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China's Public Opinion Warfare and Psychological Warfare Surrounding the "Survival-Threatening Situation" Statement and Implications for Japan–China Relations

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■ Dramatic Deterioration of Japan–China Relations

Japan–China relations entered an unusually heightened state of tension after only about ten days following their bilateral summit meeting.

On November 7, 2025, the Japanese government's explanation made by Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi during the House of Representatives Budget Committee in response to a possible "survival-threatening situation" triggered what can be described as a series of excessive reactions from China. Even after Prime Minister Takaichi stated before the House of Representatives Budget Committee on November 10 that she would "refrain from specifying particular scenarios in this setting," China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued an unusually strong advisory urging Chinese citizens to refrain from traveling to or studying in Japan. With respect to the fact that the advisory urged Chinese citizens to "refrain from" rather than "prohibiting them from" activities, one objective of this paper is examination of whether China is using this hardline posture primarily for domestic political purposes, and whether it intends to harden its stance toward Japan gradually in a more severe and escalatory manner.

Only a few days earlier on October 31, Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi and Chinese President Xi Jinping confirmed that both countries shared the broad direction of advancing their "Mutually Beneficial Strategic Relationship" comprehensively and of building a "constructive and stable relationship," and exchanged a handshake affirming that shared course. Three days prior, on October 28, Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi had held a telephone conversation with China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi. Under this broad direction, the two agreed on the need to reduce outstanding issues and points of concern while increasing mutual understanding and cooperation. Then they reaffirmed the important role played by the diplomatic authorities in achieving these objectives. Both sides had just confirmed the importance of maintaining communication at various levels, including that between the two leaders and foreign ministers.

However, based on the language used at the regular press conference of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs on November 18, it appears that the Chinese side either did not understand the information from November 7 correctly, or chose to distort it intentionally. From the perspective of many in Japan, China's unusual and "excessive

reaction," issuing from a country that has been a factor prompting Japan's recent shifts in defense policy, is difficult to comprehend. What does this excessive response, which is beyond what many Japanese observers would consider understandable, signify? There is reason to consider that China's reaction might also reflect a tactical focus that has already brought within its purview the moves within the Takaichi administration and the Liberal Democratic Party to revise the three security-related strategic documents, including the National Security Strategy, as well as discussions including reassessment of the Three Non-Nuclear Principles.

Behind the dramatic deterioration in the situation, one can discern an intention on the part of China that extends beyond simple policy disagreement. Beijing is apparently attempting to undermine the stability of the Takaichi administration and to divide public opinion within Japan as part of a broader campaign of "public opinion warfare".

This paper presents examination of these unprecedented developments in China's behavior through the analytical lens of "public opinion warfare."

■ China's Excessive Reaction Driven by "Deliberate Selective Quoting"

The Chinese Communist Party's official newspaper, People's Daily, published an editorial on November 17 stating that "Prime Minister Takaichi's dangerous remarks not only irritate all parties involved and demonstrate strategic recklessness, but also constitute a deliberate provocation." On the same day, Mao Ning, spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, urged Japan to "stop playing with fire that crosses the line, retract its erroneous words and actions, and translate its commitments into concrete actions."

In her November 7 response to Katsuya Okada, a Constitutional Democratic Party lawmaker and former foreign minister who held office at the time of the 2010 collision incident involving a Chinese vessel near the Senkaku Islands, Prime Minister Takaichi stated the following: "If a warship were used in a manner that involves the use of force, I consider that such a case could very well constitute a survival-threatening situation. The government would make a judgment after integrating all available information based on the specific circumstances of the event which actually occurs." Although her remarks were elaborated somewhat more than past explanations, they were legally unproblematic. Moreover, they did not deviate from the established and widely accepted interpretation which has existed until now.

The excessive reaction from the Chinese side, along with expressions such as "provocation" and "playing with fire," ignores the context of persistent questioning by Okada, who posed the original inquiry. China selectively extracted only one fragment of the Prime Minister's remarks, specifically the statement that "if a warship were used in a manner that involves the use of force, such a case could very well constitute a survival-threatening situation," and emphasized only that point. Based on this partial quotation, Beijing had interpreted Japan's position as an intention to intervene militarily

in a Taiwan contingency, which amounts to a distortion. If there were any element of "provocation" or "playing with fire," then those descriptions would be more appropriately applied to Okada himself.

Regarding Prime Minister Takaichi's November 7 response, she initially reiterated Japan's long-standing position on the Taiwan issue, saying that "Japan has consistently expected that the matter will be resolved peacefully through dialogue." She also stated multiple times that "the government must integrate all available information and make a judgment based on the specific circumstances of the actual situation that arises" and that "it is necessary to make a comprehensive assessment of what kind of situation has occurred at that moment."

With respect to the definition of a survival-threatening situation, she pointed to Article 2, Paragraph 4 of the Act on the Peace and Independence of Japan and Maintenance of the Security of the Nation and the People in Armed Attack Situations, etc., and Survival-Threatening Situations. The provision defines a survival-threatening situation as "a situation in which an armed attack against a foreign country that shares a close relationship with Japan occurs, thereby threatening Japan's survival and presenting a clear danger by which the rights of its people to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness will be fundamentally overturned."

It is noteworthy that the Prime Minister explicitly referred to Taiwan as "another region" in her exchange with Okada, thereby showing care not to assert it as a "country." As evident from the statutory definition, the "foreign country that is in a close relationship with Japan" in the context of a survival-threatening situation is clearly the United States.

In this context, it was Okada who continued to pose provocative and persistent questions, compelling the Prime Minister to issue additional and increasingly detailed statements. The Prime Minister's more pointed remarks should therefore be understood as having been elicited by Okada's insistent line of questioning rather than as statements volunteered in isolation.

■ Xue Jian and China's Campaign of Public Opinion Warfare and "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy through Social Media"

The immediate trigger for the rapid deterioration of Japan-China relations was a post made on X on November 8 by Xue Jian, the Chinese Consul General in Osaka. The post has already been deleted, from which it can be inferred that even the Chinese side had recognized that Xue's remarks were highly inappropriate for a diplomat.

Xue's social media post made in reference to Prime Minister Takaichi's remarks should be understood as part of a broader campaign of public opinion warfare.

Public opinion warfare manipulates public sentiment and propaganda strategically to influence decision-making processes of adversarial actors or states. It constitutes one component of China's "Three Warfares," which consist of public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare. The Three Warfares form part of the political work of the Chinese military. China's strategic doctrine seeks to integrate military struggle with political, diplomatic, economic, cultural, and legal struggles. A key objective is to create social polarization within a target country by dividing its public opinion.

Xue Jian has long been engaged in "Wolf Warrior diplomacy using social media."

As one example, immediately after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, he posted comments such as the following on social media: "A weak person must never be foolish enough to pick a fight with a strong person," "The greatest lesson from the Ukraine issue is that the weak must never commit the foolish act of provoking the strong," and "Even if some other strong person stands behind you and promises to 'support' you." These remarks, which explicitly justified Russia's aggression, were widely interpreted at the time as a form of intimidation directed at Japan and Taiwan, each of which relies on the support of the United States. The statements generated considerable controversy.

In this sense, it is in fact Xue Jian, on the Chinese side, who has engaged in acts that can be described precisely as "provocation" and "playing with fire."

On November 18, Masaaki Kanai, Director-General of the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau of Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, visited China and held director-general-level consultations in Beijing with Liu Jinsong, Director-General of the Asian Affairs Department of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The two sides explained their respective positions related to Xue Jian's social media post. Immediately before Kanai left the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, video images showed him leaning toward a much taller interpreter while Liu stood with both hands in his pockets. Chinese state broadcaster China Central Television (online edition) disseminated a selectively clipped version of the scene that made it appear as though Kanai was bowing to Liu. The video spread widely on Chinese social media and appears to have been used as propaganda to give the impression that China held the upper hand over Japan. China is using every detail, including even the posture of a diplomat, as material for its public opinion warfare.

■ China's "Public Opinion Warfare" and "Psychological Warfare" and the Role of Japanese Opposition Parties

Although Prime Minister Takaichi stated on November 10 that she would "refrain from specifying particular cases in this setting," China's bristling posture escalated around November 11. On November 14, Senior Colonel Jiang Bin, spokesperson for China's Ministry of National Defense, issued a coercive warning that "if the Japanese

side fails to draw deep lessons from history and takes reckless action by intervening militarily in the Taiwan Strait, it will surely be shattered before the steel wall of the People's Liberation Army and will pay a dreadful price."

The entire controversy surrounding Prime Minister Takaichi's remarks on a survival-threatening situation originated with Katsuya Okada, who persistently posed provocative hypothetical scenarios related to a Taiwan Strait contingency.

Some commentators argue that Xi Jinping became angered because, after the Japan–China summit, Prime Minister Takaichi met with Taiwan's APEC representative, Lin Hsin-i, during the APEC Leaders' Week and posted a photo on social media, prompting China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to issue a "strong protest" to Japan. However, APEC is an economic cooperation framework comprising 21 "economies" of the Asia-Pacific region. Taiwan participates formally under the name "Chinese Taipei." It is customary for representatives of participating economies, including Japan, to interact with one another at APEC events. Therefore, China's protest against a meeting between the Japanese Prime Minister and the Taiwanese representative aligns neither with the founding purpose or actual practices of APEC. Moreover, a considerable time gap separates the November 7 remarks and the subsequent escalation of Japan–China tensions.

China, which will serve as APEC host for the third time in the autumn of 2026, has announced that it will use the opportunity to promote the construction of an "Asia-Pacific Community." It has also expressed its intention to advance the "Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP)." Additionally, China seeks to expand the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

Given these major economic ambitions of Xi Jinping, the question must be raised of whether China would worsen Japan–China relations to such a degree merely to protect the status of Xue Jian, the Consul General in Osaka. The deletion of Xue's social media post already indicates that the Chinese side has implicitly acknowledged the inappropriateness of his message. Considering this tacit acknowledgment, it is more reasonable to interpret the escalation of friction over the Prime Minister's remarks on a survival-threatening situation as part of a deliberate campaign of public opinion warfare and psychological warfare. This campaign was designed to exert strong pressure on Japan at a moment when the Takaichi administration and the Liberal Democratic Party were initiating discussions about revising the National Security Strategy, the three key security documents, and possibly reviewing the Three Non-Nuclear Principles.

In light of China's ongoing public opinion warfare and psychological warfare, Japan's opposition parties must exercise great caution. They must avoid engaging in "provocation" of the Prime Minister in ways that allow their statements and themselves to be exploited in furtherance of China's strategic objectives. Careless "playing with fire" that uses Japan–China relations as a political tool must be strictly avoided.

(This is the English translation of an article written by MIFUNE Emi, Professor, Komazawa University / Distinguished Research Fellow, JFIR, which originally appeared on the e-Forum "Giron-Hyakushutsu" of GFJ on November 19, 2025.)