

The party needs an enemy: China and the conservatives' victory in Japan

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The scale of the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) victory in Japan's snap election to the House of Representatives (the lower house of parliament) was unprecedented in post-war Japanese history and took China's leaders by surprise. However, they do not view their escalating diplomatic campaign against Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae over the past few months as an outright failure. Japan may now become the target of an even more intense political campaign inside China that could allow the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to bolster its domestic legitimacy under nationalist and anti-Japanese slogans. Amid a diplomatic truce with the United States, Beijing needs another target to channel negative public sentiment.

On 8 February, the LDP won 315 seats in the House of Representatives, while its coalition partner, the Japan Innovation Party (JIP), secured 36 seats, giving the ruling coalition 351 seats in the 465-member lower house. The LDP alone now holds more than the two-thirds majority (310 votes) required to initiate constitutional change. However, this also requires a two-thirds majority in the upper house, the House of Councillors, which is dominated by opposition parties. Nevertheless, the resulting 'supermajority' allows the LDP to override vetoes from the House of Councillors on legislation passed by the House of Representatives. This outcome has given the prime minister a clear electoral mandate and significant scope to pursue her ambitious economic agenda and to advance fundamental changes to Japan's national security policy, primarily through the ongoing revision of the country's security strategy and a substantial increase in defence spending.

Emerging from years of economic stagnation with renewed economic growth, Japan may also become a major security actor in East Asia and, consequently, a significant obstacle to China's ambitions to take over Taiwan and achieve economic and political dominance in the region. It appears that Beijing's unprecedented campaign of diplomatic pressure against Prime Minister Takaichi (see '[Beijing escalates diplomatic conflict with Tokyo](#)') *was aimed*, at the very least, at breaking up Japan's ruling coalition and engineering the LDP's defeat in the event of a snap election. Although this did not happen, the CCP leadership may not necessarily view its strategy as a failure, even if the pressure exerted on the Japanese prime minister in the immediate lead-up to the election may in fact have strengthened the LDP.

Reactions to Takaichi's triumph

The Chinese foreign ministry's official response to the outcome of the Japanese election aligns with the ongoing pattern of escalating diplomatic tensions. Lin Jian, the ministry's

spokesperson, acknowledged that the election was Japan's internal affair, but stated that its result reflected "certain deep-seated structural problems, currents of thought and trends" that should prompt reflection among both the Japanese public and the international community. He urged the Japanese government to address international concerns and "follow a path of peaceful development" rather than "retrace the road to militarism." He also warned that if "far-right forces" in Japan "misread the situation and act recklessly, they will face resistance from the Japanese people and the international community." Furthermore, he reiterated Beijing's demand that Prime Minister Takaichi retract what he called her "erroneous remarks" on the Taiwan issue, stressing that the Chinese people are "determined to safeguard their core interests."

At the same time, the CCP is continuing its propaganda campaign against Japan. In addition to echoing the foreign ministry's official statement, many Chinese media outlets have amplified the views of party-affiliated commentators, usually 'experts' from think tanks and research institutes financed by state-owned companies. These individuals have sounded the alarm over the election result, stoking fears among many Chinese citizens that Takaichi and the LDP are seeking to amend Japan's constitution and revive the militaristic and expansionist policies pursued before the Second World War. They have also warned that the regional balance could be upset, raising the risk of war should the new Japanese government revise the country's pacifist constitution. This narrative has been echoed and reinforced in both domestic and external propaganda. Crude caricatures of Takaichi and ultranationalist comments have proliferated on Chinese social media platforms. Even if some of this content emerged spontaneously, the propaganda apparatus has amplified and disseminated it.

Beijing digs in its heels

China's pressure tactics against Prime Minister Takaichi have proved counterproductive, prompting some commentators to speculate that Beijing may adjust its course. However, it has maintained its confrontational rhetoric. The absence of any shift in approach likely stems at least in part from the reluctance of Chinese leaders to admit mistakes and risk 'losing face' at a time of heightened tensions within the party and military leadership (see '[Fourth Plenum of the Central Committee of the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party: major purges in the military and within the party](#)'). Even so, the CCP's track record indicates that it requires an external enemy. Suffering from a deficit of domestic legitimacy, it has sought to fill this gap through nationalism and so-called performance legitimacy. As China's current economic development model begins to run out of steam and growth slows, the party must increasingly rely on harnessing nationalist tendencies among the Han Chinese, the country's dominant ethnic group. Strong anti-Japanese resentment rooted in the Second World War makes it easier to mobilise the general public around nationalist themes.

Consequently, Beijing is unlikely to cease its demonisation of the LDP and its leader in the coming months, potentially even until the CCP's 21st Party Congress in the autumn of 2027. Much will also depend on how durable the current diplomatic truce between China and the United States proves to be. At least until Donald Trump and Xi Jinping hold talks in Beijing this April, China needs a target other than the United States to channel negative public sentiment. Prime Minister Takaichi and her party may also have an interest in sustaining

these tensions after they proved beneficial in the most recent election. However, if the Japanese conservatives are serious about revising the constitution, an objective that has been part of their political platform since the party's founding in 1955, they will not only need to win over the opposition in the upper house but also persuade the public to approve the changes in a referendum. Further escalation from Beijing could increase support for more far-reaching reforms in Japan.