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The real reason behind China's fury toward Japan's Takaichi

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Beijing — Weeks into the job, Japan's new leader has come face-to-face with what it means to cross China's red line on Taiwan.

In the days since Sanae Takaichi suggested her country could respond militarily if China were to move to take control of Taiwan by force, Beijing

has pulled out its economic pressure playbook: warning its citizens against travel and study there, suggesting there'll be no market in China for Japan's seafood exports, and unleashing a wave of wall-to-wall nationalist fervor pointed at the prime minister.

The furor appears carefully calibrated to send a warning to Japan – and other countries in the region – of what could happen if they even consider taking a stance at odds with China on Taiwan, the self-ruled democratic island that Beijing claims as its own territory.

But the spat, which shows no sign of abating roughly two weeks on, also reveals something else: Beijing's deep-seated concerns about the potential for changing military postures in Asia – as US allies ramp up defense spending and coordination in the face of its own **rising military might**.

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No other country piques those concerns like Japan, whose Imperial Army in the 20th century invaded, occupied and waged atrocities on China and, decades earlier, colonized Taiwan – key pain points in China's so-called “century of humiliation” at the hands of foreign powers.



This image taken from a video released by the Taiwan Ministry of National Defense shows what it says are Chinese war ships conducting drills off the coast of western Taiwan on February 26.
(Taiwan Ministry of National Defense/AP/File)

Anti-Japanese sentiment has simmered in the country since that time – flaring up and gaining traction in recent years with nationalist hardliners' voices becoming increasingly mainstream in China under strongman leader Xi Jinping.

Reinforcing the ruling Communist Party's longstanding determination to ensure history can never repeat itself, Xi has rapidly modernized China's military and grown its global influence.

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Now, in Beijing's eyes, Takaichi's comments reveal that Japan does not respect the vast rebalancing of power that's positioned China as an ascendant superpower – and that it has military ambitions that could threaten China's rise.

"For the first time, a Japanese leader has expressed ambitions for armed intervention in Taiwan and issued a military threat against China," a commentary in the Communist Party mouthpiece People's Daily said earlier this week. "Behind this lies the dangerous attempt by Japan's right-wing forces to break free from the constraints of the pacifist constitution and seek the status of a 'military power.'"

Japan's 'militarism'

Japan has made a sweeping shift in its security posture in recent years, veering away from the pacifist constitution imposed on it by the United States in the aftermath of World War II, to boost its defense budget and acquire counterstrike capabilities.

That's come as Beijing has ramped up its military activities in the region, including around Taiwan – and as the US has pushed its allies for more burden-sharing on defense spending.

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Previous Japanese leaders avoided discussing Taiwan in the context of a military response, but politicians – particularly among right wingers in

Takaichi's party – are increasingly wary of the implications for Tokyo if Beijing attacks Taiwan, which sits strategically to Japan's south. This sentiment has resulted in a growing impetus to further expand Japan's defense spending and even change the constitution.

Now Takaichi, a hawkish figure who has previously drawn Beijing's ire for questioning some of the narratives around imperial Japan's culpability for its war atrocities, has taken the step of speaking plainly on the Taiwan issue. In the first days of her term, she also called for closer security ties with the US and is moving to accelerate the country's defense build-up.



Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi answers a question during a House of Representatives Budget Committee session in Tokyo on November 7. (Kyodo/AP)

In Beijing's eyes, **according to** a social media account linked to the Chinese military, such efforts run the risk of seeing "the 'ghost' of militarism" reemerge "to wreak havoc in the world."

And that's why some on the Japanese side feel that Beijing is lashing out now "to box Takaichi in and put her on the back foot early on – so she will be more reluctant to push forward on Japan's investment in defense," according to Chong Ja Ian, an associate professor at the National University of Singapore.

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Japanese troops killed more than 200,000 unarmed civilians during its occupation, and raped and tortured tens of thousands of women and girls, in what is known as the Nanjing Massacre, one of the most notorious wartime atrocities of the 20th century. Japan has repeatedly apologized and expressed remorse for its wartime atrocities.

That era, however, has been front and center in China this year as Beijing marks the 80th anniversary of the end of the World War II, when Japan's surrender to Allied Forces freed China from its occupation and saw Taiwan handed over to the Nationalist-run Chinese government.

The Chinese Communist Party established the People's Republic of China in 1949 after emerging victorious from a civil war, while the defeated Nationalists retreated to Taiwan. Beijing has used the anniversary to justify its claim to the island – and broadcast concern about what it sees as Japan's turn toward militarism.

China sees taking control of Taiwan as a core piece of the "national rejuvenation" that it must complete by mid-century – a goal that, if Beijing

decides must be achieved by force, could be heavily complicated by a stronger Japan.

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For Beijing, Takaichi's comments can be summed up as "the wrong person, talking about the wrong thing" at the "wrong time," according to Wang Yiwei, director of the Institute of International Affairs at Renmin University in Beijing.

'Defending its sovereignty'

Despite Tokyo dispatching an envoy to Beijing earlier this week to calm the dispute, Beijing has showed no signs of dialing back its deluge of rhetoric.

It's instead insisting Tokyo retracts the comment – a position that offers neither side an easy way to find an off-ramp.

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In the meantime, China has continued to stoke nationalist feelings, including sabre-rattling from China's military, which on Wednesday released a video titled "Don't be too cocky." Without mentioning Japan by name, it includes a rap crooning: "We've honed our skills through rigorous training, how can we allow you to be so cocky?"

But it may be an image of Japan's foreign ministry envoy Masaaki Kanai and his Chinese counterpart Liu Jinsong following their meeting in Beijing earlier this week that underscores why China won't want to ease up pressure just yet.

That image – showing Liu standing straight with his hands in his pockets, talking to Kanai who tilts his head forward while listening – has gone viral across Chinese social media.

Commentators have referred to the Japanese diplomat as "bowing," while they hailed the choice of Liu's attire – a suit whose style is associated with

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The symbolism, it appears, was no coincidence: "China's stance in defending its sovereignty remains unchanged for a century," said a caption on a post from state broadcaster CCTV.

CNN's Hanako Montgomery in Tokyo contributed to this report.



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