16

Japan's 2026 Election and East Asia Security: Implications for Japan's Defense Policy

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Japan's 2026 HR election gave Prime Minister Takaichi's LDP a historic single-party supermajority. This chapter analyzes how East Asia's worsening security environment affected the campaign and the election result's implications for Japan's defense policy. It highlights the political realignment preceding February 8: the end of the LDP's 26-year partnership with Kōmeitō, its new conservative coalition with Nippon Ishin no Kai, and the creation of the left-of-center/moderate Centrist Reform Alliance. Post-election, the LDP's super-majority, the CRA's resounding defeat, Takaichi's continued popularity, and worsening anxieties about Japan's external threat environment provide a tailwind for the LDP-Ishin coalition's ambitious defense agenda. Nevertheless, other factors—including the LDP's relatively low popularity, its lack of an Upper House majority, severe fiscal constraints, and the absence of clear public consensus on several key issues—will caution Japan's leaders against pushing too hard too fast as they seek to bolster deterrence in an increasingly dangerous world.

Introduction

Japan's February 2026 House of Representatives (HR) snap election delivered an overwhelming victory to Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae (2025-) and her right-of-center Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). The bold decision by Japan's first female prime minister to capitalize on her exceptional popularity and dissolve the lower house less than four months into her tenure was an extraordinary gamble. It worked. Once the dust had settled, voters had granted Takaichi's party the largest supermajority in the history of Japan's postwar politics. The LDP's decisive victory—winning 316 of 465 contested seats (68-percent)—also marked a striking reversal of fortunes after the party's abysmal performances in Japan's 2024 HR and 2025 House of Councillors (HC) elections (K. Maeda, 2027).

This chapter examines the role of East Asia security-related concerns in the 2026 campaign and the election's likely implications for Japan's defense policy. Its analysis is intended to complement this volume's U.S.-Japan-alliance- and economic security-focused chapters (Teraoka, 2027; Vekasi, 2027). Although this was not a "national security election," per se, Japan's worsening security environment, severe frictions with China and across the Taiwan Strait,

especially after November 2025, and concerns about the future trajectory of U.S. foreign policy and U.S.-Japan relations one year into Donald Trump's second term meant that foreign affairs and national security issues were front-page news throughout the campaign. This contributed to many voters' desire for strong and stable leadership, which in turn helped the long-ruling LDP—with the uber-popular Takaichi as its standard-bearer. Indeed, pre-election polls showed that foreign policy was arguably Takaichi's strongest issue, with 68-percent of respondents supporting her approach (*Asahi*, January 18, 2026).

Beyond the headline result—the LDP's historic single-party super-majority—four additional characteristics of the 2026 campaign and its outcome carry important implications for Japan's post-election defense policy. First, the LDP won its decisive victory without relying on close electoral cooperation with Kōmeitō, its erstwhile partner in every national election and LDP-led coalition government since 1999. Kōmeitō abandoned the 26-year-old partnership in October 2025, ending a political marriage of convenience that for decades helped the LDP win elections but which also acted as a major constraint on its conservative leaders' national security reform agenda (Liff and Maeda, 2019). Second, within days of Kōmeitō leaving the coalition, Takaichi replaced it with the conservative, Osaka-based Nippon Ishin no Kai (Ishin)—a party that basically shares the LDP's goal of major changes to Japan's defense policy. Third, the abysmal electoral performance of the LDP's de facto principal HR opposition—the Kōmeitō-Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP)'s hastily assembled Centrist Reform Alliance (CRA) —severely weakened the center-left's ability to check the LDP. The CRA's loss of 123 (72-percent) of its pre-election seats is particularly relevant for the present study because the CRA was the only major party whose candidates did not overwhelmingly support efforts to strengthen Japan's defense capabilities (*Asahi*, February 8, 2026).

On the other hand, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that most observers—including even some LDP leaders—attributed the election outcome primarily to Takaichi's personal popularity, not the LDP or its policy agenda. Indeed, a close analysis of the results makes clear that the LDP is far less popular than its new HR super-majority suggests (K. Maeda, 2027; Y. Maeda, 2027). That reality, coupled with various other factors—mixed public sentiment regarding key security-related items on the ruling coalition's agenda (e.g., Article 9 revision), the LDP's lack of a majority in the Upper House, and significant fiscal and other constraints—will make Takaichi and her conservative allies think twice before moving too far too fast. Nevertheless, the combination of the LDP's unprecedented super-majority, the replacement of Kōmeitō with Ishin in the ruling coalition, and the relative collapse of the CRA herald a remarkable redistribution of power within Japan's National Diet. Especially when coupled with an objectively worsening and increasingly unpredictable regional and global security environment, the implications for both national politics and policy decision-making are likely to be significant.

The remainder of this chapter is divided into four sections. To offer historical context for the analysis that follows, the first two sections provide snapshots of the security environment in East Asia and public opinion about related issues on the eve of the election. The next three sections highlight the key characteristics of the 2026 campaign and election result most likely to shape the Takaichi Cabinet's approach to defense policy. A final section concludes.

The Worsening Security Environment in East Asia on the Eve of the Election

Japan is in a very dangerous neighborhood, with Russia, North Korea, the People's Republic of China (below, "China"), and the Taiwan Strait all less than 200 miles away. The South China Sea, through which a significant percentage of Japan's trade passes, is not much further—

just on the other side of Taiwan. Although during the 2026 campaign most prominent politicians focused on Takaichi and domestic issues, the election nevertheless played out against the backdrop of widespread public concern about both Japan's rapidly worsening security environment and its relations with two major powers—China and the United States, Japan's sole treaty ally.

The long-term trends defining Japan's security environment, which successive Japanese governments have officially deemed as "the most severe and complex… since the end of World War II," are well-documented (e.g., Ministry of Defense 2026; Cabinet Secretariat 2022). Primary among Japanese leaders' concerns has been an increasingly unfavorable regional balance of power driven by China's rapid military buildup, coupled with Beijing's provocative activities near Japan-administered territories, such as the Senkaku Islands, which the PRC also claims; the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) large-scale military and paramilitary exercises around Taiwan (e.g., in December 2025); and its repeated use of economic and other forms of coercion against Japan. Other prominent security concerns include North Korea's expanding arsenals of nuclear weapons and increasingly advanced missiles, which in recent years Pyongyang has often tested near—and occasionally, *over*—Japanese territory. Especially since 2022, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, as well as Moscow's deepening military cooperation with China and North Korea, have exacerbated anxieties about the expanding ties among authoritarian powers and their implications for regional and global stability.

External developments in the weeks leading up to the 2026 election served only to exacerbate extant elite and public anxieties about Japan's security environment. Attracting arguably the greatest attention was Beijing's brazen coercion campaign against Japan—ostensibly in response to a controversial, albeit widely mischaracterized, remark by Takaichi in the Diet on November 7, 2025. Under intense questioning by an opposition party Dietmember, Takaichi gave

an off-the-cuff response that at one point basically suggested that aggression by Beijing against Taiwan could prompt a response by Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF) in support of U.S. forces, if Japan's U.S. ally came under attack.[1] Beijing, which considers democratic and independently-governed Taiwan a renegade province, cried foul and demanded a retraction. Takaichi refused to back down, as her remark was consistent with Japan's longstanding policy, which leaves intentionally ambiguous how Japan would respond in the event of a conflict across the Taiwan Strait.[2] She did, however, pledge to avoid any future comments on concrete hypothetical scenarios (*TV Asahi*, 2025).

Nevertheless, Beijing embarked on a high-profile global propaganda campaign apparently intended to paint Japan as the provocateur, to weaken Takaichi domestically, and to isolate Japan internationally. Chinese officials even issued thinly veiled threats; at one point, China's consul-general in Osaka appeared to imply that Takaichi's "filthy head" should be cut off (the tweet was subsequently deleted) (*Asahi*, November 10, 2025). Beijing also engaged in new rounds of economic coercion by restricting tourism to Japan, canceling cultural exchanges, imposing export controls on "dual-use" items, and black-listing Japanese firms with defense industry connections (Lin and Govella, 2025; *BBC News*, February 16, 2026). And it severely limited opportunities for bilateral exchange—even between diplomats. These actions—all nominally punishment for Takaichi's impromptu remark—occurred against the backdrop of years of increased operational pressure on Japan by China's military and coast guard. For instance, in a particularly provocative incident in December 2025, the PLA locked fire-control radar on a Japanese F-15 flying in international airspace near Okinawa (*Japan Times*, December 7, 2025). These Japan-focused

[1] The full exchange between Takaichi and Okada Katsuya is viewable on YouTube (e.g., *Niconico News*, 2025).
[2] For background on Japan's official position on Taiwan's status and "strategic ambiguity," see Liff 2022.

measures also coincided with Beijing's growing coercive pressure on nearby Taiwan, including large-scale PLA and Chinese Coast Guard exercises later that month in waters and airspace near Japan's southwestern islands (Lin, et al., 2026).

In short, the February 2026 election took place at a time when Japan's relations with its top trading partner and next-door neighbor had arguably spiraled to their lowest point in at least a decade, and against the backdrop of longer-term trends in regional security that had already convinced politicians from most major parties of the need for Japan to significantly bolster its defense posture (*Asahi*, February 8, 2026). These regional insecurities were compounded by severe anxieties in Japan about the credibility of U.S. security commitments and U.S. foreign policy more generally—which had increased significantly since Donald Trump's January 2025 return to the White House (see Teraoka, 2027).

Public Anxieties Create a More Permissive Environment

Polls conducted in the weeks leading up to the February 2026 election reveal remarkably close alignment between Japanese leaders and the public as it concerns Japan's worsening security environment. In aggregate, these data suggest that, far from hurting the LDP's electoral prospects, Takaichi's reputation as a defense hawk and her firm stance in response to a sharp uptick in Chinese coercion against Japan after November 7 helped her party—perhaps significantly.

It is important to note that public opinion on the eve of the 2026 election did not reveal a fundamental shift since 2024—largely because anxieties regarding the security environment were already sky-high two years ago. For instance, a *Yomiuri Shimbun* poll conducted in January and February 2026 revealed that overwhelming majorities of the Japanese public felt at least some sense of security threat (*Nihon no anzen hoshō-jō no kyōi*) vis-à-vis China (93-percent), Russia

(87-percent), and North Korea (87-percent) and supported strengthening Japan's defense capabilities (74-percent) (*Yomiuri*, March 26, 2026). Notably, these results were nearly identical to what *Yomiuri* found two years earlier, when a similar poll revealed that 91-, 88-, 87- and 71-percent, respectively, of the public held those views (*Yomiuri*, April 8, 2024). In the weeks immediately before the 2026 election, clear majorities also supported Takaichi's taking a firm stance on China in the wake of backlash from Beijing after her Taiwan remark, even as the public also expressed concern about the economic consequences of the PRC's coercion campaign (*Bloomberg*, December 22, 2025; *Yomiuri*, January 25, 2026). According to one mid-January poll, only 11-percent of respondents thought that Takaichi should retract her statement (*Mainichi*, January 15, 2026).

A long-running triennial Cabinet survey further reveals how much Japanese public opinion has shifted in recent years on defense-related issues as the security environment in East Asia has worsened. The most recent survey—conducted in late 2025—revealed that 81-percent of the Japanese public feared that Japan was in danger of being targeted by an aggressor (*sensō o shikakerareru)* or drawn into a war (*sensō ni makikomareru*). This poll also showed that the major package of security legislation that the Abe government passed in 2015—which at the time was very controversial and generated large-scale protests—now garners support from 73-percent of the public, a ten-point increase since 2022. Remarkably, in late 2025 nearly as many respondents (45-percent) expressed a view that the SDF's size and capabilities should be expanded—a four-point increase since late 2022—as those (50-percent) who thought that it should be maintained at current levels. For long-time followers of Japan's defense politics, perhaps the most striking datapoint was this: only 2.2-percent felt that it should be reduced (Cabinet Secretariat, 2026). These late 2025 data are particularly noteworthy since Japan's defense budget had already surged by more than 50

percent between the 2022 and 2025 surveys, after *decades* of the public having grown accustomed to defense budgets artificially pegged to one percent of GDP. In aggregate, these results suggest widespread—though of course not universal—acceptance of leaders' efforts to strengthen defense capabilities and deterrence as Japan's security environment worsens.

In short, for years before the 2026 election Japan's worsening security environment and more permissive public sentiment had already given Takaichi's predecessors greater space to undertake more ambitious defense reforms to bolster deterrence. That fact, together with the February 2026 election outcome and Takaichi's persistently high post-election Cabinet support rate of over 60-percent (NHK, 2026)—despite her transparently bold pledges to invest heavily in national security—show that her agenda is not nearly as broadly controversial as some opposition politicians and an occasional overseas headline-generating protest in downtown Tokyo might suggest. Even when it comes to China, Japan's top trading partner, polls on the eve of the election suggest that, if anything, Beijing's coercion/pressure campaign backfired—strengthening rather than undermining Takaichi. By refusing to retract her statement and framing China's response as an assault on Japanese sovereignty, while repeatedly calling for open dialogue to stabilize ties, Takaichi further consolidated her image as a strong leader. Even Ishin party leader Yoshimura Hirofumi stated that only Takaichi can "hold her own (*matomo ni watariau*) against President Trump, Xi Jinping, and Putin" (Yoshimura, 2026).

Political Realignment: the LDP Replaces a "Brake" (Kōmeitō) with an "Accelerator" (Ishin)

Arguably the most significant subplot in the 2026 election concerning Takaichi and the LDP's post-election defense reform ambitions received remarkably little attention overseas. On October 10, 2025, Kōmeitō ended its 26-year-old partnership with the LDP. Although the ostensible catalyst was disagreements over political funding transparency (*Asahi*, October 10, 2025), tensions had been growing between the parties for years. This was especially true when it came to the conservative LDP's defense reform agenda—an area where LDP policies often angered Kōmeitō's pacifistic support base (a lay Buddhist movement known as Sōka Gakkai) (Liff and Maeda, 2019).

This was a very big deal, as the LDP-Komeito partnership had been a fundamental feature of Japanese politics for the past quarter-century—one which also exerted major effects on Japan's defense trajectory, even during periods when the LDP enjoyed single-party majorities in both Diet houses. Put simply, unique features of Japan's electoral system and the two parties' partnership allowed Kōmeitō and its pacifist support base to function as a "brake" (*hadome*) on the LDP's defense policy ambitions. LDP leaders grudgingly tolerated this arrangement because they judged that Kōmeitō's willingness to turn out its voters to support the LDP was a critical but inconspicuous enabler of much of the larger party's electoral success, including its single-party lower house majority throughout the nearly eight years (2012-2020) of stable LDP-Komeito rule under Prime Minister Abe Shinzō (Liff and Maeda, 2019).

In short, one of the most consequential and under-appreciated aspects of the 2026 election was that it marked the first time since the 1990s that the LDP did not engage in electoral

cooperation with Kōmeitō in a lower house campaign. Kōmeitō's past support had been considered so consequential, in fact, that after it left the coalition in October some experts predicted electoral catastrophe for the LDP; especially in single-member districts (SMDs) where Kōmeitō's ability to mobilize its supporters had in recent elections put many LDP candidates over the top. For instance, one analyst estimated that 52 of the seats that the LDP won in the 2024 HR election were due to its partnership with Kōmeitō (*Bunshun Online*, 2025).

Nevertheless, those predictions proved to be wrong. In the 2026 HR election the LDP *increased* its seat total by a historic margin: from 198 to 316. The fact that it achieved such an overwhelming victory without relying on Kōmeitō carries at least three important, if indirect, implications for Japan's defense policy.

First and foremost, the election demonstrated to LDP leaders that cooperation with Kōmeitō was no longer a necessary condition for a single-party majority. Accordingly, at least in the short term, Takaichi's cabinet is likely to exercise less caution on defense policy reforms than its predecessors for the simple reason that the LDP no longer has direct electoral incentives to make concessions to Kōmeitō (and its pacifist support base).

Providing further impetus for more ambitious defense reforms is a second consequence of Kōmeitō's decision to leave the ruling coalition: Takaichi quickly replaced it with a new coalition partner, the Osaka-based Ishin (Zenkyo, 2027). Although, unlike Kōmeitō, Ishin did not offer the LDP obvious electoral benefits—on the contrary, in the 2026 election the LDP and Ishin actually clashed in 85 SMDs (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, February 9, 2026)—it is far more ideologically aligned with Takaichi and the more conservative wing of the LDP on defense policy than Kōmeitō ever was (Taniguchi, Takamiya, Mayanagi, and Sogabe, 2027). In fact, Ishin is a reformist conservative party whose positions on several key defense-related issues are even more forward-leaning than

the LDP mainstream. Put another way, if Kōmeitō for 26 years functioned as a "brake" on the LDP in the defense policy space, then Ishin will function as an "accelerator. For example, Ishin was the primary driver behind the new coalition's joint call in October 2025 for submarines with vertical missile-launch systems and "next-generation propulsion" (*jisedai no dōryoku*; widely interpreted to suggest nuclear power) and for abolishing longstanding prohibitions on exporting lethal equipment overseas (LDP-Ishin Coalition Agreement, 2025). Additionally, Ishin has called for a far more consequential revision of Article 9 of the Constitution—eliminating the second clause—than that proposed by recent LDP prime ministers, who have generally advocated for leaving the existing clauses untouched and merely adding a third clause explicitly stipulating the SDF's constitutionality.[3]

A third important if indirect consequence of the LDP-Kōmeitō break-up was that it eventually led Kōmeitō to merge with the LDP's main opposition—the left-of-center CDP—and establish the new "Centrist Reform Alliance" as the primary challenger to the LDP (and Ishin) in the 2026 HR election (Ikeda, Klein, and McLaughlin, 2027). The merger, which took place just one week before Takaichi officially dissolved the lower house, backfired spectacularly. The CRA's lower house strength dropped from 172 to 49 seats, significantly weakening left-of-center/centrist forces in the Diet. Though the CRA platform was far from left-wing in its defense orientation—it called for "realistic security policies" and "strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance," inter alia—surveys of its candidates' positions suggest that, had it taken power, Japan's defense reforms would have been more moderate than they will be under the LDP and Ishin (CRA, 2026; *Asahi*, 2026b; see Matsumoto, 2027 for a comparison of formal party platforms).

[3] See, for example, Ishin's stand-alone September 2025 proposal (Nippon Ishin no Kai, 2025). Ironically, the LDP's more moderate position was inherited from Kōmeitō (Liff and Maeda 2019, p. 68).

Despite the CRA's loss, the merger still has political and, potentially, longer-term policy significance—whether or not the CRA persists for long. In their hastily-arranged joint policy platform announced on January 19—the same day that Takaichi announced her plans to call a snap election—CRA leaders called for a "Realistic Foreign & Defense Policy and Deepening Debate on Constitutional Revision." Most notably, their platform recognized the constitutionality of exercising the right of self-defense in "survival-threatening situations" (*sonritsu kiki jitai*) (CRA, 2026). This marked a major shift toward the center on defense issues for many erstwhile CDP members, as the CDP had for years criticized parts of the 2015 security legislation as unconstitutional. This concession became the latest example of a progressive party tacking toward the center on defense-related issues—a recurring theme of Japan's post-Cold War politics.

In sum, the LDP's landslide election victory and the political realignment that preceded it carry important implications for the pace, scale, and substance of Japan's defense policy reforms. On balance, this political realignment will embolden Takaichi and the LDP's more conservative wing. Although as a junior coalition partner Ishin is unlikely to exercise as much leverage over the LDP as Kōmeitō was able to, it will pressure Takaichi and the LDP to be *more*, rather than less, ambitious in the defense space. Indeed, Ishin leaders have already applied the party's self-characterization as a reform "accelerator" (*akuseruyaku*) to the national security proposals they submitted to the government after the election (Nippon Ishin no Kai, 2026). This terminology draws a clear metaphorical and practical contrast with Kōmeitō's role as a self-styled "brake" on LDP ambitions.

And yet… the LDP is (still) not as strong as it looks

A recurring theme across much media and scholarly analysis of Japanese politics during the era of large single-party lower house majorities under Prime Minister Abe (2012-2020) was claims of LDP "dominance" of Japanese politics and policy decision-making (e.g., Pekkanen, et al., 2018) Such claims often obfuscated the LDP's relatively low popularity, dependence on Kōmeitō for its electoral success, and other weaknesses—realities that, in aggregate, caused Abe and his allies to repeatedly dial back the party's policy ambitions when governing. In the defense space, for instance, this pragmatic caution manifested in Abe's reluctance to break Japan's decades-old normative ceiling on defense spending (one-percent of GDP) and his refusal as prime minister to call for the fundamental revision of Article 9 that he and other LDP leaders had coveted for decades. Both were goals he had personally hoped for before becoming prime minister, but which he was unable to achieve once he took up the post—despite the LDP's large single-party majorities in both houses (Liff, 2021).

There is no question that the LDP's net gain of 118 seats in the February 2026 election marked a striking reversal of fortunes after its poor showing in Japan's two previous national elections (K. Maeda 2027). However, it is best not to misinterpret the LDP's remarkable 68-percent super-majority as a permanent situation, much less as a sign of overwhelming popular support for its policy agenda. The result surprised many observers, including commentators who only a few months earlier had expected a devastating LDP loss, especially after the LDP-Kōmeitō coalition collapsed in October. Multiple LDP politicians have acknowledged popular excitement about Takaichi—Japan's first female prime minister—as a greater factor in the electoral outcome than support for themselves, their party, or its policy agenda (*Asahi*, February 9, 2026; *Yomiuri*, February 11, 2026). Indeed, at the time of the election, polls consistently showed that Takaichi was

far more popular than her party, which has for years averaged roughly 30-percent popular support. That level of support is often less than the percentage of voters who identify as unaffiliated (NHK, 2026). The LDP also benefited from the hastily-arranged alliance between the CDP and Kōmeitō, which turned off many moderate and progressive voters, as did several abrupt policy concessions that the CDP made (Jimbo, 2026). Needless to say, even how long Takaichi's popularity will last is an open question.

Providing additional evidence of lukewarm public support for the LDP and its agenda were the unprecedentedly large amplification and shrinking effects in SMDs. These provided, respectively, a tailwind for the LDP and a powerful headwind against the CRA. Once the dust had settled, the LDP managed to capture 86 percent (248 of 289) of SMD seats despite attracting only a 49-percent vote share. Conversely, centrist parties won only two percent (7 of 289) of SMDs despite receiving a 22-percent vote share. The 37- and 19-percentage point gaps, respectively, were the largest recorded since the introduction of the mixed-member proportional representation system in 1996 (*Mainichi*, February 16, 2026).

In short, although there is no question that the LDP was the overwhelming favorite in the election, it remains far less popular than its Diet seat totals suggest. Its overall vote shares were comparable to elections during the 2014-2021 period, and it benefited significantly from opposition votes being split across multiple candidates (K. Maeda 2027). Coupled with numerous competing domestic spending priorities and a lack of a clear popular consensus on tax increases to fund increased defense spending, constitutional revision, and the substance of forward-leaning defense reforms, these realities are likely to counsel caution as the Takaichi government embarks on a historic transformation of Japan's defense strategy.

Conclusion: A Significant Tailwind for the LDP's Defense Reform Agenda (with Caveats)

It is difficult to analytically isolate the impact of national security concerns or East Asian geopolitics on Japan's February 2026 election. Various polls in the weeks before the election revealed a high-level of interest in foreign and security policy, but few respondents flagged it as their top priority. Regardless, Takaichi received high marks for her performance to that point—clear evidence that, if anything, it was a winning issue for her with most voters. Also enabling the Takaichi government's efforts to pursue an ambitious defense reform agenda will be public opinion more broadly, which for years has revealed widespread and worsening anxieties about Japan's security environment—especially in East Asia—coupled with greater support, or at least reduced opposition to, efforts to bolster Japan's defense capabilities and strengthen deterrence against external threats. Looking forward, the LDP's new supermajority, the end of its electoral dependence on Kōmeitō, the formation of a new conservative coalition with Ishin, and a security environment more likely to get worse than better all provide a tailwind for Takaichi and her party.

As of this writing (spring 2026), developments during Takaichi's first seven months as prime minister leave little doubt that her government will further accelerate progress along the basic defense reform trajectory inherited by successive LDP-led governments going back at least to 2013, and which traces some of its roots back to the Democratic Party of Japan governments (2009-2012) or earlier. Behind that defense reform trajectory has been a broad consensus among political elites in Japan: first, that Japan's security environment is severe, and getting worse; second, that bolstering deterrence is critically important to prevent what government officials typically refer to as "unilateral changes to the status quo by force or coercion," be it in the East China Sea, across the Taiwan Strait, or further afield; and third, that the best way to strengthen

deterrence is a three-track approach articulated in Japan's 2013 and 2022 National Security Strategies: bolstering Japan's own defense capabilities; strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance, and deepening Japan's security partnerships with other U.S. treaty allies and partners (Liff 2023). Takaichi is set to increase the speed of travel along those tracks in the run-up to an announced revision of Japan's major strategic documents by the end of 2026, but a radical disjuncture in Japan's nearly two-decade-old defense reform trajectory seems unlikely.

Although the domestic political realignment that unfolded between October 2025 and February 2026 is significant, it is important to stress that a desire to bolster Japan's defense capabilities is not limited to Takaichi and other famously "right-wing" or "hawkish" politicians. Indeed, over the past decade-plus, more liberal and moderate voters and politicians in the LDP, Kōmeitō, and other parties have also been supportive. Most notably, this includes the historic "peace and security" legislation in 2015—spearheaded by the famously conservative "defense hawk" Abe—and the even more ambitious 2022 national defense strategy and defense buildup program—pushed through by the famously moderate "dove" Prime Minister Kishida Fumio (2021-2024). Even more liberal politicians in other parties, including past leaders of the (now defunct) left-of-center DPJ and its contemporary offshoots (e.g., the CDP), were basically on board with some of these policy shifts. In fact, one of them, Noda Yoshihiko, a former DPJ-era prime minister (2011-2012) and the CRA's co-leader during the 2026 campaign, aligns relatively closely with many in the LDP mainstream on national security matters. No wonder, then, that under his leadership the CDP sought to align with Kōmeitō on defense policy via the CRA's joint platform.

In an analysis soon after the 2026 HR election, Ken Jimbo assesses that "The result is best understood not as an ideological shift, but as an electoral endorsement of leadership suited to a faster and more demanding world" (Jimbo, 2026). Even before the election, Takaichi had

announced plans to carry out a major revision before year's end of Japan's December 2022 national security strategy, national defense strategy, and the defense buildup program—significantly ahead of schedule. She may also push for a moderate revision of Article 9 (adding a line stipulating the SDF's constitutionality) and other policy shifts. She will also likely be emboldened on foreign policy by external developments, as well. Takaichi's firm response to Beijing's pressure, which continues unabated, burnished her credentials as a strong leader, and, together with Beijing's continuing efforts to coerce Tokyo and Taipei, give her additional reasons to call for further steps to protect Japan's security in a volatile world. Also pushing in this direction are concerns about U.S. foreign policy under Trump and pressure from Japan's sole treaty ally to contribute to greater "burden-sharing" (Teraoka 2027). If anything, the 2026 election result is likely to lead Japan's U.S. ally to expect even more. Indeed, in April 2026 testimony, a Pentagon official expressed "optimism" about "Takaichi's commitment to increase Japan's defense capabilities, especially following her party's landslide victory" (Noh, 2026, 4).

That all said, the balance of power in Japan's HR is not the only factor that will shape Takaichi's and future prime ministers' political calculations regarding defense reforms. She and other LDP leaders know that their popular support is significantly weaker among the public than their new HR seat total suggests. Confronting a sobering security environment, the public may be on board in the abstract with efforts to strengthen deterrence. Even so, on the most contentious issues—e.g., possible revision of Article 9 or the introduction of nuclear-powered submarines—leaders are likely to tread more carefully. For the foreseeable future, they will also be buffeted by numerous structural headwinds, including fiscal and demographic challenges and a minority of seats in the upper house, as they consider increased defense spending amid a sea of other priorities, a desire for tax cuts, and a persistently weak yen.

Although the foreign commentariat is wont to compare Takaichi's conservatism and alleged "hawkishness" to Abe, it is important not to forget that one of the defining features of Abe's second stint as prime minister was remarkable pragmatism. This included a willingness to make significant concessions in the national security space, despite his personal policy preferences and the LDP's single-party majority in *both* the upper and lower houses (Liff, 2023). Several choices in Takaichi's first months as prime minister—including the decision not to visit Yasukuni Shine and her robust outreach to Korea's progressive President Lee Jae Myung—suggest that she has a pragmatic streak, as well. That all said, unlike Abe, Takaichi will not have to make concessions to Kōmeitō. On the contrary, she will be negotiating with a new, more conservative coalition partner pressing the LDP from the right. With Takaichi having stated upon dissolving the HR that she "wants to boldly tackle the challenge of daring policies and reforms that may divide national opinion, without fear of criticism" (Takaichi, 2026), she seems determined to be bold and ambitious. Yet how far the public (and moderates in her own party) will support specific policies remains to be seen.

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