

Japanese politics & policy**Sanae Takaichi set for high-stakes meeting with Donald Trump over Iran**

Japan's PM prepares for toughest test yet as US urges Tokyo to send warships to Gulf



Sanae Takaichi, left, has vowed to amend Japan's pacifist constitution, which limits what military operations it can undertake around the world © Andrew Caballero-Reynolds/AFP/Getty Images

Leo Lewis in Tokyo and **Demetri Sevastopulo** in Washington

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Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi faces one of the toughest tests of her five-month premiership when she visits the White House on Thursday after Donald Trump urged Japan to send warships to the Strait of Hormuz.

Trump's call for help reopening the critical waterway has created panic among Japanese officials who had focused on investment deals to placate the US president and on getting support for Takaichi amid Chinese criticism over her comments on the role Japan would play if China attacked Taiwan.

Kurt Campbell, a former US deputy secretary of state who has worked with Japan for decades, said Trump was likely to put “enormous pressure” on Takaichi to make a military commitment to the American campaign against Iran.

Japan would have preferred to watch how other leaders responded but, as the first ally to visit the White House since the US attacked Iran, people familiar with the visit said Takaichi was prepared for one of the highest-stakes Oval Office meetings since Trump blew up at Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy one year ago.

“This will be like the amphitheatre with them sitting in chairs surrounded by the press,” said Campbell, who chairs The Asia Group consultancy.

“The president is going to want to highlight a Japanese contribution to the war effort . . . He’ll want specific assets and if the Japanese just give him generalities, he’s going to be unhappy,” said Campbell. “I don’t think there’s a chance for a Zelenskyy moment, but there could be some fireworks.”

There was some relief in Japan after Trump on Tuesday said he did not need help from allies, but officials remain very nervous because the US president has already flip-flopped on the issue. Some in Tokyo view the visit as the toughest Japan-US summit in living memory.

Takaichi has demanded that her officials think through the scenarios that could emerge in the meeting with Trump who, according to one US diplomat, has “made a weapon” of his unpredictability.

Tokyo is also aware that Trump is under intense pressure as the closure of the Strait of Hormuz has sent oil prices higher and increased the cost of petrol at the US pump — which could impact American midterm elections where affordability is expected to be a core issue for voters.

Officially, Japan’s position is that it will not send Maritime Self Defense Force vessels to respond to Trump’s demands.

Takaichi recently said no formal request had been made by the US and that Japan had made no decision. But Japanese officials know that Trump could make a public request in the Oval Office in front of the media, which would put the Japanese leader in a difficult position.

After her landslide election victory last month, Japanese officials assume Washington will heap pressure on her to take decisive action, knowing that she wields greater parliamentary control than her predecessors.

Takaichi has pledged to amend Japan's pacifist constitution, which strictly limits what military operations it can undertake around the world. For now, much depends, say scholars, on whether the situation in Hormuz represents an "existential threat" to Japan, which imports around 90 per cent of its oil from the Middle East.

"Takaichi will not reject the whole idea of involvement, but at this moment the US actions are so clumsy that Japan cannot join," said Kuni Miyake, special adviser at the Canon Institute of Global Studies. "No ally will join because you never know what Trump will do next."

Meanwhile, the right-wing Sankei newspaper on Tuesday published an editorial [urging Takaichi to dispatch naval vessels](#).

In a pointed warning to the conservative prime minister, Sankei said the US-Japan alliance risked becoming "dysfunctional", warning Japan would "lose the honourable position it holds in the international community" if it failed to send ships while other countries did.

While no US allies have yet heeded Trump's plea, some experts have suggested that Takaichi try to find a way to send some of Japan's advanced minesweepers, a move that also faces legal obstacles.

One person familiar with Takaichi's thinking said her visit to Washington would be a far cry from the leaders' warm exchange in Tokyo in October, when they reaffirmed their alliance.

"Her ability to charm the guy is not the problem. The problem is substance. Last time there was no need for substance . . . but this time, Hormuz has created a real, concrete issue," said the person, adding that, while Takaichi was likely to support the idea of dispatching military vessels, she would struggle to get domestic political support for such a move.

“The Japanese people are on board with upgrading Japan’s defensive military capabilities, but are not ready for force projection,” said the person.

Stephen Nagy, a Japan expert at the International Christian University of Tokyo, said Takaichi faced a delicate balancing act in trying to ensure that her response ensured the US and Japan maintained their “rock-solid alliance”.

“At the core of this, Japan wants to prevent Chinese hegemony in the region and will contort itself in every way to make sure that the US-Japan alliance remains robust,” said Nagy.

“They will be projecting the message that Japan is committed to the only game in town, and that is the US. At the same time, Japan will have to present eye-catching economic gifts to placate Trump’s demands in the Strait of Hormuz.”

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