided in managing Washington was the strict subordination of ego to national interest. With a second Trump administration actively testing allies on burden-sharing, trade deficits, and tariffs, that specific temperament is once again at an absolute premium. Takaichi must demonstrate that Japan is a net security provider, leveraging the 2022 National Security Strategy to show tangible capability enhancements.

Second, Tokyo must build sophisticated, non-coercive coalitions to engage the Global South, especially with India. The states of Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Pacific Islands, and Africa will undeniably shape the balance of power in this century, and the contest for their alignment is intensely real. Yet, the framing of this engagement matters immensely. These nations are not passive wards to be “supported” against Chinese influence; they are agency-bearing partners with their own urgent development priorities. Many deeply resent being instrumentalised as pawns in Sino-American great-power rivalry.

Japan’s comparative advantage, rooted in high-quality infrastructure investment, the promotion of quality-infrastructure norms, and a hard-won reputation for not weaponising sovereign debt works effectively only if Tokyo offers genuine, symmetrical partnership rather than a transparent counter-China sales pitch. Crude, zero-sum bloc framing tends to backfire spectacularly across a Global South that fiercely prizes its strategic autonomy. Takaichi must lean into Japan’s role as a facilitator of connectivity, not just a security guarantor. The Abe-Modi friendship, shared national interests, and shared vision for the region must not be squandered. Takaichi needs to invest in the relationship at all levels to ensure that it continues to deepen.

Third, Japan must construct robust coalitions against information manipulation and cognitive warfare.

The alarming November 2025 episode, in which Takaichi's candid remarks on Taiwan's security triggered a massive, coordinated Chinese pressure campaign spanning diplomatic, economic, and sophisticated information channels, vividly illustrated a new reality. Disinformation, cyber-enabled foreign interference, and cognitive domain operations are now front-line, existential concerns for open, democratic societies.

This is not a vulnerability that any single state can solve in isolation. It demands the rapid establishment of shared attribution standards, deep cooperation with technology platforms, and comprehensive resilience-building among like-minded democracies. In this specific domain, the European Union's regulatory experience and Taiwan's hard-won, frontline expertise in countering United Front work are just as relevant to Tokyo as Washington's cyber capabilities.

STRENGTH AS STRATEGIC ADAPTABILITY

The deeper, most enduring lesson that Shinzo Abe modelled for Japanese statecraft was not assertiveness for its own sake, but rather *adaptability*, what the author calls Japan as an adapter middle power. The institutional capacity to accurately read macro-structural changes in the global system and reposition Japan accordingly, ruthlessly shedding the reflexive minimalism of the postwar decades. In the long arc of international relations, the states that successfully endure periods of systemic transition are rarely the strongest in absolute terms, nor the most morally righteous, but rather the most highly adaptive.

A classic Japanese proverb perfectly captures the stark choice now standing before Tokyo: "*keikō to naru mo gyūgo to naru nakare*" (鶏口となるも牛後となるなかれ), better to be the beak of the rooster than the rump of the ox; better to lead a small flock than to trail passively behind something larger.

The defining question for 2026 is whether Prime Minister Takaichi will successfully translate her inherited rhetoric into independent, institutionalised achievement. Yet, beyond the immediate trajectory of her administration, Japan's evolution offers a

profound blueprint for middle-power agency in an increasingly fractured international order. Japan has emerged as the quintessential “adapter” middle power, a state that does not merely endure systemic constraints and Sino-American friction, but actively shapes its regional environment through proactive rule-making, coalition-building, and strategic elasticity. If Takaichi can navigate today’s structural headwinds with the pragmatism of her predecessor while forging her own distinct strategic identity, she will do more than secure her domestic legacy; she will validate the crucial capacity of adapter states to anchor global stability. Should she succeed, Japan’s partners, and, in the cold, calculating calculus of grand strategy, perhaps even Beijing, will once again find a country deeply worth taking seriously. That is the substantive answer the world is waiting for, quietly but in earnest.



Stephen R. Nagy is a professor at the International Christian University, a senior fellow and China project lead at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, and a JIIA CGO Fellow at the Japan Institute for International Affairs. He is the author of Japan as an Adapter Middle Power: Navigating Ideological and Systemic Divides (Routledge, 2026).