

Asia maritime tensions**China sends coastguard to disputed islands as row with Japan escalates**

Ships sail near Senkaku or Diaoyu chain as officials warn there is no straightforward way to ease tensions



Beijing last week took the unusual step of warning its citizens not to visit Japan, a popular destination for Chinese tourists © Greg Baker/AFP via Getty Images

Leo Lewis in Kyoto and **Joe Leahy** in Beijing

Published NOV 16 2025

China conducted a coastguard patrol near a group of disputed islands administered by Japan on Sunday, adding further heat to a blazing row between the two countries.

Chinese state media has also stepped up warnings to Tokyo that Beijing has prepared “substantial countermeasures” in the dispute, which erupted from unusually [blunt comments on Taiwan](#) made earlier this month by Japan’s hawkish new Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi.

Diplomats based in Tokyo warned that there was no obvious way to defuse the situation, which has flared just days after Takaichi and China’s President Xi Jinping met at a summit in South Korea and pledged to nurture an era of co-operation and understanding.

One senior Japanese MP said the trajectory of the row created the potential that both sides might consider economic sanctions as a next step.

“Nobody wants that, but it is an unfortunate possibility if we cannot find an off-ramp,” the person said.

Senior Japanese officials said the spat had rapidly evolved into a [test of Takaichi](#), who is already viewed with suspicion by Beijing for having been an acolyte of the late Shinzo Abe — a nationalist during whose premiership Japan-China relations dipped sharply.

Sunday’s sea patrol, described by the China Coast Guard as part of a “rights safeguarding” action, took place around the islands known as Diaoyu in China and Senkaku in Japan — an archipelago whose ownership has been a notoriously combustible diplomatic issue.

The patrol was conducted after China’s foreign ministry last week took the unusual step of warning its citizens not to visit Japan, citing a deteriorating security environment and “a rise in cases targeting Chinese nationals”.

Under intensive questioning during a parliamentary session on November 7, Takaichi became the first sitting Japanese prime minister to set out a hypothetical scenario where Tokyo could consider a Chinese attack on Taiwan an “existential threat” to Japan and order its military to intervene.

Following those remarks, Beijing threatened unspecified further actions if Takaichi did not reverse her comments, which she has refused to do. The Japanese prime minister has argued that her remarks did not represent any fundamental change in Japanese policy, but said they would not be repeated.

Beijing’s consul general in Osaka, reviving the practice of so-called “wolf warrior” diplomacy, posted a since-deleted tweet warning that “if a filthy neck sticks itself in uninvited, we will cut it off without a moment’s hesitation”.

That prompted a group of MPs within Takaichi’s Liberal Democratic party last week to suggest that the Chinese diplomat be designated “persona non grata” and expelled from Japan — a severe sanction, which two Japanese officials warned could cause the row to spiral even further.

Both Beijing and Tokyo have summoned the other country's ambassador over the past week to lodge formal protests. China has intensified the war of words, warning Japan it would suffer "crushing" military defeat if its military were ever deployed to intervene in Taiwan.

Chinese tourists are one of the biggest contingents of visitors to Japan, with more than 1mn arrivals in the month of August alone. As of Sunday, it was unclear whether the Chinese government's travel advisory would have an immediate effect.

"I don't think it makes a difference unless they order the planes to stop flying. I am still planning to come back to Japan during [Lunar] New Year in 2026," said a 38-year-old woman from Shanghai who gave her name as Huang and was enjoying Kyoto's Gyoganji temple early on Sunday morning.

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2025. All rights reserved.

Follow the topics in this article

Chinese politics & policy

Japanese politics & policy

Asia maritime tensions

Joe Leahy

Leo Lewis