

Behind Takaichi's subtle signals at Japan's WWII events

Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's carefully crafted words and gestures at recent events marking the culmination of World War II have raised eyebrows both at home and abroad.

From her ambiguous commitment to Japan's nonnuclear principles to offering unconventional prayers from afar for the war-linked Yasukuni Shrine and altering key language in a war remembrance speech, the subtle moves were seen as an attempt at signaling to her domestic supporters and neighboring countries.

At Saturday's national memorial ceremony marking the end of the conflict, Takaichi declared: "We will never allow the ravages of war to be repeated." Rather than pledging that Japan would never repeat the mistakes of war, her wording left it unsaid who had caused those horrors.

The prime minister's speech marked a clear departure even from those of her conservative predecessor and political mentor, the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who pledged in 2015 that Japan "shall never again repeat the horrors of war."

Misato Matsuoka, an associate professor at Teikyo University in Tokyo, said the wording was most likely chosen deliberately, given the prime minister's stance on security issues.

"The phrase 'never to allow it to be repeated' does not identify Japan alone as the potential instigator of the war or its devastation, but suggests that Japan stands on the side of preventing such a recurrence," she said.

One could interpret it as a political message, Matsuoka added, as in using the phrase "prevent war from being repeated," Japan must possess the military and diplomatic strength to deter others from starting one."

Takaichi also omitted the word "remorse" from her speech, a word that had been reemployed by her immediate predecessor after a 13-year hiatus.

Her handling of the Yasukuni issue was similarly calibrated.

Although Takaichi had pledged during a party leadership race in 2024 to visit the shrine once becoming the prime minister, she instead sent an offering using her own funds as head of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, a middle

ground employed by Japanese leaders in recent years to avoid diplomatic friction with China and South Korea.

But Takaichi also took things a step further.

Shortly before the war memorial service at the nearby Nippon Budokan several hundred meters away, the prime minister turned toward Yasukuni and performed a traditional Shinto rite of two bows, two claps and a final bow in an act of remote worship.

Government sources later confirmed the roughly minute-long gesture as an act of worship directed toward the shrine from afar — often referred to as *yōhai*.

The unusual arrangement allowed Takaichi to make a nationalistic gesture recognizable by her conservative supporters, while avoiding antagonizing China and South Korea, both of whom see the shrine — which honors the nation's war dead, including Class-A war criminals — as a symbol of Japanese militarism.

“Not visiting Yasukuni is a pragmatic decision to avoid offsetting relations in Asia, especially with South Korea,” said Sebastian Maslow, an associate professor at the University of Tokyo.

He added that her approach is, in a sense, a continuation of Abe's approach that “combined a revisionist approach to Japan's wartime past with a more pragmatic foreign policy with a focus on the Indo-Pacific.”

A similar pattern had emerged earlier this month at the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic-bomb commemorations. At both, the prime minister said “Japan is upholding its ‘three nonnuclear principles,’” under which it promises not to possess, produce or permit the introduction of nuclear weapons.

Past Japanese leaders have traditionally used a forward-looking tone, pledging to “continue adhering to the principles.” Takaichi instead merely described the government's current position, not ruling out a possible revision to the decades-old policy as her administration prepares to amend the nation's key security documents this year.

Takaichi's careful yet purposeful positioning comes as her once-formidable public support rate declines, increasing pressure to reassure right-leaning voters that she remains committed to the assertive, nationalistic agenda on which she built her political career.

An NHK poll conducted earlier this month put support for the prime minister at 53%, down by 5 points from July and its lowest level since she took office last October.

“Given that Takaichi’s conservative base is less stable than Abe’s was, maintaining ties with conservative voters is even more important for her administration,” Matsuoka said. “Whether this will actually help sustain their support remains to be seen and will depend on how public opinion develops.”

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