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[Japan's Voices No.16] A Takaichi Doctrine to navigate great power competition

Stephen R. Nagy (CGO Fellow, The Japan Institute of International Affairs)



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When Sanae Takaichi assumed the mantle of Japan's leadership in the autumn of 2025, expectations in both Tokyo and allied capitals were decidedly mixed. Known primarily for her conservative credentials, economic security acumen and as the ideological heir to the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, questions lingered over whether she possessed the pragmatic diplomatic dexterity required to navigate an increasingly fractured Indo-Pacific. Yet, as we evaluate her initial eight months in power from the vantage point of July 2026, a clear consensus is emerging. Prime Minister Takaichi has demonstrated a surprising and highly effective competency on the international stage. She has, by most geopolitical metrics, fared far better than her early skeptics anticipated.

Her tenure began with a flurry of calculated diplomatic maneuvers that immediately established her footing. Following her election as LDP President and appointment as Prime Minister, Takaichi made a rapid, decisive visit to the ASEAN Summit. This early prioritization of Southeast Asia signaled vital continuity in Japan's middle-power diplomacy, reassuring regional partners that Tokyo remains deeply invested in their economic and security resilience amidst great power competition.

Equally impressive was her deft handling of the United States. In late October 2025, she quickly welcomed President Donald Trump to Tokyo. Rather than getting bogged down in the unpredictability and transactional friction that often characterizes the current U.S. administration, Takaichi secured a highly pragmatic victory by signing a bilateral rare earth agreement. This move appealed directly to Washington's focus on supply-chain decoupling from China while securing vital resources for Japan's high-tech and defense sectors. It was a strong example in managing a complex ally.

Perhaps the most surprising triumph of her early tenure has been the genuine diplomatic warmth cultivated with South Korea's President Lee. Given Takaichi's conservative political base, many analysts predicted a deep freeze in Tokyo-Seoul relations. Instead, she has overseen a continued deepening of bilateral engagement. By compartmentalizing historical grievances and focusing strictly on shared security concerns regarding North Korea, a revisionist China, private concerns about unpredictability from Washington, Takaichi has demonstrated a mature, forward-looking statesmanship.

These early successes have provided a foundation for a broader strategic vision. Takaichi has proactively updated Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision to reflect the stark realities of 2026, complementing it with the newly announced POWER Asia initiative. This framework emphasizes proactive Japanese investment in regional resilience, energy security, and rule-making, in-line with her experience in economic security. Furthermore, her recent diplomatic tour, visiting the UK and Italy to solidify the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) before participating in her first G7 Summit, demonstrated a nuanced understanding of multilateralism. By linking Euro-Atlantic security with Indo-Pacific stability, she is positioning Japan as an indispensable geopolitical linchpin. Her visit to India in early July further cemented this architecture, drawing New Delhi closer into a web of mutually reinforcing security, technological and economic partnerships.

Despite these undeniable successes, it is crucial to recognize that Takaichi is still in a growing stage. She is building her confidence on the international stage, and equally, the international community is still calibrating its confidence in her. This is entirely to be expected. She operates in the long, formidable shadow of her mentor, Shinzo Abe, who was in power for nearly eight years (and worries that Japan could return to a short-lived, rotating leadership). Abe had evolved into the senior statesman, a rare leader capable of bridging the United States, the G7, and the Global South. His tragic assassination magnified his stature, and his absence is acutely felt today when dealing with tough, unpredictable actors like China, Russia, and the United States.

To truly succeed and secure her legacy, Takaichi must develop her own distinct brand. She cannot simply be an echo of Abe; she must emerge as a leader who instills confidence not only in the Japanese public but also among international partners who share Japan's national interests.

This requires a delicate balance of strength and strategic communication, an area where her administration currently exhibits notable shortcomings. In a geopolitical environment shaped by authoritarian states that only respect power and strength, Takaichi must continue to demonstrate her resilience and an absolute unwillingness to be coerced. She laid down a significant marker in this regard with her November 7, 2025, statement, explicitly noting that a Taiwan contingency would require the involvement of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces to defend Japan's vital interests. This was a bold, necessary articulation of strategic clarity that sent a clear deterrent signal to Beijing.

However, deterrence is not merely about bold statements; it requires comprehensive narrative control. Herein lies her greatest vulnerability. Such statements must be backed by continuous diplomatic engagement to ensure they do not become hollow provocations that Beijing can exploit to paint Japan as an aggressor or engaged in remilitarization which Beijing has done through a massive and continuing disinformation campaign. She must stand firm on this position without allowing it to unnecessarily escalate bilateral tensions, managing the Sino-Japanese relationship with a sophisticated mix of engagement, resilience and deterrence. Currently, her administration often appears reactive to Beijing's rhetorical pushback rather than proactively setting the terms of the regional debate.

Simultaneously, Takaichi faces a profound domestic communication deficit regarding her most important ally. She must do a much better job explaining to Japanese citizens, and to regional allies, why Tokyo continues to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the United States despite the immense challenges of the current administration. The Japanese public is understandably wary of being dragged into great-power conflicts or being subjected to abrupt policy shifts from Washington. Takaichi has largely remained sequestered in the Kantei on this issue, relying on traditional bureaucratic talking points. She must articulate clearly and passionately that the U.S.-Japan alliance is not based on the personalities of its leaders, but on structural, existential geopolitical realities.

To overcome these shortcomings, she must internalize a fundamental maxim of statesmanship. Leaders lead, they do not react. Leaders engage, they do not remain passive. Leaders reach out, they do not remain sequestered in their palaces.

While her policy outcomes have been excellent, her public narrative has lagged. She has occasionally allowed the media or political opposition to define the intent behind her security policies. Moving forward, she must take control of the narrative. She needs to hold more town halls, engage directly and frequently with the Japanese press, and clearly articulate how initiatives like POWER Asia and her firm stance on Taiwan directly secure the prosperity and everyday safety of the average Japanese citizen.

Looking ahead, Takaichi's trajectory is highly promising. If she can step out of Abe's shadow, refine her public diplomacy, and maintain her resilient stance against coercion while pragmatically managing Washington, she has the potential to not just manage Japan's demographic and economic challenges, but to actively shape the future of the Indo-Pacific. She has proven she can govern; now, she must prove she can lead an era.



Stephen R. Nagy is professor of politics and international studies at the International Christian University. Concurrently, he holds appointments as a senior fellow and China project lead at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute and a CGO fellow at the Japan Institute for International Affairs.

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