

The Big Read Geopolitics

## China's risky challenge to Japan – and the US

The diplomatic rift between Beijing and Tokyo is also a test of Washington's appetite for engagement with the region

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

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The Chinese passengers onboard the cruise ship Adora Mediterranea were looking forward to basking on the subtropical beaches of Japan's Miyako Island in Okinawa Prefecture.

But just before they set sail from Fujian, on China's east coast, geopolitics crushed their holiday plans.

After years of cautious co-operation, China and Japan were now locked in a rapidly spiralling [war of words](#) over comments about Taiwan by Japan's hawkish new prime minister, Sanae Takaichi. The Adora Mediterranea would still sail near Miyako, but no one would be allowed to disembark.

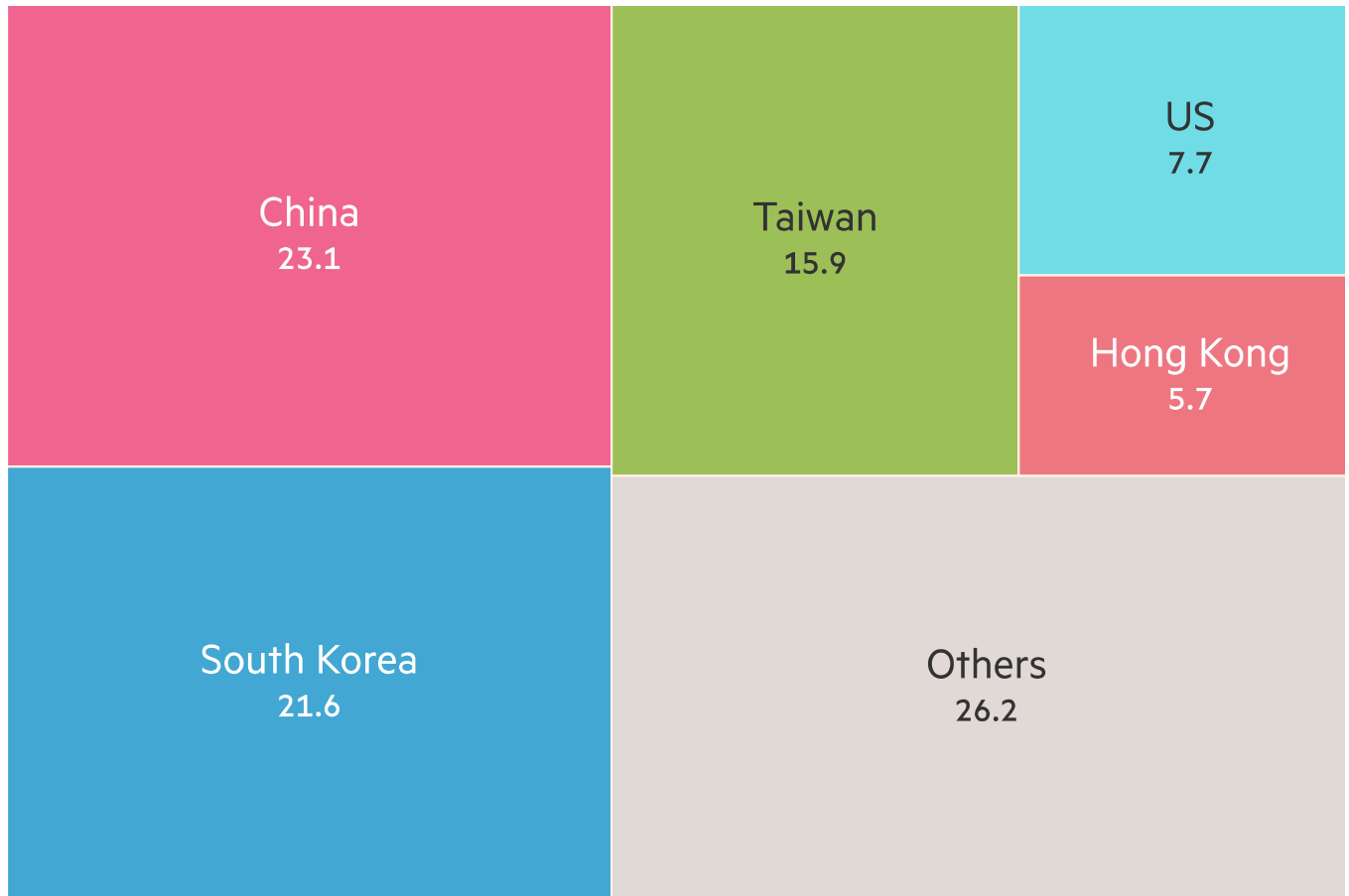
"After all this, I don't want to spend my money in Japan, not a penny," says one of the passengers aboard the ship, Ye Jin, a salesperson from central Henan province. "It was a bit disappointing but our nation's dignity comes before all else."

Looming over the spoiled cruise — and the cancellation of many thousands of tourist bookings in recent days — is the most severe diplomatic eruption between Beijing and Tokyo for years.

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## China accounted for nearly a quarter of Japan's visitors in the first 10 months of the year

Share of visitor arrivals (%), Jan-Oct 2025



On Thursday, America's ambassador reassured Takaichi that she had US support. But according to diplomats, this looks increasingly like a key test of the commitment of Washington to its ally Japan, and of the appetite of Donald Trump and his "America first" administration for engagement in regional escalation.

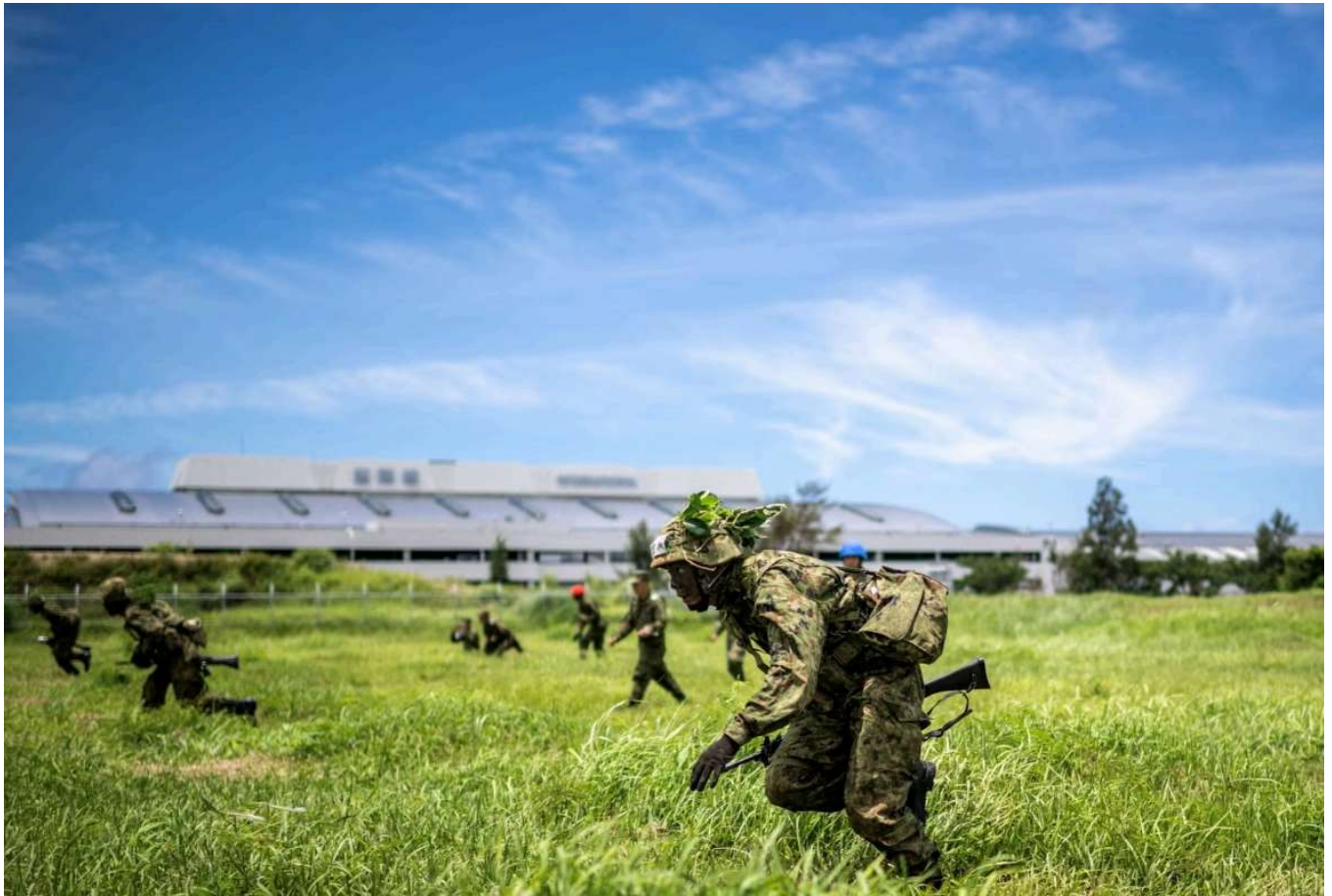
The dispute has not fizzled as some predicted it might. The verbal skirmishes have become more extreme, particularly from the Chinese side. Officials in Tokyo fret that the practical impact — from blocked seafood imports to dire travel warnings and cancelled ministerial meetings — may be just the start of a wider freeze between hugely important trading partners. A sharp fall in Tokyo stocks suggests that investors are already betting on that prospect.

But the two sides are locked in their positions. For Takaichi's supporters, her comments — that a Chinese attack on Taiwan could be existential for Japan — are a statement of fact. A war over Taiwan, which lies only about 100 kilometres from Japanese territory, would comprise a military emergency for Tokyo.

But Beijing, which claims sovereignty over Taiwan, maintains that Takaichi's remarks interfere in its internal affairs and amount to a direct military threat from its former bitter enemy in a year when China is marking the 80th anniversary of the end of the second world war.

In the opening days of the spat, there was a “business as usual” feel to proceedings. The postwar history of China and Japan's long, fraught relationship has been one of fragile co-operation, punctuated with flare-ups of varying heat, longevity and damage. Often they have centred on territorial disputes and the diplomatic navigation of history.

In 2012, fierce protests erupted in China centred around Japan's nationalisation of a small archipelago; when Japan's rightwing prime minister, Shinzo Abe — of whom Takaichi was a prominent disciple — visited the controversial Yasukuni war shrine a year later, a fresh round of fury blew up again.



Japan's Self-Defense Forces take part in an exercise in Okinawa prefecture. Takaichi's remarks on a hypothetical war over Taiwan went beyond those of her predecessors © Philip Fong/AFP/Getty Images

The strength and speed of China's escalation, say analysts, has tended to increase as its military and economic might has risen generally; the neighbours' tormented history means that underlying mistrust can be mobilised rapidly, even as Japan has invested heavily in China.

The question of whether this latest flare-up will set a new, worrying standard for such spats, say diplomats, will depend on whether an "off ramp" becomes available — and is taken.

For US allies and partners in Asia, the dispute comes at a delicate moment not only for China-Japan ties but also for the balance of power in the region. Economically, Beijing is feeling empowered after extracting a truce from the US in their trade war.

Militarily, China is also becoming increasingly assertive. In September, President Xi Jinping, flanked by Russia's Vladimir Putin and North Korea's Kim Jong Un, presided over a parade of China's latest drones and missiles designed to knock America out of any Taiwan war.

The trade truce “has helped to create confidence in Beijing that it is doing a good job of managing Washington”, says Neil Thomas, a fellow at the Asia Society Policy Institute’s Center for China Analysis. Trump’s preoccupation with trying to close a trade deal has given China “more leeway to put pressure on allies and partners because it’s less likely that Washington is going to jump to their defence”.

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**Some analysts say** that China’s wrath is all the greater for the fact Xi was taken by surprise by Takaichi’s comments.

When Xi met the new prime minister in South Korea in late October during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, he explicitly mentioned Taiwan, telling the Japanese leader that the two sides should “make sure the relationship will not be defined by problems”, according to state media.

But a day later Takaichi met Taiwan’s representative at the Apec forum, drawing immediate protest from China. Then she made her remarks in parliament on Taiwan saying that hypothetically, a Chinese attack on Taiwan could be interpreted as an “existential threat” to Japan that would allow it to respond militarily.

Takaichi’s remark went further than any sitting Japanese prime minister has in the past, by implying that the Japanese Self-Defense Forces could take military action without Japan being attacked itself.

## China's coastguard vessels have been sailing around the disputed islands

Reported positions from Nov 15 to Nov 21



Source: Marine Traffic, FT research • Ship positions are connected if the time interval between two location points is less than two hours. Data covers four vessels, including China Coastguard 1302, 1303, 1305 and 1307. The disputed islands are known as Diaoyu in China and as Senkaku in Japan

The fate of Taiwan is “within the legitimate remit of Japan”, says Benjamin Ho, assistant professor at Singapore’s S Rajaratnam School of International Studies’ China programme. But the timing of the remarks so soon after meeting Xi could easily be read as a deliberate message, he adds. “It’s almost like not showing President Xi [respect].”

China’s retaliation was immediate. It demanded a retraction and dispatched a coastguard patrol to Japanese islands whose sovereignty are disputed by Beijing.



The ferocity of China's escalation, says one senior figure close to the Trump administration, suggests a clear agenda. "This is about seizing on an opportunity to derail Takaichi. I think that what she said was maybe unguarded, but for Beijing it represented a golden opportunity," the person says.

By raising the stakes so high, China had in effect created a veto on Japan openly discussing and forming policy around Taiwan, the person adds. "This is a long-term strategy by China, after a tactical error by Takaichi."

China also threatened to ban Japanese seafood imports and warned its tourists that its famously safe neighbour was too dangerous to visit, leading to thousands of cancellations of vacations and hitting tourism-related shares in both countries. In Beijing, several music events involving Japanese artists were cancelled.

The blow to tourism in Japan is already happening. Joyful Sightseeing, a Tokyo-based bus company that runs tours from the capital to Mount Fuji, Kyoto and other famous destinations, says that since November 16, it has received 60 to 70 group tour cancellations, totalling 2,000 to 2,500 tourists.

Seeing no immediate prospect of Chinese re-bookings, Joyful Sightseeing is launching sales promotions targeted at the South Korean and Taiwanese markets to offset the loss.

The Gamagori hotel in Aichi, whose customers are 60 per cent from China at peak times, reported between 2,600 and 3,000 room cancellations since November 17.

"We have had a good time, but we probably cannot share a lot of our pictures when we get back. The atmosphere has changed very quickly," says the husband of a couple from Tianjin, who were having wedding pictures taken outside Tokyo station.



A guide hands out leaflets to a Chinese tour group in Tokyo this month. The diplomatic spat has dented tourism-related shares in both countries © Greg Baker/AFP/Getty Images

Of most immediate concern to observers of the dispute is how far China is willing to go in its reprisals.

Beijing's official rhetoric has been fiery. A Chinese diplomat has threatened Takaichi that China would cut off a "filthy neck" that "sticks itself in uninvited" while China's state media has warned Japan will wreak its "own destruction" if it intervenes in a Taiwan war.

The People's Liberation Army on Friday posted a video on X under the caption "All set . . ." that showed swarms of landing craft crossing the sea and paratroopers jumping from military aircraft backed by jet fighters, strategic bombers and long-range missiles in what looked like drills for an invasion.

The domestic politics in Japan, meanwhile, has not turned on the country's new leader.



Her support at home has not dropped, says Mieko Nakabayashi, a political scientist at Waseda University in Tokyo. Takaichi hails from the right wing of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic party, which is hawkish on China, and such views remain her brand.

The vehemence of China's reaction has caused a lot of Japanese to ask why Japan's politicians should have to think so minutely about their wording when holding a debate in their own parliament, she says. "People are not really blaming Takaichi for this."

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**Throughout the dispute,** Japan's most important ally, the US, has largely stayed in the background.

The White House left it to George Glass, the US ambassador to Tokyo, to condemn "Chinese economic coercion" and let Takaichi know "we have her back".

For US allies and partners in the region, American support for Japan is an important litmus test amid trade tensions. "The tariffs are creating a certain level of apprehension about American commitment not just to north-east Asia but to Asia as a whole," says Ho at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies. "It's not the best way to craft a coherent strategy in the region."

China will also want to gauge the strength of that relationship, says Paul Nadeau, an international relations expert at the Institute of Geoeconomics in Tokyo. "Whether this was lucky or deliberate, China may decide that this is an opportunity to see how much daylight there is between Japan and the US, and take careful notes on the gap," says Nadeau.



A People's Liberation Army pilot waves to crowds at an air show in north-east China. State media says Japan will wreak its 'own destruction' if it intervenes in Taiwan © Oriental Image/Reuters

He notes that the feud erupted with US reviews of national security strategy and national defence strategy pending. Officials across the region are watching closely for signs of an uncompromising commitment to the Asia-Pacific, or a greater focus elsewhere.

But the Asia Society's Thomas says there are limits to how far China will push Japan, as it would not want the dispute to disrupt the armistice on trade with Washington or preparations for a possible Trump visit to the Chinese capital to meet Xi in April next year.

The "most likely way this plays out" is that Beijing maintains the present levels of economic coercion until it can point to some sort of concession that Tokyo had purportedly made, he says. "But I don't think the [bans] will be resolved in the near future."

For those on the Adora Mediterranea, however, any thaw in ties will come too late to change their impressions of Japan.

"We felt proud — very proud," says passenger Ye of the decision not to set foot on Japanese soil.

Data visualisation by [Haohsiang Ko](#)

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