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Implications for Japan's Regional Relations

Sarah Soh



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Takaichi Romps to Victory in the Lower House: Implications for Japan's Regional Relations

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- *Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi has achieved an unparalleled landslide win in the recently concluded Lower House election held on 8 February 2026.*
- *Takaichi will leverage her decisive mandate to strengthen Japan's alliance with the United States, prevent relations with China from sliding further, and maintain the positive momentum in ties with South Korea.*

COMMENTARY

Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi has led the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to a [resounding victory](#) in the recently concluded Lower House election. The LDP clinched 316 of the 465 seats up for grabs – [eclipsing](#) the 304 seats captured by the Yasuhiro Nakasone administration in 1986 and the 308 won by the then Democratic Party of Japan in 2009. The LDP's record-breaking feat also marked the first instance in post-war Japan of a single party attaining a supermajority in the lower chamber. Together with the 36 seats captured by the Japan Innovation Party, the LDP-led ruling coalition has effectively earned a legislative free-pass since the Lower House can override bills and budgets rejected by the Upper House with a two-thirds majority.

The unprecedented scale of the LDP's electoral success has cemented Takaichi's position within the party's power echelons and brought much relief to Japan's partners looking for a greater degree of stability at the country's top leadership. From the foreign policy perspective, what will the election results portend for Japan's relations with its foremost ally, the United States, and its immediate neighbours, China and South Korea?



Japan's partners will likely find reassurance in the LDP's historic electoral success, which signals leadership stability. *Image credit: Cabinet Public Affairs Office, [CC BY 4.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons.*

Japan–US Relations

Posting on [Truth Social](#) in his trademark hyperbolic tone, US President Donald Trump was quick to congratulate Takaichi on her “LANDSLIDE Victory”, while extending well wishes for her “Great Success in passing your Conservative, Peace Through Strength Agenda”. Tellingly, Trump’s message did not reference the US–Japan alliance. Rather, it focused on his endorsement of her coalition, the unparalleled winning margin, and her conservative political stance (though Tokyo’s policymakers would have frowned at the conflation with Trumpian strategic doctrine) – all of which underscore Trump’s preference and support for strong, conservative leaders. The decisive mandate that Takaichi secured at the ballot box is certainly not lost on the White House. All eyes will be on her planned visit to the United States in March and how deftly she leverages her political clout to strengthen her personal rapport with Trump as well as the bilateral alliance.

Takaichi’s forward-leaning stance on Japanese security will help her score points with the Trump administration, given its push for US allies to assume greater responsibility for their own defence. Since taking office in October, Takaichi and her team have announced a slew of initiatives that will further loosen Japan’s post-war defence constraints if successfully implemented. These included plans to [revise](#) the three key national security documents to enhance defence capabilities and increase the defence budget, [easing of guidelines](#) on defence exports, a [potential review](#) of the Three Non-Nuclear Principles to allow for Japan to host nuclear weapons, and a [constitutional change](#) to explicitly recognise the legality of the Self-Defence Forces – an undertaking that will face significant challenges.

The catch is whether Japan’s efforts, particularly with regard to defence spending, are construed as “sufficient” by the Trump administration’s standards. The United States had previously flagged Tokyo’s spending as “[manifestly inadequate](#)”, and the latest [US National Defence Strategy](#) had proposed that allies and partners adopt 5% of GDP as the target for defence spending. Japan had [succeeded](#) in raising its defence expenditure to 2% two years ahead of schedule by tapping on a supplementary budget. It remains to be seen how this compares to NATO’s [pledge](#) of 5% and “[model ally](#)” South Korea’s 3.5%.

Takaichi will also have to address the matter of Japanese investments in the United States which was negotiated in exchange for tariff reductions. Delays in discussions

over the projects have purportedly drawn Trump's [ire](#). Trump has gone ahead to [announce](#) the first three projects under Japan's US\$550 billion pledge to invest in the United States even though some details have yet to be ironed out. Investment issues will be high on the agenda for Takaichi's [impending](#) visit to Washington in March. The Japanese prime minister will have to arm herself with clear plans since Trump will probably expect to announce a big investment "deal" as one of the meeting's outcomes.

Japan–China Relations

Japan's relations with China will remain strained for some time. Bilateral ties have nosedived following Takaichi's comments on the [implications](#) of a potential Taiwan contingency for Japan. China has responded by imposing punitive economic measures on Japan, ranging from flight reductions, travel curbs, suspension of seafood imports, and, more critically, a [ban](#) on exports of dual-use items, which was [extended](#) to include rare earth products for non-military use.

It is hard to say with certainty whether Takaichi's resolute stance on China and China's retaliatory actions triggered a "rally-round-the-flag" effect that contributed to her landslide victory. Takaichi has obtained strong political support domestically with which to conduct relations with China. It is in both countries' interests to dial back tensions and prevent relations from deteriorating further. At a brief post-election [news conference](#), Takaichi emphasised the importance of "communication" with China, adding that "Japan remains open to various forms of dialogue with China". Tokyo will also be keeping a close watch on the meeting between Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping in April for cues on how to calibrate its approach to China.

Japan–South Korea Relations

The now iconic moment of South Korean President Lee Jae Myung drumming alongside a beaming Takaichi during his visit to Nara in January represented a rare diplomatic bright spark amid a fraught international outlook. Optics aside, the two leaders will have to work towards translating the growing rapprochement between their countries into concrete cooperation. At the summit, they [discussed](#), among other matters, furthering their cooperation in economic security (supply chains and transnational organised fraud were highlighted as areas for collaboration in this respect), enhancing bilateral and trilateral coordination with the United States to promote regional security, as well as resuming "shuttle diplomacy".

In his [congratulatory message](#) to Takaichi, Lee expressed his desire for "broader and deeper cooperation based on our trust and solidarity". Takaichi's reply affirmed her commitment to "developing our relationship in a future-oriented and stable manner". The warm relationship between the conservative Takaichi and progressive Lee is unexpected, given their political leanings and the [history of antagonism](#) between their parties. Moving forward, both leaders will have to prevent historical tensions from derailing the momentum towards positive bilateral relations. Much will depend on Takaichi's plans for the observance of the upcoming "[Takeshima Day](#)" and whether she chooses to maintain the controversial visits to [Yasukuni Shrine](#). Takaichi will also have to invest in efforts to allay South Korea's concerns as her administration accelerates Japan's defence build-up.

Looking Ahead

Takaichi's stunning victory has been [attributed to her popularity](#) rather than support for the LDP per se, and her administration will be keen to push through its policies while public sentiments are riding high. At the same time, Japan's partners, reeling from the effects of a fraying global order, will certainly welcome the country's proactive role in regional and international affairs. Takaichi will therefore have to strike a balance between Japan's domestic imperatives and foreign policy commitments. A tough call – but the “iron lady” will surely give her best.

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