OPINION

Japan is preparing for the worst. Taiwan is just preparing excuses

As Tokyo sharpens its deterrence, Taipei stays trapped in dysfunction and denial



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Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi, left, and Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te. (Nikkei montage/Source photos by Akitoshi Sugiura and Sae Kamae)

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There were no surprises in the meeting between Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi and U.S. President Donald Trump in Washington this month. Even Trump's comparison of the U.S.-Israeli bombing of Iran to Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor caused only an awkward moment -- Trump-style humor has long ceased to be a surprise to the world.

The real surprise is this: While Japan is prepared to address the worsening security environment in our region, Taiwan is not. Challenged from within and threatened from without, Taiwan is dangerously exposed by a political leadership vacuum.

I am a Pangcah Indigenous woman. Indigenous people in Taiwan have survived Dutch colonizers, Qing administrators, Japanese imperial rule, and the Chinese Nationalist (Kuomintang) government's authoritarian decades. We know what it means to live under the rule of foreign powers without our consent. I served as spokesperson for former President Tsai Ing-wen's government and before that as a legislator. I have spent the past year studying and reporting on security and international affairs, and have spoken at length with some of Japan's most respected security analysts. What I have heard from them, and what I observe in Taiwan, has left me with a feeling I can only describe as alarm.

There are things Japan cannot do, such as sending warships to escort vessels through the Strait of Hormuz, but there are things it is doing. Increasing its defense budget and strengthening its armed forces was one of Takaichi's defining campaign promises, and steps taken to double the defense budget by 2027 are a strong argument for U.S. commitment to security cooperation. Weathering a "wolf-warrior" information campaign from China, Takaichi's communications team has distilled her platform into "defending the nation," a simple idea understood by 8-year-olds and 80-year-olds alike. Japan is confronting the most severe geopolitical environment it has faced since the end of World War II, and according to Defense Minister Shinjiro Koizumi, even this increase amounts to no more than "the minimum necessary expenditure." The Japanese public is convinced.

Taiwan's situation, in contrast, is concerning, and the Chinese Communist Party is pressing ever closer. In 2025, Chinese military aircraft conducted 5,200 incursions around Taiwan over the course of the year, with more than half crossing the median line of the Taiwan Strait. On March 18, while Japan's prime minister was in Washington arguing for regional security, Taiwan detected 24 sorties by CCP warplanes, every single one crossing the median line. Is Taiwan ready? Regrettably, I do not believe it is.

At the end of Tsai's eight-year tenure, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) managed to hold on to the presidency in 2024 but lost its legislative majority. Since then, confrontation and deadlock have worsened. The opposition majority has been relentlessly on offense, while the governing party caucus, two years on, is showing signs of fatigue.

On March 6, more than 20 legislators from the ruling DPP were absent from the chamber during a defense budget vote. Some were attending local events. Some had traveled to Japan to watch Taiwan's national baseball team play. The DPP was outnumbered 29 to 54 by the opposition on a vote about Taiwan's survival. The budget proposed by the government, which would bring the most significant increase in defense investment in a generation, had already been blocked more than 10 times. While the legislators farmed likes on social media supporting the team, opposition news shows ridiculed them. Meanwhile, the problems run deeper.

Taiwan lacks energy resilience. About 17% of Taiwan's electricity comes from natural gas imported from Qatar. When war broke out in Iran, Taiwan's natural gas reserves covered only two weeks' supply. Nuclear power once provided 12%, but, following the Fukushima disaster, DPP administrations phased it out (as spokesperson, I defended that decision), and the last reactor was shut down in 2025. This week President Lai Ching-te announced plans to resume nuclear power production, but no reactor can be back online for at least 18 months.



The entrance to the Legislative Yuan, Taiwan's parliament, in Taipei on Jan. 12, 2024. © Getty Images

Japan, on the other hand, responded to Fukushima by making its reactors safer and, more recently, expanding nuclear production. (Years ago, Japanese legislators privately told me they were surprised about Taiwan's decision to phase out nuclear energy. It seemed foolish to them.) If Taiwan were subjected to a CCP naval blockade, power shortages would quickly become a fatal vulnerability.

Taiwan's military preparedness is equally concerning. Weapons bought from the U.S. remain delayed in delivery, while domestic production is only starting to grow. In the wars in Ukraine and Iran, drones have become the primary weapon of first-strike operations, yet Taiwan's current annual military drone production stands at around 10,000. Compared to Ukraine, which makes about 4.5 million, Taiwanese production is sorely lacking, compounded by the absence of systems integration capability and combat experience. Compared to its powerful semiconductor industry, Taiwan's defense manufacturing sector stands out for its modest capabilities.

Taiwan's information environment is also compromised. Whereas in Japan increasing the defense budget has been successfully framed as "defending the nation," in Taiwan the opposition has relentlessly repeated the CCP's narrative, condemning Taiwanese military buildup as a rejection of the peace offer China claims to be extending. That "peace offer," however, requires Taiwan to accept that it is part of China. It is an extraordinarily dangerous framing that is amplified by opposition media and China's "net army" operating freely across Taiwan's open internet. Political deadlock in the legislature is handing the opposition the opening it needs.

In the wake of the Takaichi-Trump meeting, Taiwan issued press releases thanking the U.S. and Japan for their willingness to defend peace in the Taiwan Strait. Officials published articles echoing the American doctrine of "peace through strength." The government's messaging has emphasized Taiwan's resilience. But this amounts largely to a PR effort. Words come fast, action comes slow. Taiwan is caught in the kind of political vacuum that democratic systems with checks and balances are uniquely vulnerable to, one that Chinese information warfare has helped create and continues to exploit.

I understand the fatigue. Taiwan has been under pressure for decades, and the grinding repetition of threat and crisis desensitizes us to the risk. But fatigue is not a neutral condition. It is precisely the condition Beijing is trying to produce. Building up defense capabilities is the necessary answer to aggression, but it is not the only one. Democratic institutions that function are themselves a form of deterrence. Every time Taiwan's legislature performs its dysfunction in public, that signal weakens. If the president cannot find a common ground for society to rally around, and allows China's preferred narrative to spread, the country will only become more vulnerable and more tempting to a CCP that is already accelerating its timeline for unification.

Japan under Takaichi is prepared to play a more active role in the region. Can Taiwan not do the same? The administration must keep working to grow our defense capabilities, while investing in more robust responses in the information sphere. To break the legislative deadlock, the president should not be afraid of making a deal with the devil.

Taiwan can be a valuable asset in the eyes of its allies, rather than a liability. That would be the best surprise.

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