Japan's Middle-Power Ambitions and the Weight of History

By Ria Shibata

Japan's aspirations to play a role as an Asian middle power in an increasingly fractured world ran headlong last November into a volatile brew involving legitimacy, memory and the 'Takaichi problem.' Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's reply to a hypothetical question about a Taiwan contingency ignited a flamethrower of denunciation from Beijing, followed by coercive economic measures.

Ironically, that backfired, consolidating support for her in Japan and clearing the way for a more assertive defense posture. Still, Japan's middle-power ambitions are constrained by larger questions involving its history, writes Ria Shibata.

JAPAN HAS LONG sought to position itself as a stabilizing middle power in the Asia-Pacific, leveraging its economic weight, multilateral diplomacy and institutional networks to shape a rules-based regional order. Yet this ambition is structurally constrained by an unresolved historical legacy that China and South Korea invoke to contest Japan's moral authority and regional legitimacy. In this essay I argue that Japan's aspirations to lead middle-power diplomacy are inhibited by a durable legitimacy deficit rooted in wartime memory, which China has increasingly deployed as a tool of strategic statecraft. I further contend that Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's November 2025 parliamentary statement linking a Taiwan contingency to Japan's exercise of collective self-defense did not merely trigger a bilateral diplomatic crisis, it lent concrete, contemporary authentication to China's long-standing narrative of Japanese militarism. Yet China's coercive response to that statement is a strategic miscalculation: far from constraining Japan's security trajectory, Beijing's threat inflation provided the democratic mandate that delivered Takaichi a supermajority and accelerated the very military normalization China sought to prevent.

MIDDLE-POWER ASPIRATIONS

Middle powers are broadly understood as states that possess influence exceeding their material power — they shape regional and global norms through multilateralism, institution-building and coalition management rather than through coercion. In the Asia-Pacific, it is a role that has become particularly acute as the intensification of the US-China rivalry threatens to polarize the region into hard alignment blocs, foreclosing the diplomatic space on which small and medium-sized states depend. Japan is uniquely exposed at the intersection of these pressures. Numerous experts have argued that Japan should pursue a more proactive middle-power diplomacy in order to mitigate US-China rivalry and prevent a sharp division in Asia. It is the world's third-largest economy, hosts a comprehensive network of bilateral and minilateral partnerships, from the Quad to the Global Combat Air Program with the UK and Italy (GCAP), and retains deep multilayered economic, security, and cultural relationships with Southeast Asian states that give it a structural relevance that no other middle power can replicate.

The institutional architecture that Japan has constructed is considerable. Through the Quad, the US-Japan-Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue, and an expanding network of bilateral strategic partnerships, Tokyo has helped build a new category of "strategic minilaterals" — small-group configurations of like-minded states designed to manage strategic competition without the rigidities of a formal alliance. Japan stepped into a de facto leadership role within the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) after the United States withdrew. Japan's vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific launched under then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and refined under successive administrations, provides the normative scaffolding for this architecture.

Yet ambition and capacity do not alone make a credible regional leader. Legitimacy — the acceptance by others of one's right to lead — is the indispensable third element. And here Japan faces a structural deficit that no amount of institutional entrepreneurship has yet resolved.

LEGITIMACY DEFICIT: HISTORY AS A STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINT

Japan's central problem in aspiring to regional leadership is legitimacy. Unlike post-war Europe, where historical reconciliation became the very foundation of regional integration, East Asia developed a political environment in which memory politics has persistently obstructed co-operation. Japan's economic leadership initiatives — however generous in material terms — remain overshadowed by imperial memory. Even aid and trade programs carry, for some states, echoes of the wartime "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere," raising concerns that Japanese economic leadership might reconstitute a hierarchical dependence that Southeast Asian states had only recently escaped. This is not merely a reputational problem; it is a structural one, in which the unresolved past actively constrains the political acceptability of Japanese power in the present.

This legitimacy deficit is most acute in Japan's relations with South Korea and China, the two states whose historical grievances are deepest and whose acceptance would be essential to any credible Japanese regional role. South Korea's suspicion of Japan stems from Tokyo's persistent refusal to achieve genuine moral accountability for its wartime crimes, most notably forced labor and the "comfort women" system. Japan's insistence that the 1965 Basic Treaty permanently settled all wartime claims is flatly rejected by Korean civil society, which gained political voice only after democratization in 1987, decades after elite-level agreements had foreclosed survivors' testimony. The 2023 Yoon initiative, which substituted a Korean-funded mechanism for direct Japanese corporate reparations, exemplified the structural problem: Tokyo consistently treats historical closure as a bureaucratic formality rather than a moral obligation. This perception

Flagging historic failings: Protesters in Seoul destroy a Japanese imperial flag at a rally against a South Korea-Japan summit in 2024. They demanded an apology over claims of Japanese distortion of history, the disputed Dokdo Islands, and Japanese military "comfort women" during World War II.

Photo: EPA/Jeon Heon-kyun

is compounded by Japanese political leaders who periodically deny imperial-era accountability. For Korea, this is a posture that disqualifies Japan from the moral authority that regional leadership requires.

With China, history grievances — centered on the Nanjing Massacre, the biological warfare experiments of Unit 731 and the broader narrative of Japanese aggression during the 1931-1945 era — are not merely diplomatic irritants but are structurally inscribed in the founding legitimacy of the People's Republic itself. The Chinese Communist Party's claim to have led the war of resistance against Japan is a cornerstone of party-state self-justification, meaning that anti-Japanese historical framing cannot be negotiated away through bilateral diplomacy alone. History is not external to China-Japan relations; it is central to Chinese political identity. Taken together, these dynamics mean that Japan faces a legitimacy deficit that is self-reinforcing: the very states whose recognition would validate Japanese leadership are those for whom unresolved history makes that recognition politically impossible to extend.

TAKAICHI'S TAIWAN STORM

It is against this background that the full significance of Prime Minister Takaichi's parliamentary statement of Nov. 7, 2025, must be understood. In response to questions in the House of Representatives, Takaichi declared that if China's use of warships and military force against Taiwan reached a threshold constituting a "survival-threatening situation" for Japan, Tokyo could invoke the 2015 Legislation for Peace and Security to exercise collective self-defense. The statement was not a policy innovation — it was a clarification of existing doctrine. But Takaichi's error was one of explicitness: She overturned Japan's carefully cultivated posture of strategic ambiguity, making explicit what had been deliberately implicit, from the floor of the Japanese parliament, with the full weight of official governmental utterance. In doing so, she handed Beijing precisely the provocation it needed.

For China, the statement did more than provoke, it authenticated. China's narrative of Japanese neo-militarism had long been characterized by critics as instrumentalized hyperbole, a tool of diplomatic coercion rather than a genuine security assessment. Takaichi's statement provided Beijing with exactly the kind of concrete and formally uttered evidence that transformed a debatable interpretation into a defensible claim. Foreign Minister Wang Yi's February 2026 statement at the Munich Security Conference was particularly pointed: Takaichi's remarks were described as "the first time in 80 years that a Japanese prime minister has uttered such words," directly anchoring her contemporary security posture in the longstanding narrative of unreformed Japanese militarism. The rhetorical move was deliberate — by invoking the 80-year threshold, Beijing was not merely registering diplomatic protest but performing historical continuity, insisting that Takaichi's statement was not an aberration but a revelation of Japan's unresolved militarist character.

The economic coercion that followed confirmed that China intended the crisis to have structural, not merely symbolic, consequences. By January 2026, Beijing had announced tightened export controls, framing these measures explicitly as a response to Japan's "remilitarization and nuclear ambitions." Rare-earth export restrictions followed, deliberately exploiting Japan's well-documented vulnerability to supply-chain coercion. The message was unambiguous: security assertiveness would carry measurable economic costs.

The timing of China's response was not incidental. Under Xi Jinping, historical statecraft became more assertive, more institutionally embedded, and deliberately calibrated to anniversary politics. The 2015 Victory over Japan Day commemorations demonstrated Beijing's willingness to invest significant state resources in reviving wartime memory as a political project, and 2025 — the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second Sino-Japanese War — provided an exceptionally charged symbolic context. Chinese official discourse systematically used this anniversary to amplify the resonance of any Japanese

security move that could be plausibly coded as revisionist. As *China Daily* stated, the timing of Takaichi's Taiwan remarks made them "particularly egregious" precisely because of this anniversary context. Xinhua went further, arguing that Japan's failure to thoroughly purge militarist ideology in the post-war period had made possible the emergence of leaders like Takaichi.

Japan's security concerns about China's military expansion are broadly shared across the region, yet Japan's ability to lead a coalition around those concerns depends on moral authority that its historical record has not yet fully earned, and that its current leadership's choices are actively eroding. China's coercive overreaction may have delivered Takaichi domestic political dominance, but domestic dominance and regional legitimacy are not the same currency.

CHINA'S COERCION BACKFIRES

Beijing's coercive response to Takaichi's Taiwan statement could be understood not only as a diplomatic reaction but as a strategic miscalculation, a counter-productive case in which the chosen instrument of coercion produced precisely the outcome it was designed to prevent. Beijing's stated goal was to constrain Japan's security trajectory. Its methods delivered the opposite.

The trade coercion and uncensored wave of nationalist outrage across Chinese social media produced an effect precisely opposite to Beijing's intent. Rather than intimidating the Japanese public into skepticism toward Takaichi's hawkish framing, China's behavior provided real-time validation of the threat narrative she had articulated. This dynamic reflects a structural tension at the heart of China's coercive diplomacy: Beijing's most extreme reactions frequently reveal its internal vulnerabilities, particularly the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) deepening reliance on performative nationalism as procedural legitimacy erodes, more than they reflect calibrated assessments of external threats. A measured, technical protest might have contained the episode. Instead, the overreaction transformed a parliamentary hypothetical into a credible threat event, activating what might be termed threat authentication — a process by which a leader's threat narrative is confirmed not through their own rhetoric but through the adversary's observable behavior. Takaichi did not need to persuade the Japanese public that China was coercive. China demonstrated it in real time.

The domestic political consequences were the inverse of Beijing's intent at every level. Opposition politicians who dissented were portrayed as "cowardly and pro-China," collapsing the space for principled disagreement. The electoral consequences were decisive: Takaichi's landslide in the subsequent snap election delivered the LDP more than two-thirds of lower house seats — precisely the constitutional threshold required to propose revisions for national referendum. Beijing had, in effect, given Takaichi the arithmetic she needed to pursue the most transformative item on her security agenda. The record defense budget of more than 9 trillion yen (US$58 billion) for fiscal 2026 — a 9.4 percent increase — further illustrates how the authenticated threat environment provided political cover for an agenda that would otherwise have faced serious public resistance. More consequentially, Chinese coercive pressure accelerated discussions about lethal weapons sales to regional partners, legitimizing precisely the dimension of military normalization Beijing most vocally opposes.

The cumulative effect on Japanese domestic society carries the longest strategic horizon. Among *younger* Japanese voters — those aged 18 to 29 — peace is increasingly conceived in instrumental rather than constitutional terms: as the product of effective deterrence rather than legal renunciation of force. Takaichi's cabinet approval among that cohort reached 92 percent in the wake of the crisis. The practical consequence was to widen the domestic political space for Takaichi's security agenda — normalizing defense budget expansion, insulating the constitutional revision project from its most likely source of opposition and marginalizing the political parties who might otherwise contest it. Beijing's amplified threat narrative did not merely validate Takaichi's framing for conservatives already sympathetic to it; it shifted the terms of debate among precisely the generation that is most likely to vote in any constitutional referendum.

WHY HISTORY CONSTRAINS JAPAN'S REGIONAL LEADERSHIP

This argument stands in apparent tension with the preceding section's finding that China's coercive overreaction empowered rather than constrained Japan. The tension, however, is resolvable: the backfire dynamic operated primarily at the level of domestic Japanese politics, delivering Takaichi a supermajority and accelerating defense normalization, while the inhibition identified here operates at the level of regional legitimacy and coalition-building. These are distinct arenas. A Japan that is domestically emboldened but regionally delegitimized faces a different, arguably more dangerous, strategic condition than one that is neither. China's miscalculation thus produced a paradox: it accelerated Japanese military capability while simultaneously deepening the legitimacy deficit that prevents Tokyo from leading the regional coalition that capability is intended to anchor. Nonetheless, the cumulative effect of the historical memory dynamics is to significantly constrain Japan's ability to project credible middle power leadership across the region, even as the structural need for such leadership grows. The inhibition operates through three distinct channels.

The first channel is legitimacy. Middle-power leadership depends on acceptance by weaker states that the aspiring leader's values and methods are trustworthy. Japan's unresolved historical reckoning creates persistent doubt about whether its regional vision represents a genuine commitment to multilateral norms or a sublimated continuation of hierarchical ambitions. ASEAN states carry their own memories of Japanese occupation

and watch Tokyo's evolving security posture with the wariness that historical experience instills.

The second channel is coalition coherence. Historical memory fractures Japan's coalition at precisely the nodes where it needs cohesion. South Korea is the most structurally important case: a natural partner for any security architecture managing Chinese and North Korean pressure, but one whose domestic politics make sustained security co-operation with Tokyo politically costly whenever historical grievances are inflamed.

The third channel is narrative space. China's use of history is a tool to contest the regional framing of Japan's security moves across the wider Indo-Pacific. Every Japanese defense initiative — budget increases, counterstrike capability development, AUKUS Pillar II engagement — can be reframed in Chinese discourse as evidence of remilitarization. Takaichi's Taiwan statement was an unforced gift to this strategy. That Beijing would instrumentalize it was entirely predictable; that she made it anyway reflects either strategic miscalculation or a genuine prioritization of domestic nationalist credibility over regional diplomatic positioning.

INDISPENSABLE, YET INSUFFICIENT

Japan's aspiration to serve as a stabilizing middle power is strategically coherent, institutionally well-supported and normatively valuable. But the ambition is structurally undermined by a legitimacy deficit rooted in unresolved historical memory, which China has transformed from a bilateral grievance into a sophisticated instrument of grand strategy.

The November 2025 crisis reveals two simultaneous miscalculations. Takaichi's Taiwan statement squandered the diplomatic credibility that Tokyo had painstakingly constructed and handed Beijing the evidence it needed to authenticate its militarism narrative at precisely the moment when the 80th anniversary of the war had primed regional audiences for that message. But China's coercive overreaction proved equally counterproductive: the decapitation rhetoric, trade sanctions and nationalist mobilization gave Takaichi the supermajority, the budgetary mandate and the domestic political cover to pursue military normalization at a pace that would otherwise have been impossible. Beijing's use of the history issue as a way to compel behavior produced the very outcome it sought to forestall.

The structural irony is acute. Japan's security concerns about China's military expansion are broadly shared across the region, yet its ability to lead a coalition around those concerns depends on moral authority that its historical record has not yet fully earned, and that its current leadership's choices are actively eroding. China's coercive overreaction may have delivered Takaichi domestic political dominance, but domestic dominance and regional legitimacy aren't the same currency. A state can simultaneously become more capable and less trusted — more powerful in hardware, more constrained in the coalitional authority that translates power into regional leadership.

Japan as a responsible middle power is needed for regional stability, but it is held back by the weight of a past that the region hasn't yet agreed to move beyond. Until Japan develops something closer to a German-style systematic reckoning with its imperial past — not merely government apologies of contested sincerity, but sustained institutional and societal processes of historical accountability — its middle-power ambitions will remain what Junghoon Lee calls "indispensable, yet insufficient."[1]

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1 Junghoon Lee, "Indispensable, Yet Insufficient: Japan, South Korea, and the Conditional Diplomacy of Middle Powers from the Cold War to the Asia-Pacific Era," IntechOpen, 2026, www.intechopen.com/online-first/1238401