

JAPAN, TAIWAN, CHINA, AND THE EMERGING 2028 STRATEGIC TEST

BY PAUL N. GOLDSTEIN

Paul N. Goldstein (paul.goldstein@ptbglobaladvisors.com) is President and CEO of PTB Global Advisors and an Adjunct Senior Fellow at Pacific Forum. He leads PTB's strategic advisory work for US, Japanese, and other governments and businesses integrating geopolitical analysis, intelligence, and high-level decision-making support. He draws on his experience in national security, great-power competition, and US policy in the Indo-Pacific.

East Asia is entering an era in which military balance, economic resilience, technological leadership, and alliance politics are no longer separate policy domains but interconnected elements of a broader contest over regional order. This evolving environment is reshaping assumptions about the timing and drivers of a potential Taiwan crisis.

While many Western analysts have focused on 2027 and key People's Liberation Army modernization milestones, the more consequential question may be how Beijing evaluates the political conditions under which military capabilities might be employed. In this context, Taiwan's 2028 presidential election appears to be a greater strategic inflection point than any single military benchmark. Writing in *Foreign Affairs* on Sept. 25, former CIA and National Security Council China specialist Jonathan Czin argues that Beijing is focused on Taiwan's political trajectory rather than immediate military action. At the same time, a former US naval attaché in Beijing, who continues to travel regularly to China and meet with Chinese officials, offers a different perspective.

In conversation with me, he has argued that Washington and Beijing may be moving toward a period of managed coexistence resembling the strategic stability that emerged following normalization in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Within such a framework, the most important long-term question may become not Taiwan itself but Japan's place within any emerging US-China understanding.

Taiwan remains the focal point of regional tensions, but its future may depend increasingly on broader questions involving China, Japan, American commitments, and Taiwan's own democratic politics.

Japan and the Taiwan question

The election of Takaichi Sanae marks one of the most significant shifts in Japanese strategic thinking since Abe Shinzo's second tenure as prime minister (2012-2020). Takaichi has embraced higher defense spending, expanded military capabilities, stronger Indo-Pacific partnerships, and a security agenda built on the assumption that Taiwan's security and Japan's security are inseparable.

She has repeatedly argued that conflict in the Taiwan Strait would threaten Japanese trade routes, energy supplies, and national security. Her position builds directly upon Abe's assertion that a Taiwan contingency would become a Japanese contingency.

For Taiwan's governing Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), Takaichi strengthens deterrence and expands Taiwan's integration into a broader democratic security network. Beijing, however, continues to portray such developments as evidence that Japan is moving toward a more assertive security posture while failing to adequately address its wartime legacy.

Taiwan's Deep Blue response and the 2028 election

The strongest opposition to Takaichi's approach comes from Taiwan's Deep Blue current within the Kuomintang (KMT). Figures such as Ma Ying-jeou, Hung Hsiu-chu, and Chang Ya-chung emphasize Chinese cultural identity, expanded cross-Strait dialogue, and eventual reconciliation with Beijing. They argue that Taiwan should not become the front line of a broader confrontation between China and an emerging coalition of regional democracies.

To Deep Blue supporters, Takaichi's vision risks placing Taiwan at the center of a great-power struggle. To Takaichi's supporters, stronger regional partnerships are precisely what prevent coercion and preserve peace.

The rise of Cheng Li-wun as KMT chair has introduced a new variable into cross-Strait politics. Czin argues that Beijing increasingly sees political pathways as offering greater opportunities than immediate military confrontation. Cheng's emphasis on dialogue and renewed engagement has created expectations in Beijing that Taiwan's political trajectory could eventually become more favorable.

Yet support for explicitly pro-Beijing policies remains limited within Taiwan, and divisions inside the KMT remain significant. As a result, Beijing's expectations remain uncertain.

This is why the 2028 election looms so large. A KMT victory could validate Beijing's strategy of patience, political pressure, and economic engagement. A fourth consecutive DPP victory could convince Xi Jinping that years of coercion and persuasion have failed to move Taiwan politically closer to the mainland.

A different strategic perspective: The question is Japan

Where the former US naval attaché in Beijing differs from conventional Taiwan-focused discussions is in his contention that Taiwan may not be the central strategic question at all.

He argues that President Trump has not fundamentally altered longstanding US policy and remains broadly within the framework established through earlier understandings between Washington and Beijing. In his view, Washington and Beijing may be moving toward a period of managed coexistence resembling the stability that followed normalization. If such a framework develops through continued Trump-Xi engagement, the central strategic question becomes Japan.

In that context, Takaichi has elevated Taiwan's security from a regional concern to a core Japanese national security interest. Her position complicates any future US-China condominium and raises the question of how Tokyo fits into a more stable US-China relationship.

The Xiangshan Forum and competing regional visions

These competing visions were visible at China's Xiangshan Forum in September 2026. Taiwan emerged not simply as a territorial dispute but as a debate over the future structure of Asian order.

Former Japanese Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio, a longstanding advocate of closer relations with Beijing, criticized Takaichi's Taiwan-related comments, arguing that they had worsened China-Japan relations and raised questions in Beijing about Japan's commitment to the 1972 Japan-China Joint Communiqué and the one China policy. His remarks reflected the view that Taiwan should not become the organizing principle of East Asian security.

The Trump-Xi dynamic

The Trump-Xi relationship increasingly provides the framework within which these developments occur. The former US Naval Attaché argues that Washington and Beijing may be exploring a form of strategic coexistence involving parallel economic, technological, and political systems. Under this interpretation, Taiwan becomes less an immediate trigger for war than a test of whether broader US-China competition can be managed without escalation.

Czin, however, warns that Xi's patience depends heavily on the belief that political developments after 2028 could improve China's position. If Taiwan's voters reject that path through another DPP victory, Beijing may conclude that continued patience no longer serves its interests.

A Fourth DPP victory and Beijing's escalation dilemma

A fourth consecutive DPP victory would reinforce the belief in Beijing that years of pressure have failed to alter Taiwan's political direction. As Adm. Samuel Paparo warned at the 2025 Honolulu Defense Forum, China's military activities around Taiwan are "not exercises; they are rehearsals" for forced unification. His comments reflected growing concern within US Indo-Pacific Command that Beijing is steadily developing the operational capabilities required to coerce, isolate, or potentially seize Taiwan.

However, a DPP victory would not necessarily produce an invasion. More likely would be increased gray-zone pressure through maritime restrictions, inspections, transportation disruptions, economic coercion, and other measures designed to alter the status quo without crossing the threshold into open conflict.

For the United States, Japan, and other regional actors, the principal danger may not be a sudden amphibious assault but a prolonged campaign of coercion that gradually raises the risk of a broader crisis.

Conclusion: 2028 as the real inflection point

The central strategic dispute in East Asia is no longer simply about Taiwan. It is about the future regional order.

Takaichi's Japan envisions Taiwan embedded within a democratic security framework. The Deep Blue wing of the KMT favors dialogue and accommodation with Beijing. Xi Jinping appears willing, for now, to test whether political developments can achieve what coercion has not. The Trump administration appears interested in maintaining a degree of strategic stability with China.

Underlying all of these calculations is the question raised by the former US Naval Attaché in Beijing: if Washington and Beijing succeed in establishing a more stable relationship, where does Japan fit?

The answer may ultimately determine whether Taiwan remains primarily a political issue after 2028 or once again becomes the most dangerous flashpoint in the international system.

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