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Japan under Takaichi: The Turn to an "Active Player" in Foreign and Security Policy and What It Means for Korea

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Since the launch of the Takaichi (高市) Cabinet, Japan's foreign and security policy shifts have unfolded at a notably rapid pace. Despite starting from an inherently fragile political base—marked by the Liberal Democratic Party's first-ever loss of an outright majority in both the House of Representatives and the House of Councillors since its founding in 1955, the departure of Komeito after 26 years as a coalition partner, and reliance on the Japan Innovation Party (Nippon Ishin no Kai, hereafter, Ishin) for "extra-cabinet cooperation" (kakugai kyōryoku)—the Cabinet has maintained high approval ratings from the outset, thereby securing the political momentum necessary to advance its agenda.

Notably, the persistence of strong Cabinet approval in the absence of a clear rebound in LDP support—the widening gap between Cabinet and party approval—suggests that the political dynamics are being driven less by party brand and more by the Prime Minister's personal leadership and public expectations for change. In addition, comparatively higher support among younger cohorts, including voters in their 20s and 30s, and the fact that the Cabinet's support base has not been significantly shaken even after an intensification of Sino–Japanese tensions, indicate that Takaichi's "determination and progress" message has injected a measure of political vitality into a society fatigued by prolonged stagnation and a perceived strong leadership vacuum.

This domestic political impetus has immediately led to an "acceleration" of foreign and security policymaking. Shortly after taking office, Prime Minister Takaichi framed her cabinet as a "Cabinet of determination and progress," foregrounding a national-interest–driven line that explicitly couples economic reconstruction with the restoration of Japan's diplomatic standing. In practical diplomatic terms, she moved quickly to establish visibility on major stages such as U.S.-Japan summit diplomacy, APEC, and G20 shortly after her inauguration, thereby offsetting concerns about limited diplomatic experience.

In parallel, Takaichi has signaled an intention to stabilize and deepen relations with Seoul by defining South Korea as an "important partner" and publicly emphasizing a willingness to cultivate a cooperative relationship. Toward Beijing, however, she has maintained a hardline stance towards China, but conveying a dual message that emphasizes the mutual benefits of economic and human exchanges. Meanwhile, reaffirming the continuity of the FOIP (Free and Open Indo-Pacific) initiative, Japan is shifting from being a previously passive mediator to becoming an "active player" that directly contributes to the formation of regional norms, order, and deterrence.

The substance of the policy shift is more direct and more radical:

First, on defense spending, the Takaichi Cabinet has opted for speed. Whereas the Kishida Cabinet designed a gradual increase—roughly ¥1 trillion per year—to reach defense outlays of around 2% of GDP by 2027, the Takaichi Cabinet has pledged to bring that target forward by two years, achieving it early in FY2025 (April 2025–March 2026). This should be read as more than a budgetary adjustment: by proactively responding to long-standing alliance expectations—particularly calls from the United States for a larger Japanese role—the move signals an effort to reposition Japan within the regional deterrence architecture and recalibrate its strategic standing.

Second, the push for an early re-revision of the so-called "three security documents"—the National Security Strategy (NSS), National Defense Strategy (NDS), and Defense Buildup Program (DBP)—signals not only a shift in policy direction but also a deliberate shortening of the strategic review cycle itself. Japan's National Security Strategy was first established under the Abe administration in 2013 and was revised in 2022 under the Kishida administration—the first revision in nine years. By instructing another revision to be completed by the end of 2026, the Takaichi Cabinet is effectively moving Japan's security strategy into a system that realigns at a shorter cycle. Substantively, the forthcoming revisions are likely to codify a higher defense-spending target, further strengthen counterstrike

capabilities, relax constraints on defense equipment transfers, and strengthen responses in emerging domains such as space, cyber, and electronic warfare.

Third, the restructuring of Japan's intelligence and security architecture constitutes another central pillar of the Takaichi Cabinet's agenda. The proposal to establish a National Intelligence Agency (often described as Japan's version of the CIA) is intended to integrate and coordinate Japan's currently fragmented intelligence landscape and to create an "intelligence command center." In institutional terms, it would also strengthen intelligence activities under the leadership of the Prime Minister's Office, consolidating strategic direction and operational coordination at the political center. More consequentially, this discussion is being pushed as a "package of intelligence and security legislation" in conjunction with the strengthening of HUMINT capabilities and the movement to enact spy prevention law. After the Specific Secrets Protection Law, Japan's intelligence and security legislation could move to the next stage; however, political and social debates are inevitable due to concerns about violations of freedom of expression and the press, as well as excessive surveillance.

Fourth, the relaxation of restrictions in the defense industry and arms transfer system will be fully underway. Under the Abe Cabinet's 2014 "Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology," Japan effectively permitted transfers primarily within a limited set of broadly defined humanitarian and non-offensive categories—often summarized as five types, including rescue, transport, warning/surveillance, and minesweeping—thereby keeping the scope of defense exports structurally narrow. The LDP and the Ishin now argue that this "five-type" limitation itself functions as a binding constraint on defense exports and are moving toward institutional reform that would dismantle the restriction. With the political landscape weakened due to the withdrawal of the Komeito, and the Ishin—long an advocate of explicitly recognizing the Self-Defense Forces in the constitution and strengthening Japan's defense posture—now occupies a pivotal role as a key pillar of governing consensus through its extra-cabinet cooperation. Together, these factors suggest that the pace of regulatory relaxation on defense production and arms transfers could accelerate further in the period ahead.

Fifth, in the domain of economic security, the integration of security, industrial, and technology policy is being further reinforced. The Takaichi Cabinet has directed revisions to Japan's Economic Security Promotion Act and has outlined a program of concentrated investment across 17 strategic sectors including AI, semiconductors, shipbuilding, quantum technology, biotechnology, aerospace, digital and cyber, resource and energy security, green

transformation (GX), disaster prevention and national resilience, critical minerals and secondary materials, port logistics, defense industry, information and communications, and maritime affairs. This approach integrates the increase in defense spending, investments in economic security, and strengthening energy security into "one package" and can be seen as Japan beginning to formalize its management of external risks and domestic growth strategies in the framework of "economic security as national strategy."

Sixth, Prime Minister Takaichi's remarks linking a Taiwan contingency to a "survival-threatening situation" were an event that changed the grammar of Japan's security policy beyond its diplomatic repercussions. Previous cabinets have avoided directly tying Taiwan's contingency to the conditions for the exercise of collective self-defense, but the Takaichi cabinet made a more direct and specific mention. By contrast, the Takaichi Cabinet, in Diet question-and-answer sessions, stated more directly and concretely—essentially arguing that if an armed attack were to occur, it would be highly likely to fall under the category of a survival-threatening situation—and did so in an official, public setting.

Seventh, signals of a potential push to revise Article 9 of the Constitution and to revisit the Three Non-Nuclear Principles symbolize a "qualitative change in the post-war regime." Prime Minister Takaichi has repeatedly argued that it is internally contradictory to uphold the Three Non-Nuclear Principles while relying on the U.S. nuclear umbrella for deterrence, and has explicitly called for reconsidering—at a minimum—the "non-introduction" principle. After taking office, she further intensified the debate by avoiding a clear, affirmative statement in the Diet on whether her government would unequivocally maintain the Three Non-Nuclear Principles. While the likelihood of these discussions materializing in the short term is low, the fact that the ruling powers and coalition partners are setting agendas and publicizing this issue carries significant meaning.

The aforementioned changes act as both an "opportunity and a challenge" for South Korea. On the one hand, the Takaichi Cabinet's more proactive foreign and security posture could contribute—at least in part—to strengthening deterrence against North Korea and China. On the other hand, Japan's forward-leaning posture may raise the risk of crisis linkage across the Taiwan Strait–East China Sea–Korean Peninsula theater and deepen a regional "security dilemma" by stimulating arms competition and expanded military activities. Moreover, as the military and strategic character of ROK–U.S.–Japan trilateral cooperation intensifies, Japan's early attainment of a 2% of GDP defense-spending benchmark and its preemptive

assumption of expanded roles could, over the medium to long term, increase pressure on the ROK to shoulder greater roles and costs.

In parallel, the strengthening of Japan's economic security agenda and the broader securitization of information may widen the scope for ROK–Japan coordination—particularly in intelligence cooperation vis-à-vis North Korea and China, supply-chain and critical-technology collaboration, and third-country infrastructure and security cooperation. However, tighter Japanese security, intelligence, and outbound investment controls could also generate adverse spillovers for Korean firms operating in or with Japan, for Koreans residing in Japan, and for civil-society and people-to-people exchanges. Furthermore, as tensions between China and Japan escalate, the stronger China's incentives may be to separate and pressure the ROK away from trilateral alignment. This underscores the need for Seoul to design a calibrated strategy that integrates security, economic, intelligence, and domestic public-opinion management into a cohesive package.

To this end, **first,** the ROK should leverage Japan's strengthening of defense capabilities as a component of trilateral deterrence within the ROK–U.S.–Japan framework, while preemptively establishing crisis-management principles and procedures designed to avoid "automatic involvement."

Second, as deepening Sino–Japanese tensions risk further constraining ROK–China–Japan cooperation, Seoul should strengthen its role as a buffer and coordinator. In practical terms, this means using both ROK–China and ROK–Japan bilateral channels to prevent the Sino–Japanese dispute from eroding the broader trilateral cooperation architecture, and proactively proposing and coordinating trilateral crisis-management and communication mechanisms to contain spillovers and preserve functional cooperation.

Third, in the South Korea-Japan relationship, it is necessary to secure a political and social foundation that simultaneously maintains "future-oriented" and "principle-based" approaches. That is, while clarifying principles on core value issues such as historical matters, Dokdo, and human rights, security, economic security, and supply chain cooperation should be managed through institutionalized channels to build a safety net that prevents "unexpected conflicts from escalating into full-scale confrontations," along with communication of domestic public opinion to support this.

About the Author

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