

Beijing escalates diplomatic conflict with Tokyo

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On 7 October, Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi, responding to a parliamentary question during a Q&A session, confirmed that a conflict in the Taiwan Strait involving US forces would constitute an 'existential threat' to Japan. As such, it would meet the conditions justifying the involvement of the Japan Self-Defence Forces under the provisions of the 2015 law, which governs, among other matters, military engagement in allied defence operations without a direct attack on the territory of the Empire. Since 1960, Japan has also been bound to the United States by the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security. Her remark prompted a protest from China, which demanded that the prime minister retract her statement. When Tokyo refused, Beijing retaliated with a series of measures – including urging Chinese citizens to cancel trips to Japan, citing alleged anti-Chinese incidents, cancelling cultural events featuring Japanese artists, and once again suspending imports of Japanese seafood.

Beijing is deliberately escalating the diplomatic conflict with Tokyo, enabling the Chinese Communist Party leadership to pursue three objectives: to suppress public discourse in democratic countries concerning the national security threats posed by China; to undermine the popular prime minister, who seeks to strengthen Japan's defence capabilities; and to restore domestic legitimacy by stirring nationalist and anti-Japanese sentiment within China. This response also reflects the growing confidence of China's leadership, driven by a belief in its tactical victory over the United States in recent rounds of the trade war and in having forced Donald Trump to make concessions.

Commentary

- **One of Beijing's key objectives is to suppress public debate in democratic countries concerning the national security threats and challenges to the international order posed by China.** This extends beyond the potential involvement of other Indo-Pacific states in a Taiwan Strait conflict and encompasses broader issues of strategic importance to Beijing. The leadership of the Chinese Communist Party assumes that the absence of such discussion will hinder other governments from taking decisive action in response to the negative consequences of China's growing political, military, and economic assertiveness. This explains the swift and substantively unjustified escalation, intended to discourage political elites in Japan and other countries from addressing China's destabilising role and from enhancing regional security cooperation.
- **Beijing is concerned about the popularity of Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi, who – despite leading a minority coalition government – enjoys approval ratings ranging**

between 65% and 83% in opinion polls. The prime minister has outlined an ambitious programme of domestic reforms, including economic measures and a significant increase in defence spending. She aims to achieve the target of allocating 2% of GDP to defence within the current fiscal year – two years ahead of schedule. On the international stage, she is pursuing closer cooperation with other countries in the region, including in matters of security, while simultaneously seeking to revitalise Japan's alliance with the United States. China's leadership fears that if the prime minister succeeds, she may not only secure a stable majority in the next election but also set the course for Japan's domestic and foreign policy in the years ahead. Beijing seeks to prevent this and is therefore exploiting the current situation to undermine her international standing and destabilise Japan's governing coalition.

- **Since the suppression of pro-democracy protests in 1989, nationalism – alongside economic growth – has remained a central pillar of the Chinese Communist Party's domestic legitimacy.** A key element of its hyper-patriotic narrative is the mythologised portrayal of communist forces fighting Japanese troops during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). In the past, the CCP has repeatedly instigated waves of anti-Japanese protests for domestic purposes, exploiting collective memories of the atrocities committed under Japanese imperialism. At present – at least for now – it has focused on propaganda efforts while refraining from mass mobilisation. This likely reflects concerns that, given the current economic difficulties and high youth unemployment, the CCP might struggle to control such demonstrations. There is a risk that they could rapidly lose their anti-Japanese focus and assume a broader socio-economic character.