

# FEATURE

WorldBeijing Letter

## Wolf Warrior diplomacy returns as China bares its teeth in clash with Japan

Tokyo faces travel bans, trade restrictions and mounting pressure after PM's remarks on Taiwan



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in Beijing

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China suspended seafood imports from Japan after prime minister Sanae Takaichi's recent remarks about Taiwan. Photograph: EPA

Two weeks after an [unscripted remark](#) about [Taiwan](#) from [Japan's](#) new prime minister [Sanae Takaichi](#) drove relations

between Tokyo and Beijing into crisis, there is no sign of a resolution of the dispute. [China](#) has advised its citizens against travelling to Japan,

effectively banned Japanese seafood and withdrawn from circulation a number of films already approved for showing in Chinese cinemas.

Chinese tourists make up about a quarter of foreign visitors to Japan each year and the travel ban could mean a loss of €12 billion in revenue annually. This comes at a time when [Japan's economy](#) is already reeling from the impact of [Donald Trump's tariffs](#) and the prime minister is struggling to introduce measures to stimulate the economy without spooking the bond markets.

The row began when Takaichi told a parliamentary committee that if Beijing were to use force against Taiwan, it could be a “situation threatening Japan’s survival”. Her choice of words was important because that is the precise formulation that would allow Japan to deploy its military forces against China.

Few have ever doubted that, if Beijing attacked Taiwan and the United States came to the island’s aid, Japan would join the American war effort. But none of Takaichi’s predecessors has said so explicitly.

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Beijing is demanding that the prime minister should withdraw the remarks and it rejects Tokyo’s insistence that they did not represent a change in policy. Although Takaichi may wish she had never said those words, it would be politically difficult for her to withdraw them under public pressure from China.

When Tokyo sent a senior diplomat to Beijing this week in an attempt to de-escalate the row, Chinese officials released pictures that showed him looking flustered and apparently bowing. Next to him stood a Chinese diplomat with his hands in his pockets, dressed in the five-button, collarless tunic worn by the Chinese student revolutionaries who rose up against Japanese imperialism in May 1919.



*China's foreign ministry and its embassy in Japan advised Chinese citizens against future travel to Japan following recent remarks by the Japanese prime minister concerning Taiwan. Photograph: EPA*

Chinese commentators have repeatedly invoked Japan’s imperialist past and its wartime atrocities as they denounced what they characterised as Takaichi’s attempt to return her country to militarism. A commentary in People’s Daily said Takaichi had poisoned relations between Japan and China.

“No country would tolerate crude interference by foreign leaders in its internal affairs, nor would any accept threats by foreign leaders to use force against it. The ‘poison’ that Takaichi has injected into China-Japan relations must be cleared up by herself,” it said.

“As a country that once launched a war of aggression and committed heinous crimes in Taiwan, Japan should draw serious lessons from history and handle Taiwan-related issues with greater prudence. If the Japanese side risks universal condemnation and ties itself to the chariot of forces seeking to split China, it will only end up reaping the bitter fruit of its own making.”

If the measures Beijing has already taken have hurt Japan’s economy, it could cause much greater damage if it restricts the export of rare earth minerals used in advanced manufacturing. But the standoff carries risks for China too.

Separate surveys this year by the [Pew Research Centre](#) and [Morning Consult](#) showed attitudes towards China improving in most

countries polled while views of the US have darkened.

And the [2025 Chicago Council Survey](#) found that 53 per cent of Americans now believe the US should undertake friendly co-operation with China, up from 40 per cent last year and the first time since 2019 that a majority have preferred a policy of engagement.

The shift in global attitudes owes much to Donald Trump, who has alienated much of the world since his imposition of tariffs last April. But there are other factors, including the decision to allow citizens of many countries, including Ireland, to visit China without a visa.

Most visitors discover that it is not the dystopia they may have imagined and many are impressed by how technologically advanced the public infrastructure is. Chinese people are generally friendly to foreigners and eager for them to enjoy their experience in the country.

Something else that has improved China's image abroad is its abandonment of the so-called [Wolf Warrior diplomacy](#) which

prevailed a few years ago, particularly during the coronavirus pandemic. This saw Beijing react with full force and lurid language to every slight, particularly if it concerned Taiwan, Hong Kong or Xinjiang, often using its economic power to punish countries that transgressed.

[\[ How China uses soft power to exert influence in Ireland Opens in new window \]](#)

The Wolf Warrior seemed to have been put to rest after the end of the zero-Covid policy and the country presented a more relaxed face to the world. Much of the world cheered China on as it stood up to Trump, matching his tariffs and striking back with export controls on rare earth minerals.

The mood soured when Beijing started to use that economic weapon against other countries and there is limited international sympathy for its hardline approach in the dispute with Japan. Now that it has made its point and Takaichi has received the message, it is as much in China's interest as in Japan's to de-escalate this crisis.