

**His Excellency Ambassador SUZUKI Kazuhiro's commentary on Prime Minister  
TAKAICHI Sanae's visit to Australia**

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*Sanae Takaichi's visit to Australia was strategic more than ceremonial*

In reflecting upon the significance of Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's recent visit to Canberra, I would like to offer a few observations. I hope to illuminate certain domestic political circumstances in Japan that are not widely understood in Australia, yet which are essential to understanding the full strategic significance of her visit.

Under Japan's constitutional framework, it is ordinarily exceedingly difficult for a sitting prime minister to undertake overseas travel while the National Diet is in session. As the Diet – the Japanese equivalent of Australia's federal parliament – is designated as “the highest organ of state power” under the constitution, the cabinet is expected to accord the highest priority to parliamentary business throughout the year, including during the ordinary session, which typically begins in late January and extends for at least 150 days.

In the case of the Takaichi cabinet, the diplomatic calendar became extraordinarily demanding from the outset of her government, with the ASEAN-related summit meetings in Malaysia held only a few days after the establishment of the cabinet in late October, followed immediately by President Donald Trump's visit to Japan and the APEC Leaders' meeting in the Republic of Korea, as well as the G20 Summit in South Africa in November.

At the same time, the domestic political situation in Japan was highly fluid. Immediately after the establishment of the cabinet, the governing coalition to which the Prime Minister belonged found itself in the minority in both houses of the Diet – effectively making a hung parliament. Against this backdrop, Prime Minister Takaichi dissolved the lower house at the opening of this year's Ordinary Diet session on January 23, and secured an overwhelming electoral victory in the general election held on February 8, with the Liberal Democratic Party winning a two-thirds super majority in the lower house. After the election, the session of the Diet began on February 18 and is scheduled to continue for 150 days.

There were, realistically speaking, only two opportunities available to the Prime Minister for bilateral overseas travel before May. The first came during the long weekend surrounding the Vernal Equinox public holiday in mid-March, which the Prime Minister utilised for her visit to the US to meet President Trump. The second was the “Golden Week” holiday period in early May. It was during this brief interval in the Diet session that the Prime Minister undertook her visit to Australia, preceded by a visit to Vietnam

where she delivered a major foreign policy speech unveiling Japan's new and updated Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision.

In a nutshell, the first country Prime Minister Takaichi chose for a bilateral visit was the United States, and the second was a visit that took her first to Vietnam and subsequently to Australia.

Today, the international environment is undergoing transformations at a remarkable speed and with greater severity. Whether in the Middle East, global energy security, the war in Ukraine, or the situation in East Asia, assumptions that were once regarded as almost axiomatic in the conduct of foreign policy are being overturned one after another. Against this backdrop, I strongly sense that Prime Minister Takaichi recognises with great clarity the vital importance of Japan and Australia – among the most stable democratic nations in the region – to forge an unprecedented level of solidarity and strategic co-operation. This recognition was symbolically encapsulated in her remarks at the joint leaders' press statement after the summit meeting at Parliament House, where she declared "Japan and Australia are now frontrunners among like-minded nations in advancing pioneering security co-operation" and "have built a relationship that may be described as a 'quasi alliance'".

What has not been widely reported in Australia is that this was the first occasion in which a Japanese prime minister, in an official setting – and particularly at an important joint press statement with another foreign leader – publicly characterised a relationship with another country as a "quasi alliance". Australia was the first nation to be described in this manner. Prime Minister Takaichi's visit was therefore anything but ceremonial in nature. It was a strategic visit, undertaken to convey a strategic message to the world.

Equally significant were the documents and announcements issued by the two leaders during the visit. The five documents concerning co-operation in the critical fields of economic security, energy security, critical minerals, defence and security, and cyber constitute an important road map for the next stage of Japan-Australia co-operation.

One noteworthy initiative, which has perhaps not yet attracted sufficient attention, is the Japan-Australia Leadership Dialogue. Through this framework, representatives from a broad range of sectors in both countries will exchange views and develop policy recommendations on the future direction of the bilateral relationship. Taken together, these documents and initiatives reflect the clear determination of the two leaders to elevate Japan-Australia relations to an even higher level. Indeed, for both the Japanese embassy in Canberra and the Australian embassy in Tokyo, led by my now good mate, ambassador Andrew Shearer – not to mention the relevant government officials in our two capitals – these documents and initiatives represent the major "homework" entrusted to us by our two prime ministers.