

China-Japan tensions continue to worsen

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Barely a month in office, Japan's new Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi has triggered a diplomatic row with Beijing over her remarks in parliament on November 7 suggesting that Japan would automatically be involved in any military conflict between China and Taiwan. Far from subsiding, the battle of words has escalated over the past fortnight with mounting economic repercussions.

While the US and Western media have been at pains to downplay her provocative remarks, Takaichi, who assumed office on October 21, was well aware that what she said would inflame relations with China. In response to a question, she declared that, if Beijing were to impose a military blockade on Taiwan, it would constitute "a survival-threatening situation" for Japan. She hinted that Japan could provide military support to Taiwan or the US in the event of conflict with China.

The phrase has a precise legal meaning within "collective self-defence" legislation passed in 2015 by the government of Shinzo Abe allowing Japanese military deployment overseas in "a survival-threatening situation." No previous post-World War II Japanese government, even that of the militarist Abe, has publicly indicated that Tokyo would go to war with Beijing over Taiwan.

Taiwan is potentially the most dangerous flashpoint in Asia. The Trump administration, following on from Biden, has deliberately stoked tensions with China by undermining the One China policy, which de facto recognises Beijing as the legitimate ruler of all China including Taiwan. The US, while still formally adhering to One China, has ramped up diplomatic, economic and military relations with Taipei, which Beijing regards as a renegade province and has threatened military action if it ever declared formal independence.

Takaichi, a protégé of Abe, is pursuing a similar policy. Just a week after being installed, she met with

Trump aboard the USS George Washington aircraft carrier at the Yokosuka naval base and pledged under the banner of "peace and stability" to further remilitarise Japan. Peace, she declared "cannot be preserved by words alone," but requires "unwavering determination and action."

Just days later at the APEC summit in South Korea, Takaichi met with Chinese President Xi Jinping who said that relations between their countries should "not be defined by problems," explicitly mentioning Taiwan. The following day, however, she met with the Taiwanese representative at the summit, provoking a protest from Beijing.

Following Takaichi's remarks on November 7, relations between the two countries quickly deteriorated. The Chinese foreign ministry criticised her for "seriously damaging bilateral ties" by conducting "blatant interference in China's internal affairs." Beijing took steps to underline the centrality of Taiwan and the One China policy to its strategic interests. China reportedly cancelled a trilateral meeting of culture ministers with Japan and South Korea due to take place this month.

China has also threatened to ban Japanese seafood imports and warned Chinese tourists and students that Japan could be too dangerous to visit. In the first 10 months of the year, China accounted for 23 percent of foreign tourists to Japan—the largest share of any country. The Japanese tourist industry has now been hit by thousands of cancellations.

Of far more concern to Japanese industry is the potential for China to limit or ban altogether exports of rare earths to Japan. In 2010, China imposed such a ban which lasted for two months after tensions flared over a maritime clash between a Chinese trawler and the Japanese coast guard near the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea in which the Chinese captain was arrested. China has a virtual global

monopoly over the production of rare earths.

Last Thursday the US bought into the dispute. While the White House has yet to make any statement, the US ambassador to Tokyo, George Glass, condemned what he claimed was “Chinese economic coercion” and let Takaichi know “we have her back.”

The row between the two countries flared again at the G20 summit in Johannesburg last weekend attended by both Takaichi and Chinese Premier Li Qiang. No meeting took place between the two.

Having provoked the confrontation with China, Takaichi postured as the wounded party, declaring that her government had been “consistent” in building a “constructive and stable relationship” and was “open to various forms of dialogue.” She is adamant, however, that she will not accede to Beijing’s demands that she retract her remarks, saying it was “essential that Japan clearly articulates the positions it needs to assert.”

On Sunday, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi became the highest-ranking official to speak publicly on the issue so far, declaring: “It is shocking for a sitting Japanese leader to openly send a wrong signal of attempting to intervene militarily in the Taiwan question.” He warned that China had to “resolutely hit back,” not only to defend “its sovereignty and territorial integrity” but also “the hard-won postwar achievements secured with blood and sacrifice.”

China is acutely sensitive to Japan’s remilitarisation as a result of the brutal war waged by Japanese imperialism to conquer and subordinate first Manchuria then all China in the 1930s which then merged with World War II in the Pacific. Memories of the atrocities carried out by the Japanese army are deeply embedded. Anti-Japanese chauvinism, however, is exploited by the Chinese Communist Party for its own ends, particularly as a means of diverting rising social tensions at home.

Takaichi belongs to the far-right wing of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party that is notorious for its denials of Japanese atrocities in China such as the Nanking Massacre in 1937. She has been a regular visitor to the Yasukuni Shrine, a potent symbol of Japanese militarism, that enshrines the war dead, including 14 Class A war criminals. In coming to office, she forged a coalition with the extreme right-wing Nippon Ishin no Kai.

Takaichi is rapidly putting words into actions as she accelerates Japan’s remilitarisation, bringing forward

plans to double its military spending. Tokyo plans to continue acquiring long-range missiles and is considering the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines. It is also preparing to scrap restrictions on the export of lethal weaponry.

The ruling LDP is also planning to “review” Japan’s three longstanding anti-nuclear principles of not possessing, producing or permitting the introduction of nuclear arms into the country. According to Japanese media reports, the government is seriously discussing allowing the US to station nuclear weapons on Japanese soil. While China has criticised such a move, the Takaichi government also knows that the introduction of US nuclear weapons would provoke widespread domestic opposition, given the criminal US atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

Even as tensions continued to rise with China, Japanese Defence Minister Shinjiro Koizumi last weekend toured Japan’s southwestern islands that are immediately adjacent to Taiwan and China. He visited the military base on Yonaguni Island, which is just 110 kilometres from Taiwan, and confirmed the placement of surface-to-air missiles on the outpost. The missile deployment is one aspect of Japan’s military build-up in the islands in preparation for involvement in a US-led war against China. Koizumi’s visit to the base at this time is another calculated provocation that can only further undermine relations with China.



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