

The University of World Economy and Diplomacy

Institute for Advanced
International Studies

IAIS Policy Compass

Volume 1. Issue 16

JAPAN'S POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION UNDER PRIME MINISTER SANA'E TAKAICHI

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The article examines Japan's evolving political trajectory following the appointment of Sanae Takaichi as the country's first female prime minister in October 2025. Her administration represents a paradigmatic shift from cautious pacifism toward a model of proactive governance that integrates economic intervention, strategic autonomy, and renewed national identity. Throughout her career, Takaichi has consistently emphasized Japan's commitment to democracy, transparency, and the rule of law, viewing institutional stability as a foundation for policy innovation. The analysis highlights key elements of Takaichi's agenda—state-led economic revitalization, energy sovereignty through the reintroduction of nuclear power, restrictive yet selective immigration policy, and defense expansion framed as “controlled assertiveness.” Special attention is given to Japan's redefined role in the Indo-Pacific and Central Asian regions, where cultural diplomacy is increasingly complemented by technological, infrastructural, and security cooperation. Drawing on expert opinions from the United States, Europe, Japan, and Central Asia, the paper argues that Takaichi's leadership embodies a new form of “strategic conservatism” aimed at reconciling globalization with sovereignty and re-establishing Japan's agency as a comprehensive power in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Japan; Sanae Takaichi; political transformation; strategic conservatism; national identity; soft power; Central Asia; immigration policy; economic revitalization; foreign policy.

At present, Japan's state model continues to operate within the paradigm of soft power and a knowledge-based economy, maintaining both stability and latent dynamism. On one hand, this model emphasizes export-oriented industries, technological innovation, and international cultural openness; on the other hand, it faces growing contradictions: a slowdown in economic growth, demographic decline, rising public debt, and limited adaptability to the rapidly changing East Asian environment.

Against this backdrop, the appointment of Sanae Takaichi as Japan's Prime Minister on October 21, 2025 may be interpreted as a shift in trajectory—from a cautious survival policy toward a strategy of active state initiative and re-evaluation of Japan's foreign-economic and defense paradigms. Her policy orientation remains grounded in cooperation with allies and international institutions, ensuring that Japan's growing autonomy contributes to regional and global stability.



Sanae Takaichi Born in Nara Prefecture into a politically engaged family, she rose from a legal background to become one of the key figures of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Her career developed within the political climate dominated by the legacy of Shinzo Abe and the strategic line of strengthening Japan's role as a “normal” state actor in international relations.

From the early stages of her political formation, Takaichi supported discussions on updating Japan's constitutional framework to reflect evolving security realities — a stance consistent with the conservative mainstream within the LDP—an orientation later reflected in her election campaign.

Main Elements of Takaichi's Campaign Platform [4]

1. **Economic Growth and Fairness.** Takaichi's campaign centered on the slogan “Turning the people's anxieties about their present and future into hope and action” (「人々の現在の暮らしや将来に対する不安を希望に変えて」). She pledged to raise the income-tax exemption threshold, introduce refundable tax credits, temporarily suspend fuel excise hikes, and accelerate infrastructure investment. In her view, the state must once again become an active agent of economic revitalization, not merely a regulator.
2. **Energy Independence.** Distinguishing herself from her predecessors, Takaichi openly called for a rapid revival of nuclear power as Japan's energy backbone, aiming to reduce hydrocarbon imports and ease inflationary pressure. She also emphasized hydrogen, rare-earth, and other strategic technologies as part of an industrial modernization agenda.

[4] Policy Speech by Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi, произнесённой 24 октября 2025 г. на 219-й внеочередной сессии парламента Японии. — Официальный сайт Премьер-министра и Кабинета министров Японии <https://japan.kantei.go.jp/104/statement/202510/25press>



3. Security and Foreign Policy. Takaichi declared that Japan must become a “full-fledged” actor in global security by raising defense spending to 2% of GDP by 2025-26, strengthening intelligence and cybersecurity, and creating a Japanese defense-industrial complex. Takaichi emphasized that a credible defense posture is essential for maintaining national confidence and international respect. This vision implied a less passive foreign policy and greater initiative in the Indo-Pacific and Central Asian regions.

In analytical terms, Takaichi’s ascent reflects Japan’s broader historical dilemma — how to balance its status as a technological superpower with its socio-demographic vulnerabilities, and how to reconcile soft-power diplomacy with the hard realities of the 2020s. Her figure symbolizes a transitional moment — not mere continuity, but reconfiguration.

Cabinet Composition and Institutional Design

Takaichi announced her cabinet on October 24, 2025, just three days after Diet approval. Key positions went to ideological allies:

- Defense Minister Kazuhiro Kishihara, from the Abe faction;
- Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) Naomichi Taniguchi, a pro-nuclear and hydrogen advocate;
- Finance Minister Toshimitsu Motegi, a moderate macroeconomist ensuring internal balance.

This structure reflects a deliberate synthesis of Abeism and pragmatic economic interventionism. Political scientist Masayuki Tada (Waseda University) described it in *Mainichi Shimbun* as “the first cabinet to blend ideological continuity with interventionist economics.”[5]

While the appointment of Japan’s first female prime minister was widely hailed as progress, Takaichi avoids gender-based identification. In an *Asahi Shimbun* interview (October 23, 2025) she stated: “私は女性である前に政治家です” — “I am a politician before I am a woman.” Her government nevertheless includes a record six female ministers (out of 19) and has established a Council for Women’s Participation in STEM Fields.[6]

Unlike the European discourse on gender equality, Takaichi promotes meritocracy—emphasizing professionalism rather than gender quotas. This pragmatic stance aligns with Japan’s cultural tradition of quality through experience and coincides with Japan’s relatively low gender income gap.

[5] Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi’s Press Conference following the Cabinet Meeting, 25 October 2025 [Electronic resource]. — Official website of the Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet. — Access mode: <https://japan.kantei.go.jp/104/statement/202510/25press>

[6] *Asahi Shimbun*. “私は女性である前に政治家です [I’m a politician before I’m a woman].” *Asahi Shimbun*, October 23, 2025. URL: <https://www.asahi.com/articles/2025102300000.html>



Economic Program and Fiscal Measures

In her first 100 days, Takaichi defined a course of “state-led growth activation.”

In her policy speech before the Diet on October 24, 2025, she proclaimed:

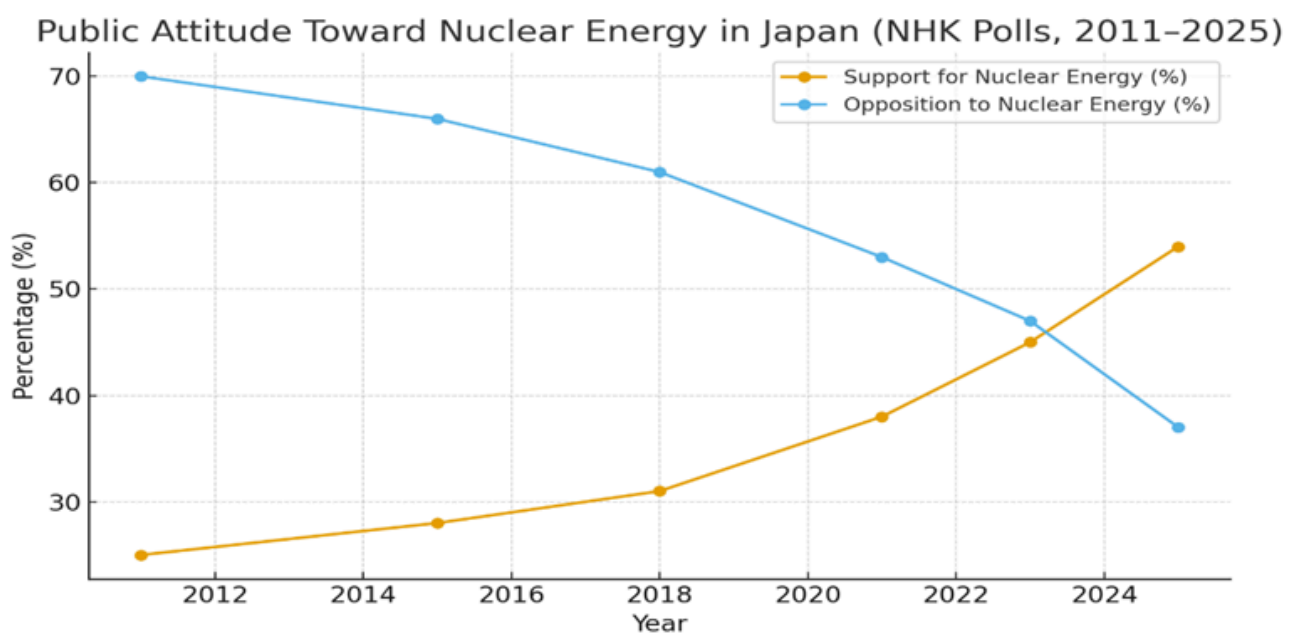
「国家が主導して、経済成長と国民生活の向上を両立させる時です」 — “It is time for the state to lead both economic growth and improved living standards.”

She then announced a series of concrete steps:

- Abolition of the temporary gasoline tax (in place since 1974), effective November 1, 2025, easing transportation-related inflation.
- Raising the income-tax exemption threshold to 1.6 million yen—the first such increase since the 2010s.
- Refundable tax credit pilot for low- and middle-income households in five prefectures.
- Supplementary budget (第二次補正予算) of roughly 14 trillion yen targeting domestic demand, digital infrastructure, and business support.

These measures had an immediate impact: the yen weakened significantly, boosting exports in the short term but sparking debate on fiscal sustainability. In analytical perspective, Takaichi appears to employ economic policy as a tool of political legitimization. Her reforms seek to deliver tangible outcomes within the first year—to consolidate her mandate and neutralize intra-party opposition.

The most consequential decision was the return to nuclear energy. In November 2025, METI approved a program to restart at least 17 reactors by 2030 and commission next-generation designs.[1]



Public reaction was cautiously positive: according to an NHK poll (November 6, 2025), 54% supported the move and 37% opposed it—the first majority approval of nuclear policy since the Fukushima disaster in 2011.

The shift thus functions not only as an energy measure but also as a mechanism for political legitimization and public reassurance. Rising electricity prices since Japan's nuclear withdrawal had become undeniable; by promising cheaper energy and industrial cost reductions, the new government aims to stimulate GDP growth and strengthen public confidence.

Immigration policy

Officials have noted that immigration policy reforms will proceed through extensive public consultation and parliamentary review to maintain transparency and societal consensus. Before assuming office as prime minister, Sanae Takaichi took part in coalition negotiations between the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the Japan Innovation Party (Nippon Ishin no Kai). One of the key provisions in their policy agreement concerned the tightening of immigration rules. “The coalition emphasized the importance of managing immigration in a way that preserves social cohesion and facilitates gradual integration.”

This line reflected a shared conservative concern within both parties that Japan's social cohesion could be undermined by a rapid demographic shift. Consequently, the coalition framework emphasized maintaining immigration at “manageable levels,” reinforcing border control, and ensuring that foreign residents “integrate under Japanese norms and values.”

Analyzing the immigration policy of Sanae Takaichi, Japan's new Prime Minister we can see The key features of her policy can be summarized as follows:

(1) the tightening of residence and employment conditions for foreign nationals is That means the introduction of quantitative and sector-specific quotas designed to restrict the inflow of foreign worker; (2) enhanced monitoring of visa status and stricter enforcement of stay limits; (3) The policy includes a review of welfare eligibility frameworks to ensure fairness and sustainability while maintaining social balance; (4) a strong emphasis on “cultural and institutional integration”—in a narrow sense—reflecting deep concerns over the preservation of Japan's national identity.

In her public statements, Takaichi stresses the need for an “orderly coexistence” between Japanese citizens and foreigners, emphasizing “mutual respect” for Japan's social norms and behavioral standards. She has criticized the current immigration frameworks as overly lenient and called for a comprehensive revision of visa and residency systems. Her approach also includes plans to establish a new governmental agency—or expand the mandate of existing ones—to combat illegal immigration, overstayed visas, uncontrolled tourism, and foreign ownership of land near strategic facilities.



Within the broader context of Japan's demographic and economic crisis—characterized by an aging population, a shrinking labor force, and a growing reliance on foreign workers—Takaichi's hardline stance raises significant concerns. While Japan's economy increasingly depends on migrant labor, her rhetoric indicates that future policy will focus not on large-scale immigration but rather on limited, selective, and tightly managed participation.

Despite her intentions, this policy direction carries several risks. A narrow approach to accepting foreign workers could exacerbate labor shortages in key industries dependent on migrant labor; excessive emphasis on control and cultural conformity may discourage skilled immigrants; and hardline political messaging might intensify social tensions. In essence, Takaichi's immigration policy reflects an effort to preserve social stability and national identity, rather than to embrace immigration as a driver of economic revitalization.

Foreign Policy and Security under Takaichi

Takaichi characterizes Japan's transition as a move from “cautious pacifism” to “controlled assertiveness” (制御された強硬さ). Under her leadership, Japan demonstrates—perhaps for the first time since World War II—a readiness to combine soft power and strategic autonomy with defense responsibility.

The 2025 National Security Strategy sets the goal of raising defense spending to 2% of GDP within the same year and introduces new priorities: cyber- and space-defense integration, the creation of a Strategic Intelligence Agency, and the development of counter-strike capabilities (反撃能力). These steps aim not at militarization but at restoring Japan's agency as a full participant in security affairs rather than a “junior partner” of the United States. Japan is simultaneously deepening ties with India, Australia, and Vietnam, seeking to act as an initiator—not merely a participant—of economic and technological coalitions.[7]

Relations with China follow the “three-D” formula: Deterrence, Dialogue, Diversification. Japan reacts firmly on Taiwan and technological sovereignty issues but maintains diplomatic channels and avoids open confrontation—a mature balance between principle and pragmatism. This framework underscores Japan's preference for diplomacy and preventive engagement over confrontation, reflecting a pragmatic approach to regional security.

The statement attributed to Xue Jian, China's Consul General in Osaka — “We have no choice but to cut off the dirty head [of Japan's Prime Minister Takaichi] who rushed in without hesitation. Are you ready?” — has become a striking example of the escalating rhetoric between Tokyo and Beijing following Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's remarks on Taiwan.

[7] 日本政府. 国家安全保障戦略 [National Security Strategy]. 東京: 内閣官房, 2025.
URL: <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/2025nss.html>



Takaichi had declared that “a conflict between China and Taiwan would constitute an existential crisis for Japan,” emphasizing that Japan’s Self-Defense Forces might intervene if regional stability or Japan’s national security were directly threatened. Her statement represented a sharp departure from the cautious tone of former Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, whose diplomacy focused on maintaining equilibrium in East Asia.

In a broader sense, the confrontation reveals a new era in East Asian geopolitics: Japan, under its first female and overtly conservative leader, is no longer content to act as a reactive power. Instead, it seeks to project strategic agency, even at the cost of diplomatic friction with Beijing.[1]

Central Asia Policy under Takaichi

Under Prime Minister Takaichi, Japan’s engagement with Central Asia is shifting from its traditional reliance on soft-power diplomacy toward a more multidimensional strategy that combines cultural, economic, and emerging security components. Although the “Central Asia + Japan” dialogue was temporarily paused due to domestic political transitions in Tokyo, the framework is expected to regain relevance. For decades, Tokyo has viewed Central Asia as a venue for “quiet diplomacy,” centered on technical assistance, development cooperation, and cultural outreach rather than geopolitical competition.[2]

However, the international environment of the late 2020s is pushing Japan toward a more proactive regional posture. The United States—Japan’s closest strategic partner—has expanded its diplomatic and economic initiatives in the Middle East, particularly in energy and hydrogen sectors. Because Japan closely coordinates its global strategy with Washington, this broader U.S. engagement opens space for Japan to complement these efforts. Central Asia, positioned as both an energy corridor and a logistical hub, fits naturally into Japan’s search for more secure and diversified supply routes.

Despite the pause in the official dialogue, Tokyo’s interest in the region has not faded. China’s growing presence continues to shape Japanese policy calculations. Japan does not seek confrontation but aims to offer an alternative model grounded in technology transfer, human-capital development, and high-quality infrastructure. In this sense, Central Asia functions within Japan’s foreign-policy thinking as a “balancing platform,” where soft power and economic tools reinforce one another.

Reviving the “CA+Japan” framework would allow Tokyo to deepen partnerships with Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan and integrate the region into Japan’s renewed focus on energy security and supply-chain resilience.



For Japan, Central Asia is arena where Tokyo can project an image of a reliable, technologically advanced, and non-confrontational actor promoting “stability through cooperation.” Japan increasingly frames itself as a “bridge between the technological West and the resource-rich East,” offering a transparent, rules-based alternative to China’s Belt and Road Initiative. This evolution reflects Japan’s broader foreign-policy adaptation to new geopolitical realities, with stronger emphasis on security, technology, and strategic autonomy.

Japan’s approach to Central Asia under Takaichi reflects a clear transition from traditional soft-power tools toward a more strategic, multidimensional policy. Although the “Central Asia + Japan” format temporarily stalled due to domestic political pressures in Tokyo, Japan’s long-term interests in the region have only grown stronger. Central Asia now plays a dual role in Japan’s foreign policy: as a stable corridor for energy and logistics diversification, and as a geopolitical balancing space amid China’s expanding influence.

By aligning with U.S. initiatives in the Middle East, Japan seeks to position itself as a reliable, technology-driven partner, offering high-quality infrastructure, human-capital development, and non-confrontational cooperation that reinforces regional stability. From this follows several basic scenarios for the development of relations, which include:

- Expansion of Japanese infrastructure and technology projects (transport, logistics, digital platforms) to diversify supply chains and counterbalance Chinese and Russian influence.
- Strengthening of educational and research cooperation, using universities and think-tanks as platforms for economic security and soft-power projection.
- Indirect security engagement through energy, logistics, and resource cooperation rather than military presence—focusing on stable transit corridors and regional connectivity.

Future of the C5+Japan framework will be defined by Japan’s need to secure stable supply chains and strengthen its presence in the broader Eurasian strategic landscape. He argues that Central Asia will become increasingly important as Japan expands cooperation in critical minerals, hydrogen production, digital connectivity, and security-related capacity building. Rather than confronting China directly, Japan will pursue a differentiated model based on transparency, institutional reliability, and human-capital development. Yamaguchi emphasizes that, as geopolitical uncertainty intensifies, Tokyo will view the C5+Japan dialogue as a platform for creating long-term regional stability while positioning Japan as a trusted, technologically advanced partner in Eurasia. [8]

[8] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA). ““Central Asia + Japan” Dialogue – 13th Tokyo Dialogue: Geopolitical Outlook of the Central Asia Region” URL https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/release/pressit_000001_01901.html



Japan is likely to act selectively, prioritizing flagship partnerships with Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan rather than launching a large-scale program across the region. Such a targeted approach reduces risk while increasing visibility and efficiency.[9]

Expert opinion

While policy adjustments under Takaichi appear assertive, they also aim to strengthen Japan's long-term resilience by investing in education, technology, and inclusive social development.

The rise of Sanae Takaichi as Japan's first female Prime Minister in October 2025 marks a decisive turning point in the country's domestic and foreign policy. Her administration represents not merely a change in leadership but a recalibration of Japan's political identity.

The following analysis presents comparative expert opinions from four major geopolitical spheres — the United States, Europe, Central Asia, and Japan — highlighting how each interprets Takaichi's emerging doctrine.

According to Sheila A. Smith, a senior fellow for Japan studies at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), the rise of Sanae Takaichi represents a turning point in Japan's political trajectory. She argues that Takaichi's government embodies a decisive shift toward nationalism, defense consolidation, and a restrictive immigration agenda. Smith emphasizes that Japan now faces the challenge of balancing its economic need for foreign labor with growing political pressure for tighter border control and domestic security. Furthermore, American analysts underscore that while Washington views Tokyo as an increasingly capable strategic ally, concerns remain that Japan's push for autonomy—especially in defense and immigration—could occasionally complicate bilateral coordination. In short, the United States interprets Takaichi's policy line as an opportunity to strengthen partnership within the Indo-Pacific framework, yet one accompanied by risks of heightened ideological rigidity.[10]

European experts offer a more nuanced reading. Elli-Katharina Pohlkamp, from the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), suggests that Takaichi's Japan may become a more consequential strategic partner for Europe, particularly in the areas of supply-chain resilience, defense cooperation, and technological security. However, she notes that Tokyo's growing emphasis on national identity and restrictive migration policy may reduce Japan's attractiveness to skilled migrants and global talent. Analysts at the Atlantic Council likewise argue that Japan's accelerated goal of raising defense spending to 2 percent of GDP marks its transformation from an "economic partner" into a "strategic actor." [11]

[9] The Japan Times. "Japan Revives 'Central Asia + Japan' Framework with New Focus on Hydrogen, Digital Economy, and Supply Chains." 8 November 2025. — URL: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/>

[10] Understanding Takaichi Sanae: Sheila Smith on Japan's First Female Prime Minister <https://www.cfr.org/article/potential-impact-takaichi-sanae-japans-first-female-prime-minister-conversation-dr-sheila>

[11] Pohlkamp, Elli-Katharina. "Pacific drift: Why Europe needs a Japan strategy for the Takaichi-Trump era." European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 5 November 2025. Available at: <https://www.ecfr.eu/article/pacific-drift-why-europe-needs-a-japan-strategy-for-the-takaichi-trump-era/>



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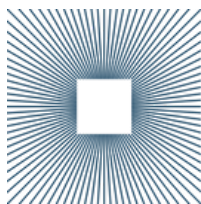
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