

China and Japan: Down the rabbit hole of the past to future

As former British wartime Prime Minister Winston Churchill once said, “History is written by the victors”.

Indeed, our world today is what it is because of a major event that happened in the past that brought us where we were today. We live in a world created by the victorious allied powers of World War Two — a rules-based multilateral order led by the USA. This world order has brought us relative peace and stability in the past 80 years, across different corners of the world that have seen war. Alas, with the rise of global populism and the weakening of the global political establishment, this world order is quickly coming to an end, with implications across different corners of the world.

This commentary will be focussed specifically on China-Japan relations, with a brief history of China-Japan relations before pivoting to the implications of it on China and Japan today and the future.

A look back

China and Japan have long been trading partners. The first recorded mention of Japan was in AD 57¹, where Wa(then Japan) was mentioned by the Chinese Han Dynasty. For centuries², Japan was a tributary state to China, regularly giving gifts and paying tribute to the Chinese Emperor. China perceived itself to be the centre of the universe(tianxia concept³) while viewing Japan as a smaller and weaker state. However, over the course of time, this relationship gradually reversed with an increasingly assertive Japan and a weakening China. After reunifying Japan in 1592, Japanese Shogun Toyotomi Hideyoshi⁴ sought to reshape the balance of power in Japan’s favour through his two Invasions of Korea in 1592 and 1597. However, these 2 invasions were repelled by the combined forces of Joseon Korea and Ming China⁵.

¹ Wikipedia Contributors. 2019. “History of China–Japan Relations.” Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. June 11, 2019. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_China%E2%80%93Japan_relations.

² Wikipedia Contributors. 2019. “History of China–Japan Relations.” Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. June 11, 2019. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_China%E2%80%93Japan_relations.

³ “Tianxia.” 2021. Wikipedia. April 4, 2021. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tianxia>.

⁴ Wikipedia Contributors. 2019. “Toyotomi Hideyoshi.” Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. May 28, 2019. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toyotomi_Hideyoshi.

⁵ Wikipedia Contributors. 2019. “Toyotomi Hideyoshi.” Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. May 28, 2019. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toyotomi_Hideyoshi.

After the Meiji Restoration⁶, Japan underwent modernization across different fields, from the military to the political realms. On the other hand, the late Qing China⁷ was suffering from corruption and decay, having been already trounced by British forces 2 times in the Two Opium Wars⁸. This emboldened Japan to go to war with Qing China over Korea in the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895⁹. Japan achieved a decisive victory, destroying China's Beiyang Fleet and forcing China to cede Taiwan and pay heavy reparations of 230 million taels (about USD 5 billion in 2015) in the Treaty of Shimonoseki¹⁰. There were numerous other humiliations that Japan inflicted on China, from the Japanese participation in the Eight Nation Alliance in the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion in 1900¹¹, to the acceptance of Japan's Twenty One Demands¹² by the Yuan Shikai government in 1915.

But the crucial historical memory that still poisons Chinese-Japanese relations today remains the Second Sino-Japanese War¹³ of 1937-1945. Japan invaded and occupied large swathes of Eastern China and subjected the Chinese to immense pain and suffering during those years. The Nanjing Massacre¹⁴ of 1937 remains firmly in Chinese historical consciousness till this day, where Japanese soldiers committed gruesome war crimes against hundreds of thousands of Chinese civilians. The inability for both countries to get over this painful historical memory stems partly from the repeated playing up of World War Two by the Chinese state¹⁵, Japanese historical revisionism¹⁶ and also repeated visits¹⁷ to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine by nationalist Japanese politicians.

A lighted powder keg: China-Japan

⁶ Wikipedia Contributors. 2019. "Meiji Restoration." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. March 17, 2019. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meiji_Restoration.

⁷ "History of the Qing Dynasty." 2024. Wikipedia. February 7, 2024. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Qing_dynasty.

⁸ Wikipedia Contributors. 2019. "Second Opium War." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. March 26, 2019. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Opium_War.

⁹ Wikipedia Contributors. 2019. "First Sino-Japanese War." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. May 13, 2019. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Sino-Japanese_War.

¹⁰ Wikipedia Contributors. 2019. "Treaty of Shimonoseki." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. April 19, 2019. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_Shimonoseki.

¹¹ Wikipedia Contributors. 2018. "Boxer Rebellion." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. December 11, 2018. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boxer_Rebellion.

¹² "Twenty-One Demands." 2020. Wikipedia. May 7, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twenty-One_Demands.

¹³ "Second Sino-Japanese War." 2019. Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. January 14, 2019. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Sino-Japanese_War.

¹⁴ Wikipedia Contributors. 2019. "Nanjing Massacre." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. May 21, 2019. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nanjing_Massacre.

¹⁵ Wikipedia Contributors. 2026. "Victory over Japan Day (China)." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. January 11, 2026.

¹⁶ Ryall, Julian, and Wesley Rahn. 2025. "Japan Grapples with Its Past 80 Years after World War II." Dw.com. Deutsche Welle. August 15, 2025. <https://www.dw.com/en/japan-grapples-with-its-past-80-years-after-world-war-ii/a-73654758>.

¹⁷ Wikipedia Contributors. 2026. "Controversies Surrounding Yasukuni Shrine." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. January 28, 2026.

Ever since the end of the Second World War, Chinese-Japanese political relations have been frosty at best, due to tremendous underlying grievances between both states. The Chinese detest the Japanese for being the foreign nation that inflicted the most pain on China during the Century of Humiliation¹⁸. The Japanese worry¹⁹ about a militarily resurgent China keen to settle historical scores with Tokyo once and for all in their worst nightmares.

Over the past 80 years, Tokyo became one of America's closest allies²⁰. East Asia has not seen another war yet, with a largely constrained Japanese post-war military in the form of the Self Defence Forces²¹ (SDF) and a rapidly rising China. China and Japan have had relatively close economic ties since relations were normalised in 1972²², with China as Japan's largest trading partner²³.

But with the second Trump Presidency and the arrival of arch-conservative Sanae Takaichi as Japan's Prime Minister, Chinese-Japanese relations are once again deteriorating today. The Trump administration's policy shift of having their allies pay more for their own defence has caused policy ripples in Japan's policy and security establishment. One underlying trend has been the acceleration of the increase of the Japanese Defence Budget from 1% of GDP to 2% of GDP by 2026 instead of 2027 previously²⁴. But the sudden catalyst was PM Takaichi's remark of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan that would constitute a "survival-threatening" situation, that has caused deep Chinese unhappiness and economic retaliation in the form of reduced Chinese tourist arrivals in Japan²⁵.

From the Chinese perspective, Japan's actions were seen as highly provocative. The last time a "survival-threatening" situation was invoked by Japan was for the takeover of

¹⁸ Wikipedia Contributors. 2019. "Century of Humiliation." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. April 11, 2019. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Century_of_humiliation.

¹⁹ Kelly, Tim. 2026. "China Tops Japanese Public's Security Worries in Latest Government Poll." *Reuters*, January 9, 2026. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-tops-japanese-publics-security-worries-latest-government-poll-2026-01-09/>.

²⁰ Wikipedia Contributors. 2024. "U.S.–Japan Alliance." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. September 14, 2024. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U.S.%E2%80%93Japan_Alliance.

²¹ "Japan Self-Defense Forces." 2021. Wikipedia. July 24, 2021. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japan_Self-Defense_Forces.

²² Wikipedia Contributors. 2019. "China–Japan Relations." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. May 8, 2019. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/China%E2%80%93Japan_relations.

²³ Wikipedia Contributors. 2019. "China–Japan Relations." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. May 8, 2019. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/China%E2%80%93Japan_relations.

²⁴ Yamazaki, Makiko. 2025. "Japan's New Premier Pledges Early Boost to Defence Spending, 'Proactive' Fiscal Policy." *Reuters*, October 24, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/japans-new-premier-pledges-early-boost-defence-spending-proactive-fiscal-moves-2025-10-24/>.

²⁵ "Nearly Half of China Flights to Japan Cut in December, Chinese State Media Says." 2025. *The Straits Times*. December 2, 2025. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/nearly-half-of-china-flights-to-japan-cut-in-december-chinese-state-media-says>.

Manchuria in 1931 by Japan²⁶, still deeply scarring in Chinese historical consciousness today. Given also that China views Taiwan as an integral part of the Chinese nation,²⁷ Japan's statements of a potential intervention in Taiwan brought about great anger as it was seen as Japan wanting to repeat what they did to China during the Century of Humiliation once more again. But yet, mere emotional outrage at what PM Takaichi said is unlikely to be the most serious Chinese concern. What China is likely more worried about is the potential remilitarisation of Japan with the steep jump in defence spending. Over the course of the First²⁸ and the Second Sino Japanese War²⁹ from 1894 to 1895 and from 1937 to 1945 respectively, Chinese military forces were trounced by Japan time and time again, often with heavy casualties and humiliating territorial losses. Hence China certainly views Japan as a strong military adversary and even a deserving peer to China's military might. With Trump unshackling the constraints of Japanese pacifist requirements³⁰, Japan's military is rising, with the acquisition of longer range strike capabilities against China itself³¹. The Chinese know that the rise in Japan militarily can alter the balance of power in East Asia. A strong Japan in future could potentially be the key to repelling a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, even without American support. This would be a headache for Chinese policy makers, who are unable to stop the Japanese military build up. This could potentially accelerate the Chinese timeline for the retaking of Taiwan, before Japan's military becomes strong enough to resist such attempts.

From the Japanese perspective, there has been a rise in the nationalist right, but within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in the form of the selection of PM Takaichi in October 2025³², and outside the LDP, in the form of the anti-immigration Sanseito Party³³. The Japanese right is spurred by historical revisionism over the Second World War and a determination to

²⁶ "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning's Regular Press Conference on November 19, 2025." 2025. China-Embassy.gov.cn. 2025.

https://mz.china-embassy.gov.cn/por/fyrth/202511/t20251119_11756196.htm.

²⁷ "Taiwan Is Part of China — an Indisputable Fact Supported by History and the Law_Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of South Africa." 2025. China-Embassy.gov.cn. 2025.

https://za.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwfb/202504/t20250425_11604294.htm.

²⁸ Wikipedia Contributors. 2019. "First Sino-Japanese War." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. May 13, 2019. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Sino-Japanese_War.

²⁹ "Second Sino-Japanese War." 2019. Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. January 14, 2019.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Sino-Japanese_War.

³⁰ Davidson, Helen. 2025. "Pete Hegseth Calls on Asia to Boost Military Spending in Face of 'Imminent' Threat from China." The Guardian. The Guardian. May 31, 2025.

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/may/31/pete-hegseth-calls-on-asia-to-boost-military-spending-in-face-of-imminent-threat-from-china-us-defence-secretary>.

³¹ Honrada, Gabriel. 2025. "Japan's Next-Gen Missile Crafted to Crack China's Pacific Push - Asia Times." Asia Times. November 15, 2025.

<https://asiatimes.com/2025/11/japans-next-gen-missile-crafted-to-crack-chinas-pacific-push/>.

³² "LDP Elects Sanae Takaichi as New Leader: Paving the Way to Japan's First Female Premier | GR Japan." 2025. Grjapan.com. 2025.

<https://grjapan.com/insights/insights/ldp-elects-sanae-takaichi-new-leader-paving-way-japans-first-female-premier>.

³³ "Sanseito, DPP Sharply Increase Their Presence in Upper House | the Asahi Shimbun: Breaking News, Japan News and Analysis." 2025. The Asahi Shimbun. 2025.

<https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15918632>.

amend Japan's pacifist post-war constitution to deal with a more aggressive China³⁴. Apart from the right, the Japanese general public is also wary³⁵ of an increasingly assertive China, pressuring Japan on the territorial issue of the Senakuku Islands³⁶. This, combined with pressure from President Trump, led to the rise in Japanese military spending. This was seen as necessary to keep Japan safe in the "severest and most complex" regional environment since the end of World War Two.³⁷ Furthermore, Prime Minister Takaichi has not been the only Japanese policy maker to call for a Japanese intervention in Taiwan, with former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe similarly calling for a need for such intervention in the past³⁸. This is due to the close proximity of the Japanese island of Yonaguni³⁹ to Taiwan, making it potentially caught in the crossfire of a Chinese invasion.

Tough questions on both sides

However, a better question to ask Prime Minister Takaichi instead could have been, "If the US refuses to intervene in a Chinese invasion of Taiwan today, would Japan still intervene?". This is an especially pertinent question due to the ambiguity of US policy over Taiwan and the unpredictability of President Trump, who will still be here until his term ends in January 2029⁴⁰. This would provoke thought among Japanese policy makers on the right who are pro-Taiwan, as even they know that the SDF on its own today would not be strong enough to face China's People Liberation Army (PLA) or make a major difference on the battlefield. This is compounded by the realisation that the SDF has never had any battlefield experience nor lost a single soldier in combat⁴¹. This pales in contrast to the PLA, while not being in combat in the 21st century yet, does still have experience from the Korean War in 1950⁴² to the 1979 border skirmish with

³⁴ Wikipedia Contributors. 2026. "Seiwa Seisaku Kenkyūkai." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. February 14, 2026.

³⁵ Morning, China. 2024. "90 per Cent of People in China and Japan Have Negative Views of Each Other, Poll Reveals." Yahoo Finance. December 3, 2024.
<https://finance.yahoo.com/news/90-per-cent-people-china-093000942.html>.

³⁶ Davidson, Helen, and Justin McCurry. 2025. "China Sends Coast Guard to Senkaku Islands amid Row with Japan." The Guardian. The Guardian. November 16, 2025.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/nov/16/china-sends-coast-guard-to-senkaku-islands-amid-row-with-japan>.

³⁷ Yamaguchi, Mari. 2025. "Japan's Cabinet OKs Record Defense Budget That Aims to Deter China." Defense News. December 26, 2025.
<https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2025/12/26/japans-cabinet-oks-record-defense-budget-that-aims-to-deter-china/>.

³⁸ Blanchard, Ben. 2021. "Former PM Abe Says Japan, U.S. Could Not Stand by If China Attacked Taiwan." *Reuters*, December 1, 2021, sec. Asia Pacific.
<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/former-pm-abe-says-japan-us-could-not-stand-by-if-china-attacked-taiwan-2021-12-01/>.

³⁹ Wikipedia Contributors. 2024. "Yonaguni." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. November 29, 2024.

⁴⁰ "Term Limits in the United States." 2020. Wikipedia. June 27, 2020.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Term_limits_in_the_United_States.

⁴¹ "Japan Self-Defense Forces." 2021. Wikipedia. July 24, 2021.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japan_Self-Defense_Forces.

⁴² Wikipedia Contributors. 2025. "China in the Korean War." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. June 4, 2025.

Vietnam⁴³. This could make an intervention for Japan especially costly, given the asymmetry of battlefield experience. However, if this same question is asked 5 years later after Japan's military build up, it is possible that this question will receive a "yes" from Japan. Hence Japan's priority now under Prime Minister Takaichi is likely to build up their military as fast as they can.

On the Chinese side, a crucial question remains in military planning for a Taiwan invasion. Would China also strike bases in Japan, Guam and Hawaii at the same time? History, through the Six Day War in 1967⁴⁴ and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941⁴⁵, has shown that pre-emptive attacks have great value in gaining the upper hand, and buying much needed time for the attacker to achieve their military aims while the victim recovers from shock. But at the same time, a pre-emptive strike would likely destroy all progress in economic and people-to-people ties that have been fostered between China and Japan over the past 50 years. But most of all, it may strengthen the resolve of Japanese and American publics for a full scale war with China. Ultimately, as an import-reliant nation⁴⁶, what China lacks the most in a Taiwan invasion is time, and such an attack would precisely buy time for China to secure Taiwan while Japan and the US lick their wounds. China, like Japan during World War 2, would hope to conclude a war with Taiwan as quickly as possible, to avoid longer term economic dysfunction should America cut off the Malacca Straits. Whether China launches such an extensive pre-emptive strike would rest on Chinese assessments of the probability of a Japanese-American intervention over Taiwan.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the poison of history has strained ties between Japan and China till this day. Mutual trust is breaking down over tit-for-tat measures and it would take time to mend ties between both nations, potentially through a younger generation of leaders on both sides in the longer term. But the powder keg has already been lighted, with many avenues for it to blow up, from the Senkaku Islands to Taiwan. Managing this powder keg would hence require careful management by the current leaders on both sides.

⁴³ Wikipedia Contributors. 2019. "Sino-Vietnamese War." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. April 27, 2019. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sino-Vietnamese_War.

⁴⁴ Wikipedia Contributors. 2019. "Six-Day War." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. March 27, 2019. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Six-Day_War.

⁴⁵ Wikipedia. 2018. "Attack on Pearl Harbor." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. December 14, 2018. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attack_on_Pearl_Harbor.

⁴⁶ F_126. 2023. "China Becomes World's Largest Food Importer - People's Daily Online." People.cn. 2023. <https://en.people.cn/n3/2023/1204/c90000-20105550.html>.