



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

POLICY BRIEF

Japan is Back

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Cover Images:

Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae ceremonially placing a rose, signifying the Liberal Democratic Party's electoral success and the renewed public mandate, on February 9, 2026. Source: [X/@takaichi_sanae](https://twitter.com/takaichi_sanae)
Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae held a summit meeting with the President of the United States of America, Donald J. Trump, at the State Guest House, Akasaka Palace, on October 28, 2025. Source: [Prime Minister's Office of Japan](https://www.pmo.go.jp/en/press-releases/2025/10/28-prime-minister-takaichi-sanae-held-a-summit-meeting-with-president-donald-j-trump)

Prime Minister of Japan, Takaichi Sanae met Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the sidelines of the G20 Summit, in Johannesburg, South Africa, on November 23, 2025. Source: [Prime Minister's Office of Japan](https://www.pmo.go.jp/en/press-releases/2025/11/23-prime-minister-takaichi-sanae-met-indian-prime-minister-narendra-modi-on-the-sidelines-of-the-g20-summit-in-johannesburg-south-africa)

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Japan is Back

by

Hemant Krishan Singh

After a period of drift, we are witnessing what appears to be another turning point in Japan's recent political history, one which could raise its national spirits, economic prospects, global profile and contributions to Indo-Pacific stability. The horizon for India-Japan relations also looks likely to become brighter.

In December 2012, the LDP's resounding election victory had returned Shinzo Abe to power. He went on to become Japan's most transformational leader in a generation, setting his nation firmly on the path of national renewal, restoring its global relevance, and making greater contributions to the security and geopolitics of Asia.

In Japan's Lower House election held on February 8, 2026, Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi – Abe's political and ideological protégé – led the LDP to its largest ever victory in seven decades, securing a two-thirds majority on its own, and 75% of seats along with its coalition partner JIP.

In a little over three months since she came to power, to use a term popularised by Abe and personified by her, "Japan is back" under a dynamic and charismatic leader.

PM Takaichi swept into office on October 21, 2025 like a breath of fresh air, shaking up traditional mindsets, a tired political establishment, and a skeptical media. Despite the notable success of her diplomatic debut in November 2025, when she set out Japan's interests and priorities at various summits with considerable charm, clarity and conviction, there remained a lingering reticence to see the significance of her election as LDP leader as a pathbreaking advance for Japan's democracy. The essential features of Japanese politics – conformity, cohesion, self-effacement, caution and incrementalism – appeared to pose formidable challenges for her chances of success. So did China's coercive rhetoric and threats of economic sanctions following Takaichi's forthright remarks in the Diet on November 7, 2025 regarding a hypothetical Taiwan contingency.

By defying conventional wisdom in calling for a snap election and putting herself front and centre as the protagonist before the electorate, PM Takaichi has skilfully harnessed her soaring popularity among Japan's younger demographic and

unaffiliated voters, who have eagerly embraced a decisive and energetic leader with a positive vision for their future.

She has now positioned herself to potentially become another transformational leader of Japan. The Japanese public wanted change, and Takaichi rose to the challenge. That synergy can become a powerful equation to transform Japan in the coming years. The odds may still be daunting, but as a leader who has promised to work, work and work, she has already declared that “We don’t have the luxury of basking in victory”.

PM Takaichi inherited a demoralised LDP mired in decline and disarray, with its policy-oriented factions dismantled and public standing on life-support. By delivering the LDP’s reprise, she now has the opportunity to reshape a party which has long resisted her aspirations as a nationalist-conservative leader. Her measured pronouncements after her election victory also indicate a pragmatic approach to the pursuit of her new Cabinet’s strategic, economic and security priorities, while strengthening the LDP’s coalition partnership with the JIP and offering open outreach to a vastly diminished political opposition. This will serve her well as the LDP lacks a majority in the Upper House of the Diet, where elections are not due till mid-2028.

Converting her massive mandate into concrete outcomes is now PM Takaichi’s main challenge. She has a vast and ambitious agenda to deliver on: boosting social welfare through “responsible and proactive fiscal policy”, ensuring economic revival and resilience, strengthening defence capability and national security, and the far more complicated (and longer-term) task of constitutional revision. She will need to harness all her political capital and acumen to meet public expectations.

The governance changes made during Shinzo Abe’s tenure - accumulating substantial powers in the Japan prime minister’s office to coordinate government functioning and policy making, and creating a national security apparatus - will facilitate her style of resolute leadership. She has pledged to also establish a national intelligence agency under her office, and to address Japan’s severe security environment by updating three core national security documents.

In terms of crafting Japan’s foreign policy, PM Takaichi has confidently affirmed that “a stable political foundation also provides significant strength for advancing robust diplomacy”. She will clearly enjoy much more political head room domestically than her immediate predecessors, as well as the advantage of (so far) highly positive relations with U.S. President Donald Trump.

There are some suggestions that this favourable conjuncture can enable her to consider a wider range of foreign policy options, but PM Takaichi has already made it clear that her first priority will be to shore up Japan's economy and defence posture to make it the U.S.'s indispensable alliance partner in Asia. In her own words, "We will confirm the unshakable unity between Japan and the U.S., while advancing broad Japan-U.S. cooperation in diplomacy, economics and security." However, this path will be complicated by President Trump's unusual approach to diplomacy and his administration's pressures on allies to boost defence spending to 5% of GDP, as well as to assume greater responsibility for the security of their respective regions. Notably, the U.S. has offered at best modest support for Takaichi as she has faced harsh criticism from China over her plain speaking on Taiwan. There will also be insistent demands on Japan to deliver on promised investments of \$550 bn in the U.S. under the U.S.-Japan trade deal.

Beyond the U.S., Japan now also faces a changed reality – the disruption of Trans-Atlantic ties and a weakening of the "Collective West" – after a period of significant advancements in the strategic alignment between Japan and Europe (and NATO) over the Ukraine conflict, which has also seen a sharp deterioration in Japan-Russia ties. There is a continuing logic to Japan maintaining its leading role in institutions like the G7, as well as its close ties with Europe and the European Union, in support of the "rules based liberal order" for which the Trump administration seems to have little time.

Japan has long regarded its relations with U.S. allies in Europe (and Asia) as seamlessly buttressing its alliance with the U.S. It may now have to approach its ties with Europe in a more nuanced manner that maintains a primary focus on the U.S., not least given the increasingly difficult security situation confronting Japan and its concerns about the prospect of U.S.-China dealmaking. Japan's diplomacy has long centred around projecting itself as a model global citizen and upholder of the international rule of law, which sits uneasily beside the current U.S. posture of power alone being the law. Japan will, hopefully, continue to weigh in strongly on the side of rules-based order, not least in the Indo-Pacific.

China looms large as Japan's foremost challenge, and its "wolf warrior" approach to PM Takaichi indicates how little the authoritarian CPC regime understands of the way democracies work and the role of public opinion in shaping leadership and policy. Perhaps China had also become a little complacent, given its vast influence over left-liberal Japanese politicians and a ubiquitous pro-China business lobby. In fact, this segment worked hard to deny Takaichi the LDP leadership position, and then undermined her chances of election as PM by engineering the

sudden pullout of long-time LDP coalition partner Komeito. That proved to be a blessing in disguise for Takaichi, given the far better alignment on political ideology and nationalist orientation between the LDP and Nippon Ishin no Kai (JIP).

China's tirade and campaign of intimidation against Takaichi has been unrelenting since early November last year, with its propaganda machine also attempting to sow doubts in Japanese public opinion by labelling Takaichi's decision to call a snap election as a "surprise attack" which had "triggered widespread concern and discontent across Japanese society". This approach has clearly backfired, as the Japanese public has overwhelmingly backed Takaichi on her refusal to back down in the face of China's coercion. China's Foreign Office, meanwhile, has continued to call for a retraction of Takaichi's remarks on Taiwan even after her sweeping victory, declaring imperiously that China's policy towards Japan "will not change because of one election".

So, the stage is now set for China to deal with a popular and nationalist leader in Japan, who is offering to build a "constructive and stable relationship" with China from a position of considerable domestic strength. This impasse in Japan-China ties is reminiscent of a similar period in 2013, after Shinzo Abe had returned to power. Any breakthroughs will now likely depend on the outcomes of the forthcoming Trump-Takaichi summit in March, and the subsequent Trump-Xi summit in April. China's pressure playbook has not worked in the short term, and may only drive PM Takaichi further in the direction of solidifying the U.S.-Japan alliance. The only question is how much the manifest uncertainty about U.S. policy will impact decision-making in Takaichi's Japan. In any event, China will be looking at a more robust Japan in terms of economic resilience, military power, and engagement with regional security frameworks.

While the roadmap for the India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership, with several elements of economic security as the central focus, has already been largely set at the August 2025 bilateral summit, India too will need to shape its approach towards Japan with fresh thinking. All relationships require constant tending; even friends cannot take each other for granted. PM Takaichi has empowered Japan with democratic stability, and we will be dealing with a self-confident leader who controls the levers of power and decision-making. It will be incumbent upon our diplomacy to forge closer ties of understanding and trust with PM Takaichi and her inner circle of advisers. Both India and Japan now have leaders with nationalist credentials, with their ideological commonality bolstered by the personal ties each had enjoyed with the late Shinzo Abe.

However, there may also be some divergences in how India and Japan view their respective ties with the U.S. under the Trump administration. Japan will strongly pursue its U.S. alliance commitments regardless of irritants, while there could be more conditionality in India as it seeks to reset strategic relations with a highly transactional and unpredictable U.S. administration.

Where the interests of India and Japan fully converge is their role as guardians of stability, security and prosperity across the Indo-Pacific, and the upholding of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) construct. Here, they will face the imperative of working even more closely together to bolster partnerships in South East Asia and maintain the role and relevance of the Quad. To fully harness the unrealised potential of their economic partnership, the paradigm shift towards private sector-led engagement across the areas of manufacturing, technology and AI will need to intensify. Both India and Japan are also pursuing a significant expansion of their defence capability to bolster national and regional security. If Japan proceeds to relax its guidelines on defence exports (beyond non-lethal equipment), this could open up additional prospects for mutually beneficial cooperation.

Japan is back, and India should embrace the opportunity this presents to cement what is now an even more vitally important partnership for ensuring a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Both countries will emerge stronger by working together, which has long been the defining vision of their relationship in this century.



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