PRC Launches Campaign to Isolate Japan

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Executive Summary: Chinese pressure on Japan has escalated to efforts to diplomatically isolate the country. These efforts are ongoing at a subnational level, in the United Nations, and through attempts to drive a wedge between the United States and Japan.

- In Japan, the People's Republic of China's (PRC) isolation campaign involves cultivating the opposition to establish friendlier relations between the two countries. In the United Nations, the PRC is drawing on post-World War Two language to limit Japanese influence. General Secretary Xi Jinping's visit to Washington was also an attempt to probe weaknesses in U.S.–Japan ties.
- These efforts are failing to isolate Japan, as others have in the past year. Japanese prime minister Takaichi still holds popular support, World War Two narratives are less potent among other UN member states than in the PRC, and President Donald Trump's relationship with Takaichi remains strong.

Nearly a year into its diplomatic spat with Japan, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has shifted from pressuring Japan economically to a multi-faceted campaign that aims to isolate Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi for her pro-Taiwan stance, at home, in the United Nations, and within the U.S.–Japan relationship. While shunning Takaichi's government, Beijing has hosted delegations of pro-PRC Japanese politicians and businesspeople, attempted to discredit Japan in the UN Security Council, and pressed the United States to limit support for Tokyo.

Despite its relentlessness, these PRC efforts are unlikely to succeed. Beijing's preferred diplomatic partners in Tokyo lack political clout, the UN scheme is far-fetched, and the U.S.–Japan alliance has structural staying power reinforced by the warm relationship between President Donald Trump and Takaichi.

PRC Attempts to Cultivate Japanese Opposition

The PRC used the occasion of the 54th anniversary of the normalization of its diplomatic ties with Japan to admonish Takaichi. The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) said on September 29 that Takaichi had "gravely undermined" the political foundation of bilateral relations with a "blatant challenge to China's national sovereignty" (□□□□□□□□□□□) (Embassy of the PRC in the United States, September 29).

On the same day, PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi (□□) met with former Japanese Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya, who opposes Takaichi, in Beijing. Wang told Iwaya that Japan must "correct the erroneous words and deeds" of Takaichi on Taiwan (□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□) (PRC MFA, September 29). For his part, Iwaya echoed PRC talking points when he called for "a return to the original spirit" (□□□□□□□□□□□) of the four political documents between the PRC and Japan (People's Daily, September 29).

The PRC views Iwaya as friendly to its interests. Though a member of Japan's ruling Liberal

Democratic Party (LDP), he is not close to Takaichi and stepped down after she was elected last year. Sima Nan (□□□), a prominent Chinese political commentator, compared Iwaya favorably to Takaichi, writing on Guangcha that Takaichi “is constantly creating conflict and closing the door to dialogue abroad, while her party rivals are braving pressure to come to China to break the ice and seek cooperation opportunities” (□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□) (Guangcha/□□□□, September 30).

Since July, Iwaya has served as the head of the Beijing-friendly Japan Association for the Promotion of International Trade (JAPIT). He succeeded the late Yohei Kono, a former Speaker of Japan’s House of Representatives with close ties to the PRC. Wang told Iwaya that Kono was “ a politician of conscience who dared to confront Japan’s dark past and bravely reflected on the aggressive crimes of militarism” (□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□) (PRC MFA, September 29).

The JAPIT delegation is the third such group that has visited the PRC since August. In mid-September, a delegation from the Japan-China Friendship Parliamentarians’ Union met with Assistant Foreign Minister Liu Bin (□□) in Beijing. They were preceded by a cross-party group of Japanese lawmakers (Global Times, September 27).

None of these delegations have included any prominent Japanese officials in Takaichi’s administration or lawmakers with close ties to the prime minister.

Stoking the ‘Enemy State’ Debate

The PRC is using its UN Security Council seat to resist Takaichi’s calls to remove archaic clauses in the UN charter that imply Japan is an “enemy state.” The language appears in Articles 53, 77, and 107 of the charter. Article 53 explains that the term “enemy state … applies to any state which during the Second World War has been an enemy of any signatory of the present Charter” (United Nations, accessed October 6). By this definition, Japan, Germany, Italy, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and Finland are “enemy states.”

Crucially, Article 53 allows the UN Security Council to take enforcement actions against these “enemy states.” The PRC well knows that three permanent Security Council members—the United States, the United Kingdom, and France—would never agree to that and, without unanimity, the Security Council cannot take any formal action against Japan.

Yet the very existence of these clauses serves Beijing’s anti-Japan propaganda purposes. On September 2, MFA spokesman Guo Jiakun (□□□) said at a press conference that the clauses are designed to prevent countries defeated in World War II from posing any threat in the future. He repeated accusations that Japan has embraced a “new-type militarism” (□□□□□□) and emphasized the need for “full compliance” (□□□□) with the UN Charter need for “enemy state clauses” (China Brief, April 28 [1], [2]; Embassy of the PRC in the United States, September 2).

During Takaichi’s first address to the UN General Assembly on September 22, she described Japan as a peace-loving nation and called for the removal of the “enemy state” label in the charter. She noted that the United Nations recognized this language as obsolete in both 1995 and 2005, but that it was never formally removed (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, September 22).

PRC media responded indignantly. The People’s Daily-owned tabloid Global Times accused Takaichi of putting on a “diplomatic performance” (□□□□) and “openly challenging the post-war international order” (□□□□□□□□□□) (Global Times, September 23).

Trying to Drive a Wedge in U.S.-Japan Relations

The third prong of the PRC's campaign to isolate Takaichi aims to drive a wedge between Japan and the United States, its chief security partner. Beijing sees an opportunity because of President Trump's focus on building his personal relationship with Xi Jinping.

Xi has used both of his face-to-face meetings with Trump this year to probe potential weak points in the U.S.–Japan relationship. Trump reportedly pushed back in May (Asahi Shimbun, May 28). Yet during the September summit in Washington, the White House released a fact sheet that said, "[t]he two leaders recalled that United States and China were allies in World War II and fought side by side to win the war" (The White House, September 25).

Though the readout did not name Japan, the PRC still seized the propaganda opportunity, including for international audiences. In an English translation of the readout, state run-Xinhua News Agency said that the two leaders honored the history of a "China-U.S. joint fight against Japanese aggression in WWII" (Xinhua, September 25).

Takaichi has handled the issue well. She told reporters that Trump called her after his summit with Xi and explained the meeting in detail. She said that she told Trump that "Japan and the United States have now become each other's most trusted allies" (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, September 26).

Suggesting promise for Takaichi, she has aligned Japan with key Trump administration priorities—higher defense spending by allies, large investments in the United States, and critical mineral supply chain diversification—while avoiding conflict with the U.S. president. As a result, the U.S.–Japan alliance has deepened operationally and technologically despite Tokyo's concerns about U.S. unpredictability.

Conclusion

Almost one year on from the outbreak of its diplomatic dispute with Japan, the PRC shows no interest in pursuing an off-ramp. Instead, it is trying to undermine Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi by wooing her domestic political opponents and depicting her within the United Nations and to the United States as the leader of a revanchist militarist movement.

The PRC's campaign no longer appears to be focused on inducing any change in Takaichi's stance on Taiwan or more broadly towards Beijing. Instead, it looks like an attempt to punish her for challenging a PRC "red line" and make an example out of her to other countries.

The pressure is unlikely to relent as the PRC prepares for the 21st Party Congress in the fall of 2027, when Xi Jinping is widely expected to seek a fourth term. Yet Beijing will also be wary of going too far, with the degree of U.S. support for Japan a crucial factor in the PRC's calculations in the months ahead.

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