

JAPAN'S NEW PM

Who is Japan's 'Iron Lady' Sanae Takaichi?

Self-made conservative standard bearer steeled by personal challenges, US experience



Sanae Takaichi poses with Margaret Thatcher, her longtime role model. (Photo courtesy of Sanae Takaichi)

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TOKYO -- Sanae Takaichi, Japan's first female prime minister, knows what it takes to be a trailblazer and celebrates people of similar ambition such as her hero Margaret Thatcher.

Upon her historic election as leader of Japan's ruling party on Oct. 4, Sanae Takaichi said she must forget about the concept of "work-life balance."

"I will work, work, work and work," she declared when [chosen as the first female leader of the Liberal Democratic Party](#).

Takaichi went on to add in remarks delivered immediately after the LDP vote that she expects each lawmaker to "work hard like a horse pulling a cart," because the party has far fewer lawmakers than a year ago following two consecutive routs in national elections in October 2024 and July 2025.

After being elected as the country's first female prime minister on Tuesday, she immediately embarked on the job of forming a new cabinet, which included the appointment of two women in key posts -- the ministers for finance and for economic security.

Such tasks, which will only increase in coming days, come on top of looking after her 73-year-old husband who is fighting to recover from a stroke he suffered this year.

The 64-year-old conservative firebrand, who has modeled herself on Margaret Thatcher, widely known as the "Iron Lady," later reiterated that her message on the need for toil was for fellow lawmakers, not for the general public, and that work-life balance is important. But social media was abuzz with reactions, with business owners and managers cheering her leadership style, while labor unions are rapping her for endorsing excessive work.

The responses underscore the divergent public views on whether Takaichi will prove to be a polarizing figure or the strong leader the country needs to revitalize its economy and tackle a long-standing demographic crisis. Her hard-charging style contrasts with her need to unite a party that is deeply divided between conservative-leaning members who support her and more moderate-leaning ones who have formed the core base for the three most recent governments led by prime ministers Shigeru Ishiba, Fumio Kishida and Yoshihide Suga.



Sanae Takaichi worked in the office of U.S. Democratic Congresswoman Pat Schroeder to gain insight into how Japan was viewed among Americans during bilateral trade tensions in the 1980s. (Photo courtesy of Sanae Takaichi)

Clues to Takaichi's toughness can be drawn from [her background as a self-made politician](#) different from many of her colleagues in the party who are the scions of political dynasties. Her father was an employee at a manufacturing company and her mother a police officer. She grew up in the western Japanese city of Nara, an ancient imperial capital and home to some of the country's most important cultural heritage.

"We only live once," she wrote in a book, "so I want to dedicate myself to something in which I can be No. 1" -- thinking that has become a guiding principle whenever she came to a crossroads in her career.

"I want to lift Japan back to the top of the world," she stated during a press conference announcing her candidacy on Sept. 19. "What matters is economic strength. A strong economy. I will relentlessly pursue economic growth."

Even within the conservative LDP, Takaichi is seen as having hardcore views. Such conviction stems from her experience of the "Japan bashing" prevalent during U.S.-Japan trade friction in the 1980s.

To understand how Japan was viewed in the U.S., she decided to work in the office of Democratic Congresswoman Pat Schroeder from 1987. The congresswoman was seen as a leading hardliner on Japan at the time.

It didn't take long before Takaichi noticed how little her country was understood among average Americans. Translation work she was assigned included documents in Chinese and Korean. Food served at her welcome party was Chinese.

That made her wonder about the wisdom of leaving Japan to the whim of people such as those she encountered in the U.S. with a limited understanding of her country. Japan, she thought, needed to be able to defend itself.

Before going to the U.S., Takaichi, right after obtaining a management degree from Kobe University, in 1984 enrolled in the Matsushita Institute of Government and Management, a leadership academy founded by Panasonic founder Konosuke Matsushita. The late Matsushita, still widely respected in Japan, has long been dubbed "the god of management" for his business success.

Japan's political and diplomatic schedule

Oct. 4	Liberal Democratic Party presidential election
7	Appointment of key senior LDP executives
10	Komeito leaves LDP-led coalition
15	LDP, Japan Innovation Party hold leaders meeting
20	LDP, Japan Innovation agree to form coalition
21	Shigeru Ishiba and cabinet resign en masse
	Parliament vote on appointing next PM
	New PM appoints new cabinet
26-28	ASEAN Summit (<i>Kuala Lumpur</i>)
27-29*	U.S. President Donald Trump to visit Japan
29-30	Bank of Japan board meeting
Oct. 31-Nov. 1	APEC Summit (<i>Gyeongju, South Korea</i>)

*Expected

Source: Nikkei Asia research

Her seniors at the academy included Yoshihiko Noda, who was prime minister in a center-left government during 2011 and 2012 and now leads Japan's biggest opposition force, the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP). Young Takaichi helped Noda run a campaign for a local assembly office in 1987. Their relationship continues today, with Takaichi congratulating Noda when he was elected as the leader of the CDP last year.

Takaichi, who also worked as a TV anchor, made her first bid for electoral office in 1992. She ran as an independent in a Diet, or parliament, upper house race without the backing of the LDP, and lost. "The key to success lies in persisting until you succeed," she says she told herself. The next year, she won a seat in the lower house, joining the New Frontier Party. She eventually joined the LDP in 1996.

During her career, health care and nursing have been issues close to her heart.

To look after her ailing parents, she divided her time as a lawmaker in Tokyo with regular trips back to her hometown. Now she is caring for her husband, a former lower house lawmaker, after his stroke. The couple lives in housing reserved for lawmakers in central Tokyo.

During the Sept. 19 news conference, Takaichi admitted that she herself once struggled with post-menopause rheumatoid arthritis. Her policy pledges include having major hospitals across the country establish comprehensive departments specializing in women's health issues, creating an official qualification for homemaking services and making the cost of those services tax-deductible, among others.

For Takaichi, her personal icon Thatcher came across as a warm figure despite her tough exterior, she recalled after meeting the former British prime minister in person. Thatcher's autobiography is one of her favorite books. She owns both the translated and original language versions and regularly revisits them as a personal guide.

G. Kingsley Ward's "Letters of a Businessman to His Son" is another favorite book. Purchased at a Kinokuniya bookstore in New York, she says it taught her the virtue of hard work.



Sanae Takaichi walks in a hallway in parliament in Tokyo on Oct. 15. (Photo by Ken Suzuki)

Takaichi has learned to steel herself. When first winning electoral office, she was greeted with jeers such as, "What's a little girl like you doing in parliament?" She has since focused on being recognized for what she has actually accomplished rather than on achieving female "firsts."

A turning point came when Shinzo Abe, who would eventually become Japan's longest-serving prime minister, realized that Takaichi shared his conservative views. Takaichi reciprocated by supporting Abe in his party leadership bid in 2012, instead of backing the leader of the faction she had been a member of at the time.

In 2021, she tried to persuade Abe, who had resigned as prime minister the previous year, to run again to lead the party -- and become prime minister for a third time. When Abe rejected the idea despite her repeated urgings, she snapped, "Fine, then I'll run."

She lost, but put up a good fight with Abe's backing, securing the second-highest number of LDP lawmaker votes after Fumio Kishida in the first round of balloting. Kishida went on to win and she served in his government as chair of the party's Policy Research Council and then minister for economic security. After Abe's assassination in 2022, she has taken over as the standard bearer of the Party's right wing.

While known as a policy wonk, Takaichi is not known as a socializer and is open about feeling uncomfortable with drinking sessions. Party leadership elections have also exposed her to fierce rivalry among fellow LDP lawmakers. "I thought everyone was a comrade before. After running in the leadership race," she said. "I look at fellow lawmakers in terms of whether they are a friend or a foe. I hate that part of myself."

To win the leadership race, however, she focused on building support within the party and polishing her own policy ideas. She reached out to former Prime Minister Taro Aso and initiated discussions on the party's diplomatic strategy following the inauguration of the second administration of U.S. President Donald Trump.

[Her diplomatic debut](#) is expected to come at the ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur on Oct. 26, where Japan needs to show its commitment to Southeast Asia in the face of China's rapidly growing presence in the region.

This is likely to be followed by summit talks with Trump, who is expected to visit Japan from Oct. 27 to Oct. 29. Discussions could center around regional security and the need for U.S. allies to play a greater role in national and regional security.

She will then turn to diplomatic relations with Japan's regional neighbors -- China and South Korea, when the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit will be held in Gyeongju, South Korea, on Oct. 31 and Nov 1. Takaichi needs to build a rapport with Chinese President Xi Jinping and South Korea's left-leaning President Lee Jae Myung in order to stabilize regional security and allow economic relations to continue at a time of disruptions in global trade under Trump's sweeping tariff measures.

