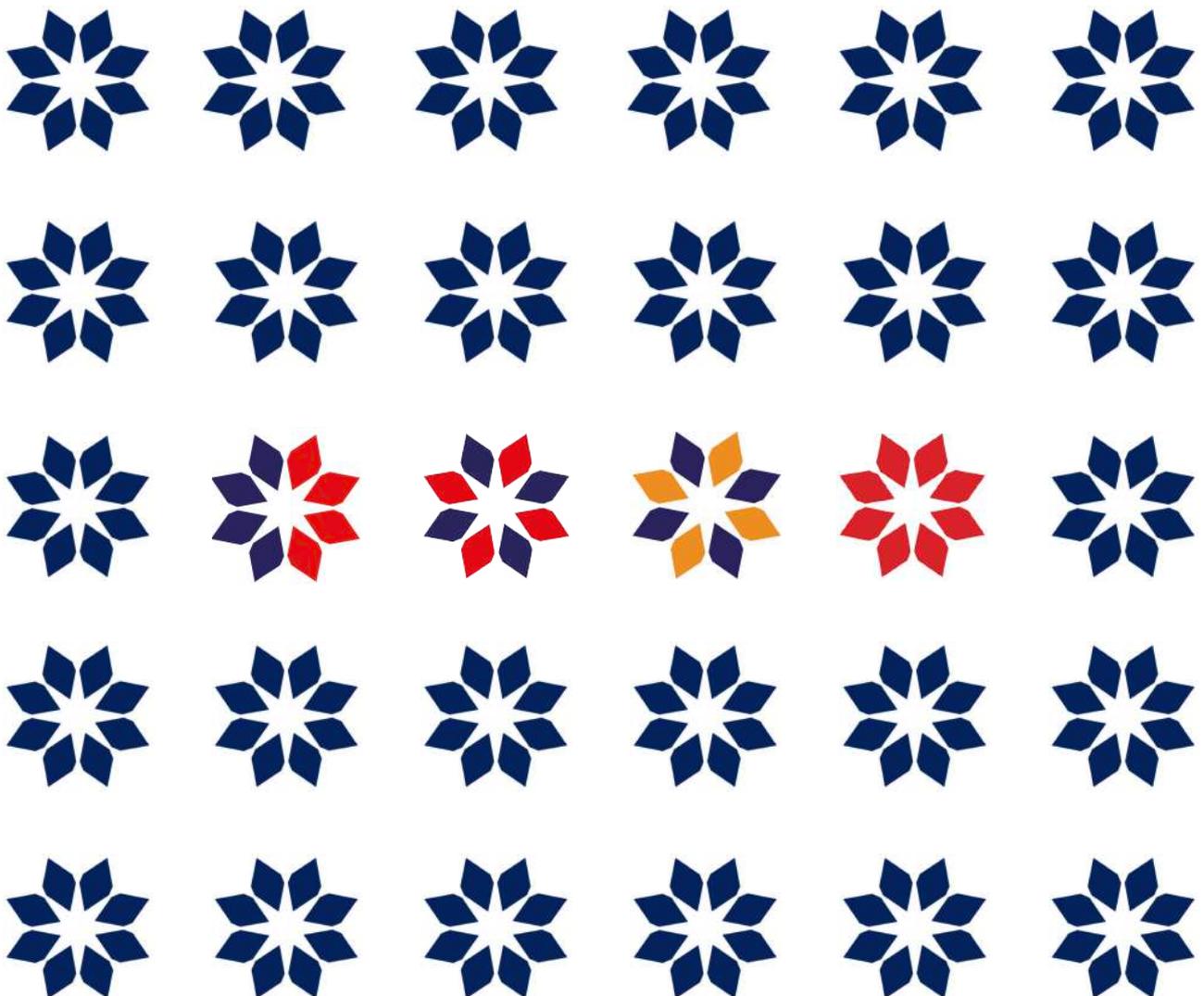




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France-China 2026

June 17

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Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet

Editorial Director and former diplomat

EDITORIAL

We no longer defend sovereignty today: we use it. It is no longer a universal principle [1], still less a bulwark against war or arbitrariness [2]. It has become a rhetorical weapon, a means for major powers to justify what they condemn in others. And Asia, far from being a mere bystander, stands at the heart of this brutal reconfiguration of the international order.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has dispelled any ambiguity.

A state can invade another sovereign state, annex territory, bombard cities and civilian populations, without the international system proving capable of preventing it.

Condemnations may rain down and sanctions accumulate, yet the violated border remains so. This precedent carries profound significance for Asia. It demonstrates that sovereignty is protected neither by international law nor by the principles that underpin it, but by the balance of power. China, moreover, has not been mistaken in reading this reality. Beijing has never genuinely defended Ukrainian sovereignty [3].

The Chinese capital did not formally condemn the invasion, nor did it speak of aggression, contenting itself with echoing the Russian narrative.

This caution is not neutrality but cold calculation: a determination not to weaken a strategic partner while observing the reactions of a common adversary—the United States. The lesson is simple: it is not the violation of sovereignty that poses a problem, but who commits it.

Accordingly, China's call for "unification" (tongyi) with Taiwan cannot be understood in isolation. It forms part of a broader vision in which sovereignty becomes the right of powerful states to impose their reading of history. Taiwan is not perceived as a political entity, but as a territory to be reclaimed—less out of nationalist sentiment than for strategic reasons. Taiwan's democracy, the will of its population, and its de facto independence are relegated to secondary considerations in the face of imperatives of power [4].

Yet reducing the question of sovereignty in Asia to Taiwan would be a mistake. The Asian continent is a veritable minefield of sovereignty disputes. In the South China Sea (the "nine-dash line") and the East China Sea (the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands), several states see their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) challenged by a power that transforms reclaimed reefs into military bases.

In the Himalayan region, India and China confront one another through armed demonstrations. The same holds true between Thailand and Cambodia. On the Korean peninsula, two states continue to claim exclusive legitimacy over a single nation. In Kashmir, sovereignty has been a bloody fault line between India and Pakistan for nearly eighty years.

In this context, Western discourse on the defense of sovereignty also appears weakened. The abduction of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro by the United States produced a devastating effect. Whatever judgment one may pass on the Venezuelan regime, the removal of a head of state—however illegitimate—from his territory by a foreign power constitutes a major breach of international norms [5]. For Asian



states, the message is unequivocal: sovereignty is respected only so long as it does not obstruct.

Donald Trump's remarks about acquiring Greenland, under the guise of strategic security [6], completed this shift. Behind the provocation lies a blunt logic: territories are no longer inhabited political spaces but geostrategic pawns. This vision finds a troubling echo in Asia, where certain states fear that their sovereignty might one day be deemed negotiable, purchasable, or circumventable. Faced with this accumulation of precedents, Asia can draw only a bitter conclusion: sovereignty is not a right but a privilege reserved for those able to defend it militarily, economically, or diplomatically. Others must adapt, align, or remain silent.

The danger is immense. A world in which sovereignty becomes relative is one in which force replaces law, history is rewritten by the victors, and grey zones multiply until they explode.

Asia—with its colonial legacies, disputed borders, and rival powers—is undoubtedly the region with the most to lose in such a drift.

By invoking sovereignty when it suits them and ignoring it when it constrains them, the great powers undermine the only principle capable of limiting their own violence. And when no one believes in sovereignty any longer, only one rule remains: that of the strongest.

Three trajectories now emerge for Asia.

The first is that of generalized armed deterrence. In the face of the weakening of law, states—such as China, Japan, or India—are strengthening their military capabilities, multiplying partnerships and alliances, accepting the premise that only force guarantees sovereignty. This logic heightens the risks of escalation, notably around Taiwan, in the South and East China Seas, along the Sino-Indian and Indo-Pakistani borders, and on the Korean peninsula.

The second trajectory is that of fragmented sovereignty, in which certain states retain formal autonomy but endure growing strategic, economic, or technological dependence. In this scenario, sovereignty persists juridically but dissolves within asymmetric interdependence and pressures exerted by major powers. This is the case, in particular, for most of the former tributary states of China in Southeast Asia. Yet

they continue to rely on the American umbrella for protection.

The third path—more fragile yet more ambitious—would entail a collective reaffirmation of international law by Asian states themselves. This would require breaking with tacit acceptance of *faits accomplis*, strengthening regional dispute-settlement mechanisms (ASEAN [7], ARF [8], SAARC [9], SCO [10], RCEP [11], CPTPP [12]), and restoring binding force to the principles of the United Nations Charter. Nothing today suggests that this course will prevail.

Asia thus stands at a pivotal moment. If sovereignty continues to be treated as a strategic adjustment variable, the continent could become the epicenter of the major crises of the twenty-first century. If, on the contrary, Asia succeeds in reasserting the primacy of law over force, it could play a decisive role in refounding an international order now profoundly weakened.

[1] Article 2(1) of the United Nations Charter: "The Organization is based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all its Members."

[2] Ibid., Article 2(4): "All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations."

[3] <https://lerubicon.org/la-chine-lukraine-et-les-dilemmes-dune-definition-de-la-souverainete/>

[4] In contravention of Article 1(2) of the Charter, which defines the purposes of the United Nations as including: "to develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples."

[5] Article 2(7) of the Charter: "Nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state..."

[6] In 2018, China declared itself a "near-Arctic state" with the aim of increasing its influence in the region. Beijing also announced its intention to build a "Polar Silk Road" as part of its global Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), through which it has developed economic ties with numerous countries, including in Latin America.

[7] Association of Southeast Asian Nations, now comprising the eleven member states of Southeast Asia (including Timor-Leste), which constitute the regional core of the area (principle of centrality), connecting economic, security, and diplomatic frameworks without taking sides or forming military blocs. The other frameworks listed below revolve around or interact with it.

[8] ASEAN Regional Forum, a military and strategic dialogue forum in the Asia-Pacific bringing together twenty-seven members, including the United States, China, Russia, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, and the European Union.

[9] South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, a primarily economic South Asian regional organization comprising eight states: Afghanistan (membership de facto suspended), Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.



[10] Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, founded in 2001 at the initiative of China and Russia, comprising nine members (including India, Pakistan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan), initially focused on border security in Central Asia.

[11] Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, bringing together the eleven ASEAN countries plus China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, covering approximately 30% of global GDP and constituting the largest free-trade agreement in the world.

[12] Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, which replaced the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in 2018 after the withdrawal of the United States, comprising twelve member countries, including Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei in Asia-Pacific; Canada, Mexico, Chile, and Peru in the Americas; and the United Kingdom in Europe. The CPTPP aims to set the rules of future trade and to limit China's normative influence.

Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet

A career diplomat who studied Chinese studies in France and then worked in development aid as an international expert for UNESCO in Laos (1988-1991), Jean-Raphaël PEYTREGNET has held positions including Consul General of France in Guangzhou (2007-2011) and Beijing (2015-2018), as well as in Mumbai/Bombay from 2011 to 2015. He was responsible for Asia at the Center for Analysis, Forecasting, and Strategy (CAPS) attached to the office of the Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs (2018-2021) and finally Special Advisor to the Director for Asia-Oceania (2021-2023).



Pierre Haski
Journalist

Asian news

Géopolitique, a podcast offering a perspective on international affairs.

By Pierre Haski on France Inter

February 10 - Jimmy Lai and Narges Mohammadi: two arbitrary convictions in total impunity.

Hong Kong media owner Jimmy Lai and Iranian Nobel Peace Prize laureate Narges Mohammadi are victims of arbitrariness in their respective countries for having called for democracy. The rest of the world condemns—but remains motionless.

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February 18 - Modi's India: a privileged partner of France and Europe despite its authoritarian drift.

France and Europe have made India one of their privileged global partners, backed by arms deliveries, for obvious geopolitical and economic reasons—compelling them to turn a blind eye to

Prime Minister Modi's authoritarian drift. India is occupying an increasingly central place in European and French diplomacy.

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February 20 - After Greenland, the Chagos Islands in the Indian Ocean: a symbol of Donald Trump's imperial ambitions.

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Pierre Haski

French journalist, former correspondent in South Africa, the Middle East, and China for Agence France Presse (AFP) and then for the newspaper *Libération*, co-founder of the news website *Rue89*, Pierre HASKI has been president of Reporters Without Borders since 2017. Since 2018, he has been providing insight into international politics through his morning show "Géopolitique" broadcast on France Inter.



Emmanuel Véron Professor at the École de guerre and specialist in contemporary Asia

Interview Nouveaux Regards

Asia and the new nuclear age: **what future?**

Interviewed by Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet

Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet: Eighty years after the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we are witnessing a resurgence of crises pitting—or risking pitting—nuclear powers against one another (Russia vs. the United States, India vs. Pakistan, China vs. the United States/Taiwan, North Korea vs. the United States/South Korea/Japan, etc.). In Asia in particular, North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003 and, by 2017, had developed the capability to strike U.S. territory with an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). Beyond this example, how do you assess the most recent developments in nuclear proliferation in Asia?

Emmanuel Véron: Asia stands as a singular case, on the one hand, as you recall, because of the use of the atomic weapon—the two bombs dropped by the United States in August 1945 on the cities of Hiroshima and then Nagasaki—and on the other hand, today, because of the strong concentration of strategic stakes and international competition, in which the rise of conventional arsenals and nuclear weapons embodies the military-strategic pillars. Historically, the vast Asia-Pacific region has been the site of a series of American, British, and French tests, notably in the South Pacific. The

fastest and most significant proliferation is indeed taking place in Asia.

Nuclear proliferation in Asia is an expanding reality. The era of disarmament is over.

First, China is doubling its arsenal, moving from 600 warheads in 2025 toward a horizon of 1,000 warheads in 2030, followed by North Korea, India and Pakistan, which are also increasing their stockpiles. In addition to this vertical proliferation (the increase of arsenals of nuclear-armed states), weapons modernization is also underway throughout nuclear Asia.

Finally, horizontal proliferation—that is, the accession of a new state to military nuclear capability, either through its own means or through the acquisition of means, techniques and materials from a nuclear-armed state—is a recurring strategic issue in Asia, particularly in response to the vertical proliferation of China and North Korea.

For more than a decade, the expansion of arsenals has led analysts to examine deterrence through the prism of a “new nuclear



age” or “third nuclear age.” The third nuclear age was characterized by Thérèse Delpech (1948–2012) as an era of “strategic piracy,” marked by the entry into the strategic landscape of new nuclear-armed states, the erosion of non-proliferation and arms-control agreements, and the development of “non-nuclear strategic weapons.”

These dynamics, centered on regional tensions such as in South Asia (India–Pakistan) and East Asia (China–North Korea), stimulate modernization and a regional arms race, with risks of escalation and a challenge to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

The significant expansion of China’s arsenal, reinforcing its position as a major nuclear power, is leading to a recomposition of regional defense policies (Japan, South Korea and India) and a repositioning of the United States. North Korea’s trajectory (with an estimated arsenal of around 50 warheads), despite international sanctions, points to a continuation of the development of its ballistic and nuclear capabilities, against the backdrop of the Chinese and Russian equation, including Pakistani links from the outset of its program.

Finally, India and Pakistan are engaged in a historical and doctrinal rivalry, with Islamabad seeking tactical deterrence vis-à-vis New Delhi, which, for its part, focuses more on political deterrence. According to SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), there is near parity in warhead numbers: 172 for India and 170 for Pakistan. Neither country is a signatory to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

Chinese proliferation and the Indo-Pakistani strategic rivalry, today and tomorrow, feed into one another.

Nuclear tensions in Asia (but also in the Middle East, with Israel, as well as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and even Turkey) are increasing, with dynamics specific to each theater. We are indeed dealing with a nuclear multipolarity that is more unstable and more complex than deterrence/proliferation during the Cold War and the balance between the two blocs. Finally, it should be recalled that the interest in civilian nuclear energy among certain states in Asia (Southeast

Asia) sometimes raises questions about the boundary between civilian energy and potential military programs, through the diversion of uses and nuclear engineering. The difference essentially lies in the level of uranium-235 enrichment. A civilian facility can produce and be transformed into a military installation (cf. the Iranian program).

The NPT commits the 190 countries (out of 193) that are parties to it not to transfer nuclear weapons to any country. Can it still be considered an effective instrument to combat nuclear proliferation when it failed to prevent India and Pakistan—who have still not joined it to this day—from acquiring nuclear weapons in the 1990s? According to the Pentagon and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), China continues to develop its nuclear capabilities and could have around 1,500 warheads by 2035 (approximately one third of the Russian arsenal), compared to 500 in January 2024. The same applies to India and Pakistan, which also appear to be strengthening their nuclear arsenals with new delivery systems under development, according to a study conducted by the Nuclear Information Project of the Federation of American Scientists.

The NPT is the most widely supported arms-control agreement. To date, four states have not signed the NPT: India, South Sudan, Israel and Pakistan. It should also be noted that North Korea announced its intention to withdraw from the NPT. The NPT was concluded in 1968 and experienced a revival after 1991.

There is also the CTBT (Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty) (1996), which aims to ban all tests, and the TPNW (Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons) (2021), which prohibits possession and use, but is not yet in force due to a lack of ratifications.

The NPT is not entirely obsolete. For example, U.S. nuclear weapons reportedly located on German, Italian, Turkish, Dutch and Belgian territory (so-called DCA nations for Dual-Capable Aircraft – gravity bombs) remain under permanent U.S. control in accordance with the NPT.

However, the deep international divergences and ruptures, notably within the UN Security Council, that is to say, the cohesion and authority of the “nuclear directorate” to produce norms of conduct and ensure compliance with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), are compromised. The dismantling or denunciation of the principal nuclear disarmament treaties is significant and illustrates the international grammar of the past one to two decades, whereas the NPT was



reputed to be the cornerstone of global nuclear security.

China's growing geopolitical weight over the past two decades, its sustained and continuous "arsenalization" (conventional and nuclear), are contributing to a recomposition of international balances, of a grammar dating back to the Cold War and, as mentioned above, to the "new nuclear age," seeking, in the long term, a form of parity with U.S. forces, if one adds Russian, and even North Korean and/or Pakistani arsenals.

American sources, notably from the Department of War (formerly the Department of Defense, before Trump II), recall a horizon of 1,500 warheads by 2035.

The modernization of China's nuclear arsenal has both accelerated and expanded in recent years. Over the past five years, China has significantly strengthened its nuclear modernization program by deploying more types and a greater number of nuclear weapons than ever before.

China has continued to develop its three new silo fields (Yumen in Gansu province, Hami in Xinjiang province, Yulin near Ordos) for its solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), to expand construction of new silos for its liquid-fuel DF-5 ICBMs, to develop new variants of ICBMs and advanced strategic delivery systems, and has likely produced surplus warheads for potential use on these systems once deployed.

China has also expanded its arsenal of DF-26 intermediate-range ballistic missiles, which appear to have completely replaced the medium-range DF-21 in its nuclear role. At sea, China has modernized its Type 094 ballistic missile submarines with the longer-range JL-3 ballistic missile. In addition, China has recently reassigned an operational nuclear mission to its bombers and is developing an air-launched ballistic missile that could have nuclear capabilities.

Overall, China's nuclear expansion is one of the largest and fastest among the nine nuclear-armed states. The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists estimates that China has built up a stockpile of approximately 600 nuclear

warheads intended to be delivered by land-based ballistic missiles, sea-based ballistic missiles, and bombers.

Thus, the entire triad is being modernized. The military parade of 3 September 2025 in Beijing showcased the extent of a large part of its modernizations and weapons. The Pentagon indicated in 2024 that China's nuclear stockpile had "exceeded 600 operational warheads by mid-2024" (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024).

However, Chinese warheads are not "operational" in the same way as U.S. and Russian nuclear warheads deployed on missiles and at bomber bases; the vast majority of Chinese warheads are reportedly stored separately from their launchers.

India continues to modernize its nuclear arsenal, with at least four new weapon systems and several new launch platforms under development to complement or replace existing aircraft, land-based systems, and sea-based systems capable of carrying nuclear weapons.

Several of these systems are nearing completion and are expected to be deployed soon. The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists estimates that India may have produced enough weapons-grade plutonium for 130 to 210 nuclear warheads, but has probably produced only around 172, although the country's warhead stockpile is likely to grow.

India continues to modernize its nuclear arsenal and to operationalize its nascent triad. The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists estimates that India currently operates eight different systems capable of delivering nuclear weapons: two aircraft, five land-based ballistic missiles, and one sea-based ballistic missile.

At least five other systems are under development, most of which are expected to be completed shortly and deployed with the armed forces. Pakistan is pursuing the gradual modernization of its nuclear arsenal, with improved and new delivery systems, and a rapidly expanding fissile material production industry. Analysis of commercial satellite imagery of construction at Pakistani army garrisons and air bases reveals what appear to be newer launchers and facilities, potentially linked to Pakistan's nuclear forces, although official information on Pakistani nuclear units remains scarce. The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists estimates that Pakistan possesses a stockpile of approximately 170 nuclear warheads.



This estimate carries a margin of uncertainty given the opaque nature of proliferation in this strategic environment. With several new delivery systems under development, four plutonium production reactors, and an expanding uranium enrichment infrastructure, Pakistan's weapons stockpile could further increase in the coming years. The scale of this increase will depend on several factors, notably the number of nuclear launchers Pakistan plans to deploy, the evolution of its nuclear strategy, and the growth of India's nuclear arsenal.

North Korea has made considerable advances over the past two decades in developing its nuclear arsenal as political leverage against the United States.

Since 2006, it has conducted six nuclear tests, updated its nuclear doctrine to emphasize the irreversible role of nuclear weapons for its national security, and continued deploying various new missiles tested in flight from new launch platforms. It is widely accepted that North Korea possesses operational nuclear warheads for its short- and medium-range missiles, and possibly for its longer-range missiles, although this latter capability has not yet been publicly demonstrated.

According to the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, uncertainty remains regarding the deployed North Korean missiles equipped with an operational nuclear capability. However, it is acknowledged that the regime intends to equip itself with an operational nuclear arsenal capable of threatening targets in East Asia, the United States, and Europe.

In 2021, Kim Jong-un announced several key strategic objectives for North Korea's nuclear weapons program: 1) the production of very large nuclear warheads; 2) the production of smaller and lighter nuclear weapons for tactical use; 3) the improvement of precision strike and range capabilities; 4) the introduction of hypersonic glide warheads; 5) the development of solid-fuel intercontinental, submarine-launched, and land-based ballistic rockets; and 6) the introduction of a nuclear-powered submarine and a submarine-launched strategic nuclear weapon.

Despite these clarifications, the real and precise assessment of the regime's advances and capabilities remains unclear. The intensification of relations between Russia and North Korea (with Beijing in the background) in the context of

the war in Ukraine could contribute to an upgrading of North Korea's ballistic and nuclear program.

Can it be said that Russia's invasion of Ukraine—a country that had definitively relinquished the nuclear weapons stationed on its territory in 1996—has in its own way contributed to the acceleration of nuclear proliferation worldwide? Or at least to the consideration that only nuclear weapons provide a sufficiently deterrent means to avoid aggression by a third country? Moreover, we have seen that in exchange for Pyongyang's military support in this conflict with Ukraine, Moscow ended its, admittedly limited, cooperation with the United States aimed at curbing North Korean ambitions, even going so far as to use its veto at the United Nations Security Council to block UN monitoring of the implementation of sanctions imposed by the international community against North Korea in relation to the development of its military nuclear program. What can be concluded from this?

One of the characteristics of the "third nuclear age" is unconstrained competition. In a recent article, Louis Gautier [1] recalled: "The third nuclear age is indeed characterized by the resumption of a frenzied arms race, strategic competition between blocs of powers, and a relaxation of the disciplines of prudence that had until then been deeply internalized by nuclear states..."

In the third nuclear age, there are no longer any leaders, nor any directorate." This new race and competition corresponds to a generalized disinhibition and to nuclear blackmail or intimidation. Finally, with regard to the war in Ukraine, nuclear blackmail is combined with a form of theater sanctuarization, an "aggressive sanctuarization" in which the weapon is used for purposes of conquest and coercion.

This could constitute a precedent, notably in the strategic framework of Taiwan. In light of Sino-Russian cooperation, exchanges, and feedback on the war in Ukraine, Beijing could draw inspiration from Russia in this logic of "aggressive sanctuarization."

Thus, with regard to nuclear Asia and the strategic relations between China, Russia, and North Korea, it is not only a question of the quantitative and qualitative rise in weapons, but also of increased, multidirectional pressure from "aggressive" deterrence across several simultaneous theaters.

Among the United States' allies threatened by a regional conflict are, in Asia in particular, Japan, Taiwan and South Korea. The latter, like others in



Europe, may have been led to question the credibility of the American “nuclear umbrella” following certain impromptu statements by President Trump. If one or more of these countries, particularly in East Asia, were to decide—as some of their leaders have already contemplated—to build their own nuclear weapons in order to guard against any external threat, could this, in your view, create a domino effect in the region and consequently sound the death knell of the nuclear non-proliferation regime?

In July 2024, the United States and South Korea adopted a joint directive aimed at strengthening their cooperation on nuclear deterrence on the Korean Peninsula. Emerging from the work of the Nuclear Consultative Group established in 2023, this directive notably seeks to better integrate South Korean conventional forces into potential U.S. nuclear operations.

It forms part of a series of U.S. reassurance measures, such as the symbolic port call of a U.S. nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (USS Kentucky – SSBN 737) in Busan in 2023. This constitutes a form of strategic signaling. A comparable dynamic exists with Japan, albeit more discreetly, with the aim of consolidating U.S. extended deterrence in the face of growing threats from China and North Korea, in a context of increasing doubts regarding the credibility of that deterrence.

Since the early 2010s, the debate on U.S. extended deterrence in Northeast Asia has intensified, in the wake of the “pivot to Asia” launched by the Obama administration and subsequently the Indo-Pacific strategy. This strategic reorientation aimed to respond to the growing threats posed by North Korea and China to U.S. allies, particularly Japan and South Korea.

The acceleration of North Korea’s ballistic and nuclear programs, as well as the modernization of Chinese forces, has reinforced the perception of a more unstable security environment. The military trajectory of China and North Korea is shaping the defense tools of both South Korea and Japan.

In response to these developments, Washington has deepened its mechanisms for consultation and coordination with its allies. In South Korea, frameworks such as the Tailored Deterrence Strategy (TDS) have been developed and

revised in order to adapt deterrence to North Korean threats. In Japan, the Extended Deterrence Dialogue has become one of the most sophisticated instruments of bilateral cooperation in the field of deterrence.

However, despite this institutional strengthening, the credibility of U.S. guarantees remains contested. In both South Korea and Japan, debates are emerging over the reliability of the American commitment, fueling calls for the reintroduction of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons or even for the acquisition of national nuclear capabilities, particularly in South Korea.

These trends reveal a persistent fragility in extended deterrence, aggravated by the perception that the United States might seek to avoid nuclear escalation by constraining its allies during major crises.

A parallel is drawn with the adaptation of NATO deterrence in Europe, initiated in 2010 and accelerated after 2014. In both regions, the need for greater burden-sharing and increased investment by allies is now acknowledged, although national capabilities and political will vary.

Finally, reflection on extended deterrence in Northeast Asia has been shaped by European conflicts, notably the war in Ukraine. A growing consensus underscores the interdependence of the European and Asian theaters, even if perceptions of threat diverge. The main risk identified is not so much a breakdown of the nuclear balance as nuclear escalation resulting from conventional conflicts, which has become a central factor of strategic instability in both regions.

While historically strongly committed to non-proliferation, Japan and South Korea are now at the center of major reflection on horizontal proliferation. Our era is clearly marked by a recomposition of the global nuclear order. In the same article, Louis Gautier recalled: “Japan, which refused to sign the TPNW (Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons) ‘so as not to insult the future,’ is striving at all costs to revitalize the American nuclear guarantee. But its efforts are marked by considerable nervousness. The same is true of the less controlled calls by certain South Korean leaders in favor of a national path to nuclear capabilities.” [2]

Can it therefore be considered that the risks of nuclear proliferation are higher in Asia than in Europe, given that the latter continent may feel



better protected from external threats thanks to the French and British nuclear arsenals capable of providing extended deterrence within NATO?

Undeniably, Asia is today the center of gravity of this “new nuclear age” by virtue of the number of states concerned and the weapons developed.

While historically strongly attached to non-proliferation, Japan and South Korea are at the heart of major reflections on horizontal proliferation. Our era is clearly marked by a recomposition of the global nuclear order.

In the same article, Louis Gautier recalled: “Japan, which refused to sign the TPNW ‘so as not to insult the future,’ is striving at all costs to revitalize the American nuclear guarantee. But its efforts are marked by considerable nervousness. The same is true of the less controlled calls by certain South Korean leaders in favor of a national path to nuclear capabilities.” [3]

If military nuclear power is morally disqualified in the Japanese public sphere, associated with suffering and destruction, and giving rise to the doctrine of the three non-nuclear principles (not possessing, not producing, not introducing nuclear weapons), the strategic-military alliance with the United States underscores how structuring and political the issue of the “American umbrella” remains within restricted circles.

This is an issue of particular sensitivity in Japan, different from Korea, where deterrence is increasingly present in public debate without, however, leading to any significant change.

This is all the more so since a poll conducted in February 2022 indicated that 71% of the South Korean population were in favor of their country acquiring nuclear weapons. Another poll conducted in May of the same year revealed that 70.2% of respondents supported the country’s nuclearization, and that 63.6% favored it even if such a decision could result in violating the NPT. The results of these polls appeared to respond to North Korea’s development of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and to China’s growing assertiveness as perceived in its regional environment. These factors have had the same impact on the Japanese debate over nuclearization, notably following statements by former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who publicly declared during his lifetime that Japan should seriously and urgently reflect on the issue of nuclear weapons, thus marking a fundamental break with the pacifist commitment

adopted by Japan after the Pacific War. What is your view?

Regional competition in Asia and international competition, combined with China’s aggressive postures and “arsenalization,” as well as North Korean uncertainties, are generating a strong movement within South Korean and Japanese public opinion and, of course, within political landscapes. In other words, the militarization of Asia is fostering an evolution in mindsets and perceptions within the societies of Northeast Asian democracies. This is a fundamental issue for the next generation.

While these societies are undergoing accelerated and structural aging, yet remain major industrial and innovative countries, they are reflecting on proliferation within the structuring framework of alliances with the American power. National security and foreign policy elements (in their neighborhood) permeate domestic politics. In January 2023, South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol, criticized in Korea, called for a Korean path to deterrence.

More generally, the recomposition of security architectures in the Indo-Pacific or Asia-Pacific, combined with militarization, is energizing this third nuclear age. In this regard, one may cite the various nuclear-powered submarine programs that Australia is expected to acquire under AUKUS or that South Korea is pursuing. This reflects the strategic-military framing of China’s rise and of its network of nuclear partners. In January 2026, South Korean President Lee Jae-myung stated that North Korea would produce enough nuclear material each year to assemble up to 20 atomic weapons, “warning of a ‘global danger’ if nothing is done to resolve the issue.”

More recently, the North Korean regime, at the Party Congress, stated that it was “clarifying plans for the next stage aimed at strengthening the country’s nuclear deterrent force.” Indeed, the continuation of North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic program structures South Korea’s security architecture. Unlike in Japan, deterrence fuels broader debates within Korean public opinion and restricted circles alike. Political cleavages are clear, and the debates remain legitimate.

The trauma of the two bombs in Japan remains fundamental, both within Japanese society (notably among the survivors—the hibakusha), in public opinion, and in the political landscape. The discreet debates on nuclear matters in Japan reflect an evolution/aggravation of the



archipelago's strategic and security environment, in which China's militarization, North Korean proliferation, and Russian postures (blackmail, threats, and theater sanctuarization/Ukraine) form the pillars of the defense apparatus.

Deterrence does not prevent crises and war, but the ultima ratio makes it possible to contain escalation, prevent runaway dynamics, and rationalize escalation between two nuclear powers. While the "third nuclear age" is particularly at work in Asia, and more generally in the world, doctrinal evolutions in the context of competition and regional tensions will shape strategic balances over the next ten years as a lever of political influence and power.

On 4 February 2026, Russia declared that it no longer considered itself bound by the New START Treaty limiting the number of strategic nuclear launchers and deployed nuclear warheads on those launchers, while also establishing a new verification system for compliance with the Treaty's provisions. Can it be said that the Russian decision, without directly threatening Asia, degrades the global deterrence ecosystem, thereby making Asia—already fragile—more unstable, more unpredictable and potentially more nuclear?

Signed in 2010 and entering into force in 2011, the New START Treaty (New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) had been extended once in 2021 for five years, setting its expiration date at 5 February 2026. With the expiration of New START—the last bilateral nuclear arms-control agreement between the United States and Russia, which entered into force in 2011—the legal constraint limiting their strategic arsenals disappears. This poses a major challenge for international security, as there is currently neither an extension nor a clear successor to this treaty. The two nuclear powers are nevertheless discussing a resumption of strategic dialogue in order to avoid an arms race and maintain a minimum level of transparency, but negotiations are fragile and difficult.

The situation is made more complex by:

- The absence of verification mechanisms for several years,
- Divergences over the modalities of a future agreement,
- The emergence of other nuclear powers (such as China) outside the traditional bilateral framework.

For several years, other agreements have disappeared (such as the INF Treaty on

intermediate-range nuclear forces in 2019). With the end of New START, there is no longer any major bilateral treaty limiting strategic nuclear weapons between Washington and Moscow—an unprecedented situation since the 1970s. This means that strategic dialogue becomes more difficult, Europe finds itself more exposed to nuclear tensions, and the credibility of the global non-proliferation regime weakens. The logic of deterrence becomes more "competitive" again.

This may also push other nuclear powers (notably China) to accelerate their own programs. Transparency disappears, leading to increased mistrust, risks of misinterpretation, and strategic tensions. In this respect, it should be recalled that at the heart of strategic rivalry and competition between the United States and China, the United States recently claimed that Beijing may have conducted at least one secret nuclear test in 2020.

In April 2020, the U.S. Department of State published its annual report to Congress on compliance with arms-control agreements. It noted intense activity at the Lop Nor nuclear test site (Xinjiang province) and mentioned the possibility that China may have conducted or prepared low-yield nuclear tests, raising questions about compliance with international norms. Beijing firmly denied this, describing the report as "false accusations" and denouncing their politicization. China's last nuclear test dates back to the summer of 1996. Beijing is reported to have conducted 45 nuclear tests between 1964 and 1996.

Neither the United States nor China has ratified the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), which is therefore not in force for them. Moreover, the notion of "low yield" or "zero-yield" is not defined in the CTBT, which complicates the interpretation of observations of activity at the site. Some experts suggest that the signals could simply result from subcritical tests (without a chain reaction), which are permitted under the CTBT.

China has intensified its nuclear weapons simulation activities, notably under the mountains of Mianyang (Sichuan province), in order to improve the precision and sophistication of its arsenal, which fuels questions about its intentions.

Does Russia's unwillingness to extend the New START Treaty in its current form (bilateral: USA vs. Russia) not indirectly reflect the fact that nuclear proliferation and arms control no longer concern only the United States and Russia, but also other



countries, such as China, which is seeking to achieve parity with the United States? Could the non-renewal of the New START Treaty be both worrying in terms of reigniting the nuclear arms (and testing) race and realistic in light of this new situation, meaning that, theoretically, China (and even other Asian countries, North Korea in particular) should normally be included in the perspective of a hypothetical New START II Treaty? What is your view? Would China be ready to participate in negotiations for a new New START Treaty that would include it?

The obsolescence of the bilateral format is indeed a fait accompli. Russia justifies its refusal to extend the treaty “as it stands” with two arguments of strategic “realism.”

First, the emergence of China: Moscow and Washington agree (for once) that the rapid expansion of China’s arsenal changes the equation. Beijing would be aiming, in the long term, at technical and political parity with the two major post-Cold War nuclear powers.

Second, the inclusion of NATO. Any future treaty would now have to include the arsenals of France and the United Kingdom. According to Moscow, it is illogical to limit Russian weapons while ignoring the nuclear capabilities of the United States’ European allies.

Is China ready to negotiate?

For the time being, Beijing’s answer is a categorical “no,” and this for several reasons: The asymmetry of stockpiles: Even though it is growing rapidly, China considers that its arsenal (estimated at around 700–800 warheads in 2026) remains well below the approximately 1,550 deployed warheads (and the thousands in reserve) of the United States and Russia. For Beijing, it is up to the two giants to drastically reduce their stockpiles before it sits down at the table.

The doctrine of “Minimum Deterrence”: China refuses to disclose its exact numbers, arguing that secrecy is the key to its survival in the face of more powerful adversaries. Accepting a New START II-type treaty would imply intrusive on-site

inspections, which Beijing considers a threat to its national security.

Finally, the “no first use” position. China frequently invokes its commitment never to use nuclear weapons first in order to argue that it is not an “offensive” threat, unlike American and Russian doctrines. It is important to stress that the end of New START without a replacement creates a total legal vacuum, and this at several levels: Qualitative arms race. Without numerical limits, the focus shifts to disruptive technologies (hypersonic missiles, nuclear-powered underwater drones, AI integrated into command systems). Resumption of testing. Recent statements by the three major powers suggest a temptation to resume actual nuclear testing to validate these new technologies, which would definitively bury the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT).

Finally, instability in Asia. North Korea, as you noted, observes this deterioration of international norms as a “green light” to pursue its own program, while Japan and South Korea, as previously mentioned, are experiencing debates at various levels regarding deterrence. In addition, the combined arsenals of Pakistan and India further alter the strategic equation.

Recurring exchanges between Russia, China and Iran on nuclear issues (notably in 2025) within a diplomatic framework reflect a renewed web of strategic porosity. Although North Korea does not formally participate in these diplomatic forums, the continuation of its nuclear program and its rapprochement with Russia confirm nuclear multipolarity. It remains the case that, in the missile domain, exchanges with North Korea are known and documented.

Nuclear multipolarity is increasingly structuring, making our time the new nuclear age.

[1] <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2025/12/15/le-nouvel-age-nucleaire/>

[2] <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2025/12/15/le-nouvel-age-nucleaire/>

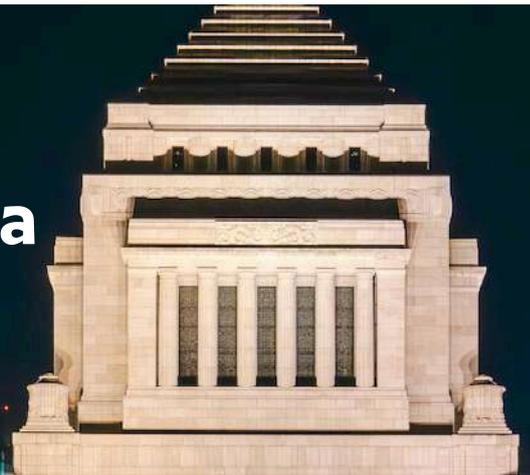
[3] <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2025/12/15/le-nouvel-age-nucleaire/>

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Yves Carmona
Former diplomat



Interview Nouveaux Regards

LDP's sweeping victory in Japan's legislative elections: **Sanae Takaichi secures a historic mandate.**

By Yves Carmona

Elections for the House of Representatives were held on 8 February. This time, the polls were right: Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae won her gamble hands down, with a surprise dissolution and a very tight schedule (16 days of campaigning), even in the eyes of her own party, as there had not been an announcement of a dissolution since 1966 at the opening of the parliamentary session.

She also took the risk of announcing it before the budget debate, which also surprised her party, and she turned it into a referendum on her policies: this resulted in an electoral triumph, even though her popularity rating dropped significantly immediately after the announcement of the dissolution. The result is clear.

In a House of Representatives with 465 members (289 elected by majority vote and 176 by proportional representation), her party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP, conservative), won 310 seats, two-thirds of the seats in the Assembly for the first time since this electoral system was introduced in 1996. This allows the

lower house to pass its bills even if they are rejected in the upper house, where the LDP is in the minority.

The LDP no longer even needs an alliance such as the one that has enabled it to govern since September 2025 with the nationalist Japan Innovation Party. The latter, which is well established in Osaka, failed to win any seats outside of that region. This comfortable situation for the LDP has not been seen since the Second World War. Furthermore, if exit polls are to be believed, young people voted heavily for Ms Takaichi, while the LDP appeared ageing and losing momentum.

However, there was a certain amount of irritation surrounding this election campaign: an election in February takes place in the snow, which happened even in Tokyo and not just in Hokkaido, where it is more common.

Wasn't that precisely the objective, to weaken the opposition? The centrist party was founded on 16 January by the Constitutional Democratic Party and the Komeito Party. Its aim was to unite



centrist forces under the slogan 'Citizens First', but it suffered a crushing defeat, falling from 167 seats before the elections to 49 seats, a loss of 70%.

Important figures such as the founder of the Constitutional Party, Edano, the veteran leader Ozawa Ichiro, and other executives were defeated one after another. The leaders of both parties, former Prime Minister Noda and Mr. Saito, resigned, taking responsibility for the defeat.

At a press conference early in the morning of the 9th, Mr. Noda stated: 'This is an enormous responsibility that deserves a thousand deaths.' It must be said that the alliance, forged just before the elections, between the 'Constitutional Party' defending the pacifist Constitution of 3 November 1946, led by Mr Edano Yukio, a former minister several times over, could hardly embody renewal. The alliance between the heir to the Socialist Party and the Komeito (Buddhist Party of Light) certainly confused voters on both sides, leading to this historic setback.

It wasn't seen since at least 1969, when only the Tokyo governorship was at stake, at a time when the Buddhist party was playing the game of siding with the left!

However, dissatisfaction remains with the LDP, which is regularly accused of campaigning, which in Japan is particularly costly, with hidden money, especially that of the Unification Church (Moon sect), while the majority of citizens see their purchasing power stagnate, at a time when Mr. Trump is striking in all directions, sometimes with an increase in customs duties, his favourite weapon, and sometimes by increasing the already high contribution to defence spending, which is supposed to protect Japan from hostile neighbours (North Korea and China, at the very least), while the US President's inconsistency offers little guarantee of its effectiveness.

Ms Takaichi, for her part, is skilfully promoting economic revitalisation and support for purchasing power (remember that her role model was Mrs Thatcher...).

This is particularly the case with energy: her government has approved the restart of the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa nuclear power plant, the largest in the world, 13 years after the Fukushima disaster, which led to the shutdown of all nuclear power plants, some of which have since been brought back into service.

Revitalisation is also underway in the 'oil of the 21st century', semiconductors. The world leader in high-end products, Taiwan's TSMC, is set to invest \$12.2 billion in Kumamoto, with the government promising to contribute, according to Ms Takaichi. Artificial intelligence will be the main market for this investment. At the same time, national champion Rapidus is bringing together 30 shareholder companies, led by Softbank and Sony.

One of her strengths is her pragmatism. At the start of the campaign, she promised a review of labour standards, the first since 1987, in response to popular sentiment: a new employee of advertising giant Dentsu had committed suicide due to overwork after working long hours of overtime.

Another strength is that she is a woman, something that had never been seen before. Ms. Tsujimoto, a former socialist leader, has been very complimentary about her tenacity, even though they belong to opposing camps: Ms. Takaishi has broken the 'glass ceiling' that weighed and continues to weigh on women in politics.

More generally, the market, temporarily concerned about the continuation of quantitative easing policies that increase public debt, fuel inflation, cause the yen to fall against the dollar and encourage Japanese investors to increasingly invest abroad, and her comments shortly before the start of the campaign when she stated that 'fiscal policy to date had been affected by the "curse of excessive austerity"', the market was ultimately very satisfied with the LDP's victory, rising by 3.89% on 9 February.

With regard to supporting purchasing power, which is the number one concern of the Japanese, followed by retirement and security issues, Ms Takaichi announced the abolition of consumption tax on food products and beverages for the next two years.

At the crossroads between foreign and domestic policy, on 23 January, once the election campaign had begun, the government adopted a package of measures to be implemented by the summer concerning foreigners, who numbered 2.57 million in October 2025, an increase of 11.7% over the previous year. The largest group are Vietnamese, followed by Chinese, Filipinos, Nepalese and Indonesians.



They will be liable to stricter rules on land acquisition and nationality status, as well as programmes to study the Japanese language and way of life. Measures will also be taken against 'overtourism' with encouragement to broaden the scope of visits.

Diplomacy has not been forgotten. Admittedly, at the end of November 2025, Mz Takaichi fell into the trap set by the leader of the Constitutionalist Party, Noda, a veteran politician: she responded that if Taiwan were attacked, it would constitute an 'existential' threat to Japan, which provoked strong reprimands and economic reprisals from Beijing.

Since then, she has pretended to ignore Beijing's displeasure, which has earned her great popularity: finally, a Prime Minister who knows how to stand up to the Chinese authorities, whose anger she then ignored without any immediate consequences.

She also took care to showcase her international stature: she has a good relationship with South Korean President Lee Jae-myung, whom she met on 13 January and with whom she agrees on many issues, from the fight against organised crime to North Korea's nuclear weapons programme. Neither of them publicly expressed what is on everyone's mind: the need to stand up to Beijing's drive for hegemony.

She also met with Ms Meloni on 16 January. Japan and Italy will cooperate on access to critical minerals and space, as well as on liquefied natural gas with Italian giant ENI.

She also made a point of meeting quickly with President Trump and the leaders of South-East Asian countries at the ASEAN summit.

Finally, she received British Prime Minister Starmer on 31 January, and they shared their concerns in the field of security, including economic security, preserving access to critical minerals and launching a cyber security partnership. They shared their views on Chinese intrusions.

Conclusion: A veritable 'Takaichi fever', as the press has dubbed it, has swept through the youth.

The first woman to hold the highest office, smiling, friendly, and not afraid to say or claim to say what she thinks, it is striking to note that she inspires sympathy even among the opposition. She may be described as a 'populist', but the fact remains that her image of approachability contributes to her success.

What will happen now? According to the mainstream Japanese press, she will form a second government tasked with implementing her promises, including promoting a responsible and proactive fiscal policy, reviewing security policy and strengthening intelligence capabilities.

She will therefore have to maintain a difficult balance between all these objectives. One of the factors contributing to increased spending is the rise in social security expenditure due to the ageing population, and there is little she can do about this.

The cost of repairing ageing infrastructure is also rising, and the reality is that 'this is expansion rather than austerity' (government economic officials).

As a result, there is scepticism in financial circles about her success: 'If public finances to date have been "excessively austere" in Ms Takaichi's eyes, I wonder if her fiscal policy is not quite the opposite,' said one of the major players in the banking sector, noting that "Japan's indulgence has accelerated further due to the new coronavirus (COVID) disaster. A huge supplementary budget has been prepared, and the scale of spending in 2020 has reached 147.6 trillion yen (nearly 800 billion yen at current rates), the largest ever recorded."

Admittedly, the Japanese are the main subscribers, but a financial crisis cannot be ruled out in the long term...

Yves Carmona

A former student of the École Nationale d'Administration (ENA) and a career diplomat, Yves CARMONA spent most of his career in Asia: twice posted as Counsellor for Foreign Affairs in Japan, then as Deputy Chief of Mission in Singapore, and later as Ambassador to Laos and Nepal (2012–2018). In these positions, as well as in those he held in Paris, he focused—drawing also on his background as a student of Japanese—on the rapid transformations of Asian countries and their relations with France and Europe. Now retired, he is committed to sharing his experience with those who may benefit from it.



CHEN Yo-Jung
Former French diplomat

Analysis Nouveaux Regards

In Japan, a woman at the helm! **And so what?**

By CHEN Yo-Jung

On 21 October 2025, the Japanese parliament designated Takaichi Sanae, 64, as the 104th Prime Minister, making her the very first woman to hold such office since 1890, the year when Japan, until then feudal, converted to a constitutional parliamentary monarchy.

The arrival of a woman at the head of the government of a country still far behind others in terms of the status of women indeed constitutes a revolution that has not failed to generate astonishment and excitement in the archipelago as well as in the rest of the world.

However, despite a popularity generating near-general euphoria at the political level, this historic success of a woman appears to have aroused very little enthusiasm—indeed even indifference—within Japanese society, particularly among women.

As sociologist, Ueno Chizuko, a specialist in gender issues, declared following Ms. Takaichi's appointment: "There is nothing to rejoice about!"

At first glance, the world's fourth-largest economy seemed far from predisposed to entrust its highest executive office to a woman. Despite some progress made thus far in terms of gender equality, the country retains the core of the patriarchal social system that has prevailed in its society for millennia.

Today, it ranks 118th out of 148 in the 2025 World Economic Forum Gender Equality Index, and its score in this area is the poorest among the Group of Seven major economies. Women in fact constitute only 16% (72 individuals) of the 465 members of the lower house of the National Diet (Kokkai), and even the new government formed by Ms. Takaichi includes only two women out of a total of 19 ministers.

Barely 10.9% of all executives in leadership positions in the country are women, whereas this rate averages 30 to 40% in the principal Western countries. Likewise, the wage gap remains significant (22%) between men and women in Japan. Same-sex marriage remains legally banned, whereas it has already been legalized in neighboring countries such as Taiwan.



Married couples are still legally required to share the same surname, which effectively obliges women to relinquish their maiden name upon marriage.

In most cases, Japanese society considers that a married woman should stop working to take care of the household. Under such conditions, the ascent of a woman to the post of Prime Minister was bound to cause a sensation. Ms. Takaichi Sanae's breaking of the glass ceiling in a country such as that described above represents, in every respect, an achievement that should have provided momentum to movements defending women's rights.

Yet it must be acknowledged that Japanese society as a whole has remained unmoved, observing near-total silence in the face of Ms. Takaichi's historic achievement. Societal reactions are surprisingly restrained, far from the heated debates that might have been expected.

Four months after her election, while the new Prime Minister's approval rating remains very high—around 70%—a sense of disappointment is perceptible among those who had expected a general surge of enthusiasm within Japanese society in favor of improving the status of women.

Sharing sociologist Ueno Chizuko's view, Arata Yamamoto, Tokyo correspondent for the American network NBC, headlined: "Japan Has Its First Woman Head of Government, but Not All Women Are Celebrating."

Primarily Political Popularity

Certainly, since her appointment at the head of government, Ms. Takaichi has enjoyed an unprecedented level of support ranging between 60% and 70%. But this very high rating is explained rather by the Japanese people's attraction to the hard conservative line displayed by the new leader.

The image of ultra-nationalist firmness and the blunt frankness conveyed by Takaichi Sanae's statements constitute a welcome novelty for an electorate exasperated by years of indecisive and cautious ambivalence from the male leaders the country has known until now.

In other words, a popularity acquired essentially through the strong and virile image of the new

Prime Minister, demonstrating firmness and dynamism in contrast with the attitude of her male predecessors.

Whether in foreign or domestic policy, the frank and determined conservative language of the new head of government—distinct from the prudent ambiguity to which the Japanese had grown accustomed under previous leaders—has been enthusiastically received by a young electorate that is increasingly nationalist and gradually influenced by a xenophobic reflex following years of overtourism and the absence of a coherent immigration policy.

The hard and combative ultra-nationalism defended by Takaichi Sanae throughout her political career has led her to position herself as a champion of opposition to a neighboring China, rising in power and perceived as arrogant and threatening.

The diplomatic dispute she provoked with Beijing over the highly sensitive issue of Taiwan—by declaring before Parliament that a Chinese armed offensive against the island would justify action by Japan's Self-Defense Forces [1]—only further propelled her to the height of popularity in a country where, according to polls, more than 90% of the population declares itself Sinophobic...

In economic matters, the "proactive fiscal policy" and successive measures to reduce the tax burden put forward by the new Prime Minister have been favorably received by voters, even though the economic press is unanimous in warning against the damage that, in its view, this "financial populism" is likely to inflict on the national economy in the long term.

Moreover, the fact remains that Ms. Takaichi was not elected by universal suffrage. As political scientist Terashima Jitsuro recalls, she was first elected president of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) by a vote limited to its 920,000 members. And only 250,000 of them (0.2% of national voters) voted for her, the remainder of the votes being distributed among the four other candidates.

The president of Japan's leading party was automatically designated on 21 October 2025 by Parliament to form the government, after obtaining a majority of votes in the lower house (237 votes out of 465, four more than the required majority) thanks to the support of a coalition with the Japan Innovation Party (Nippon Ishin no Kai).



Several television commentators agree that the choice of Ms. Takaichi by LDP members was motivated by a sense of crisis within the archipelago's main political formation: the ruling party was losing members from its right wing to Sanseito ("the Party of Political Participation"), the brand-new far-right party openly xenophobic and known for its slogan "Japanese First!" (Nihonjin fāsuto).

There was therefore urgency in stopping this hemorrhage by placing at the head of the LDP a leader no less right-wing than Sanseito. Among the five candidates for party president, there was no one other than Takaichi Sanae who fit this profile, even though in normal times the combative ultra-nationalism deemed dangerous that she professes had always kept her at the margins of the party's mainstream.

It should also be recalled that a woman at the helm of a state or government is no longer a novelty in this part of the world.

Almost all of Japan's neighbors, with varying degrees of success, have had a woman leader in recent decades: South Korea (Park Geun-hye), Taiwan (Tsai Ing-wen), the Philippines (Corazon Aquino, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo), Thailand (Yingluck Shinawatra), Indonesia (Megawati Sukarnoputri), Sri Lanka (Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Chandrika Kumaratunga, Harini Amarasuriya), India (Indira Gandhi, Pratibha Patil, Droupadi Murmu), Pakistan (Benazir Bhutto), Singapore (Halimah Yacob), Bangladesh (Sheikh Hasina, Khaleda Zia), Nepal (Bidya Devi Bhandari)...

And most of these countries were no less traditionalist and conservative than the Land of the Rising Sun (Hi Izuru Kuni 日出る国). Moreover, as Ms. Ueno recalls, whether in the case of Margaret Thatcher—an avowed model of Takaichi Sanae—or that of Park Geun-hye of South Korea, feminists in those two countries harbored no illusions upon the advent of a woman at the head of their state or government.

In Japan as well, a woman occupying a high leadership position (minister, civil service, local government, etc.), though still too few in number, is no longer a source of surprise. As Ms. Ueno notes: "We are no longer at the stage of being astonished to see a woman occupy this or that position." For example, since 2016, Tokyo—the capital and the world's largest metropolis—has had as governor the very popular Ms. Koike Yuriko, former Minister of Defense. In addition, recent scandals separately involving female

mayors of several local authorities have in a way accustomed public opinion to seeing a woman in a high political position.

Be that as it may, the exceptionally high personal popularity of Ms. Takaichi (and not necessarily that of her party, whose approval rating had been at its lowest following a succession of politico-financial scandals) led her to tempt fate by calling, on 8 February, barely three months after taking office, an early general election.

A more than successful gamble, since she emerged overwhelmingly victorious, securing for her party, the ruling LDP, more than two-thirds of the lower house of the Diet—316 seats out of a total of 465. An unprecedented record that makes Ms. Takaichi the most powerful head of government in postwar Japanese history.

None of the numerous serious post-election commentaries and analyses mention the femininity of the person responsible for this historic political landslide. As Nikkei Asia observed, this historic ballot is merely the "translation of a typically Japanese populism relying on Ms. Takaichi's fans."

A Powerful Woman but an Enemy of the Feminist Cause

In short, the exceptionally high approval rating of the Takaichi government is due to the very charismatic and conservative political style—"more masculine than men"—of its leader and has very little to do with Takaichi Sanae's gender. This political popularity contrasts with the societal lukewarmness that greets the breaking of the institutional glass ceiling by a woman in Japan.

This general lack of interest is explained by the fact that, as a fierce defender of traditional patriarchal values, the new Prime Minister does not identify as a feminist and has never shown any affinity for the women's cause. Even before Takaichi Sanae was officially appointed to form the government, the New York Times correspondent in Tokyo wondered on 19 October: "A woman is going to lead Japan, but will that be good for women?"

Rather than improving the status of women, Takaichi Sanae's political career has been devoted to defending what she considers the fundamental traditional values of Japanese society.



Coming from an ultra-conservative middle-class family, she has always defended these values rooted in the patriarchal system. Her rise through the political hierarchy, however exceptional, owes nothing to her femininity nor to the defense of women's rights. Her ascent followed the classic path of a Japanese politician.

Hence her many nicknames: "a politician in a skirt" (*sukāto o haita seijika*), "honorary man" (*meiyo dansei*), "Iron Lady" (*Tetsu no Onna*, modeled on Margaret Thatcher), "Taliban Takaichi," etc.

As the New York Times correspondent in Tokyo noted: "Sanae Takaichi will break the political glass ceiling, but she seems set to maintain the measures that have so far hindered progress for women." Interviewed on the street by a television channel, an anonymous citizen expressed what many felt: "It doesn't feel like we elected a woman!"

According to sociologist Ueno Chizuko, Takaichi Sanae's ascent represents a typical case of "over-identification" by women who seek distinction within the male political hierarchy by attempting to position themselves more resolutely to the right than their male colleagues, and therefore more hostile than men to measures promoting gender equality at the expense of men's acquired rights.

In an interview with *Asahi Shimbun*, Ms. Sato Fumika, another Japanese sociologist specializing in gender studies, was critical of Ms. Takaichi Sanae and her "frivolous" attitude—"unusual for a traditional Japanese leader"—alongside President Trump when the two leaders visited together on 28 October 2025 the hundreds of American servicemen aboard the aircraft carrier USS *George Washington* docked in Yokosuka harbor.

In a scene that raised eyebrows among many Japanese—men and women alike—she even allowed herself to be embraced by the American president! The sociologist said she was "disgusted" by this spectacle deemed humiliating, which in her view demonstrated the typical case of a woman striving to flatter "males" within a system dominated by all-powerful men.

Ms. Sato even sees in it a miniature reflection of the relationship of subordination that Japan has always maintained vis-à-vis the United States.

In fact, Ms. Takaichi's concrete political positions place her firmly on the conservative right rather than within a feminist perspective.

She opposes, for example, same-sex marriage; she rejects the movement seeking to allow a woman (in this case Princess Aiko, the only daughter of the current Emperor) to accede to the imperial throne, at a time when the imperial family is experiencing a serious shortage of male heirs; fearing harm to Japan's traditional family values, she rejects the growing societal demand that married women be allowed to retain their maiden name.

Her lack of interest in professional equality between men and women is well known.

Instead of seeking to improve women's working conditions, she extols the virtue of long working hours, regardless of gender. Contrary to expectations, the Takaichi government includes only two women out of 19 ministers, as the new Prime Minister says she wishes to prioritize competence over parity.

With such hostility toward anything that threatens to call into question traditional social values founded on male supremacy, is it surprising that Takaichi Sanae, Prime Minister or not, is considered a "traitor" (according to the progressive monthly *Sekai*) by those who fight for the advancement of gender equality in the country?

It is therefore understandable that even though Ms. Takaichi is acclaimed by a large majority of the population in general, this predominantly political adoration is in no way linked to the fact that the new head of government is a woman.

As for the weakness of sociological reactions to the achievement of a woman becoming Prime Minister, one should also note the reserved attitude of the media as a whole.

Having been criticized in the past for reporting deemed insensitive and offensive toward women, Japanese media outlets now appear cautious about overemphasizing the female dimension of Ms. Takaichi's success.

Conclusion

Given the gap between, on the one hand, the high approval rating Ms. Takaichi has enjoyed since coming to power among Japanese voters and, on the other hand, society's near-indifference to the achievement of a woman reaching the summit of power, one may wonder



whether, in Japan as elsewhere in today's world, breaking a "glass ceiling" necessarily amounts to a victory for women's status or for gender equality.

[1] Ms. Takaichi's exact statement, translated from Japanese: "If a situation—for example an attempt to place Taiwan completely under the control of the Beijing government, whether simply through a blockade of sea routes or through the use of military means such as warships—in fact involves military means, then, whatever one may say, I believe that this could become a situation of the 'threat to survival' type [for Japan]."

CHEN Yo-Jung

Born in Taiwan in 1947, CHEN Yo-Jung grew up in Vietnam and Hong Kong. He completed his higher education in Japan and then served for 23 years at the French Embassy in Tokyo as press attaché and translator-interpreter. Naturalized as a French citizen in 1981, Chen Yo-Jung became a permanent civil servant at the Quai d'Orsay in 1994. He served as deputy consul/press advisor in several French diplomatic and consular posts, including Tokyo, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Singapore, and Beijing, before retiring to Japan in 2012.



Clara Germont Concert cellist, Young Leader France-China 2025

Young Leader's Voice

Clara Germont, concert cellist, Young Leader France-China 2025.

Interviewed by Thomas Mulhaupt & Agathe Gravière

Fondation France-Asie: Clara Germont, you are a concert cellist and you began your musical training at the age of seven at the Conservatoire of Aulnay-sous-Bois. How did music enter your life so early? What was your first gateway into this world?

Clara Germont: I am the youngest of several siblings. My parents wanted their children to be introduced to music. My mother regularly took me along to my older siblings' music lessons. That is how the cello teacher noticed me. I was a well-behaved little girl and I kept telling my parents that I wanted to play the "violin-sky" (a child's mispronunciation of "violoncelle"). When I was old enough, I began my musical training and I have never stopped since, despite the difficulties that can mark such a path.

Music is a demanding environment. It is not only about practicing one's instrument, but also about music theory, orchestra, chamber music, and music history. At the same time, I was practicing classical dance at a high level. I had to make a choice around the age of 13 and decided to devote myself fully to music. It was an early decision, but as in high-level sport, training must begin early to acquire the necessary dexterity. I therefore continued my schooling with an adapted timetable.

The choice of the cello came through this singular human connection with my first teacher. But the defining moment in my interest in the instrument was a cello concert at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées where Yo-Yo Ma performed Bach's Suites. That concert gave me a deep desire to follow this path. Within my family, we all received musical training, but I am ultimately the only one who made it my profession; my brothers and sisters chose other paths.

My musical journey began in this way. Then, after several years of training, it is customary to leave one's first teacher to discover other approaches, other methods and other conservatories. At 15, I joined the class of Philippe Muller, one of the great masters of the cello in France, who has trained some of the most brilliant musicians. After the Paris regional conservatory, I went to Switzerland to study for my bachelor's degree, before returning to Paris to the École Normale Supérieure de Musique. There, I completed a three-year advanced cycle under Professor Henri Demarquette.

What were the key moments or decisive choices in your musical journey? Is there an encounter, a



person or an event that profoundly influenced your trajectory?

Meeting Philippe Muller was a true catalyst in my quest for excellence. At 15, working with a teacher who had trained some of the greatest French and international cellists immediately creates a high level of expectation. His standards, his rigor, his approach to sound and interpretation deeply marked me. It pushed me to aim higher.

Moreover, the difficulties and trials I have faced have played an essential role in shaping me. They have nourished my determination and strengthened my capacity for self-questioning.

Each setback forced me to refine my work, clarify my musical identity and develop greater inner strength. I sincerely believe that such moments are structuring: they do not weaken a trajectory, they shape it.

You develop a plural artistic universe, combining chamber music, solo projects, more contemporary inspirations, the creation of a label and the organization of festivals. How do you choose these different projects and where do these multiple inspirations originate?

My albums and various projects were first born out of a form of frustration: I wanted to propose my own vision of the concert, an experience that could reach everyone, including young audiences, and that would allow for greater inclusion of the public.

In order to practice the cello in my own way, I chose to organize my own concerts and to develop a festival, the Festival des Cours parisiennes. It was born in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic: I was playing with the windows open in my Paris apartment when one day neighbors knocked on my door to thank me for accompanying the lockdown with my music. They suggested organizing a concert in the building's courtyard.

This initiative was a genuine opportunity and gave birth to the festival, with the desire to bring music into unexpected places closer to the audience.

The creation of a label stemmed from the same impulse: to offer formats different from traditional classical music, more in line with my artistic vision. More recently, I also launched a concert season in the south of France, Les Concerts de l'Heure Dorée.

The very first concert of the Festival des Cours parisiennes remains a very strong memory. I was responsible both for production and performance. That experience deeply marked me and gave me the momentum to continue producing and developing my own musical projects.

You are at once a producer, musician, composer and, in certain respects, an entrepreneur. How do you manage to balance these different responsibilities? Do you operate through segmentation, or through constant back-and-forth between these roles?

Until recently, all this remained rather blurred and sometimes difficult to manage. Today, on the contrary, I try to segment my time very clearly, because without this organization it would be impossible to handle everything at once. Composition requires a very particular state of mind, completely different from daily instrumental practice. Nothing must interfere with that moment.

I even took a break of several months before immersing myself again in writing my next album, scheduled for release before the summer. I am currently finalizing several pieces that I wish to include. I now devote two or three mornings per week to production, alongside my associate. The rest of the time is dedicated to composition. This segmentation allows me to preserve distinct mental spaces and to find a more effective balance in my work.

As a composer, what is your creative process? How do you enter that particular state where inspiration takes shape and notes come to life on paper?

I discovered my creative process on my own. During my training, I did not really learn to write, nor to detach myself from the highly structured frameworks that are transmitted to us. Yet every musician possesses, through their training, the necessary tools to compose.

What most often holds one back is a lack of confidence and difficulty in letting go. To overcome this, I began by improvising, simply to search for melodies. A few years ago, certain ideas emerged almost naturally in this way, and this is still how I work today.

Concretely, I take my cello and improvise. A melodic line emerges. Then comes the writing stage: I transcribe the melody, orchestrate it for several instruments, build the harmony, establish verticality within the chords.



For me, composition is always born of a spontaneous gesture: improvisation is the starting point, writing is its structured extension.

Are you able to describe the mental state you are in when you compose or improvise? Improvisation is often associated with an intense state of concentration, like a bubble. Is that how you experience it?

Exactly. I am incapable of composing in the city. It is not a deliberate choice, but inspiration comes to me when I am isolated. Nature, in particular, deeply inspires me. In the very first piece I composed, *Pantai*, which means “dream” in Provençal, I sought to reproduce the wind in the trees, the movement of air, the presence of birds.

Nature is a major source of inspiration for many composers, and it is just as much so for me.

To create, I need that bubble of calm and silence. It is in that environment, in contact with nature, that I am able to fully enter into writing.

Nature seems to occupy a central place in your music. During the Young Leaders France-China 2025 seminar, you notably performed one of your compositions at the Château d'If, echoing this place isolated by sea and wind. You also regularly accompany museum visits on the cello, notably as part of the exhibition *Voir la mer* at the Maif Social Club. Could you tell us about your relationship with nature and how you seek to integrate it into your music?

It probably stems from a desire for unity, from a wish to become one with nature. I feel particularly at ease when I play outdoors. That is why most of the concerts I organize take place outside. There is something fascinating about the unpredictability this implies: birds, wind, the sea, the elements add themselves to the original composition and give it an additional dimension. This interaction with the environment fully forms part of the musical experience.

It is also the spirit of the exhibition *Voir la mer*, with which I collaborate: bringing nature and its elements back into the heart of the city. For my next album, I would like to capture sounds from nature and integrate them directly into certain pieces.

You toured China in 2025 and another tour is planned for June and July 2026. How did you perceive the reception of Chinese audiences compared with other international audiences? Did

this experience change your approach to certain works or your relationship to the stage?

Yes, absolutely. Three weeks on tour in China, with twelve concerts from Shanghai to Shenzhen, were a wonderful discovery. At the very first concert in Shanghai, in a magnificent hall before nearly 1,500 people, the audience applauded rather briefly at the end. I was initially surprised, almost worried, wondering whether they had truly appreciated our performance. Then, during the signing session, the audience crowded in large numbers to speak with us. I understood that the expression of enthusiasm was simply different from that of French audiences, who often applaud at length but do not always extend the moment afterward.

This cultural difference marked me deeply, and I particularly appreciated the quality of the exchanges after the performances. There were also nuances from one city to another. This tour was a profound enrichment.

I have also had the opportunity to perform in Dubai, Scandinavia and Mexico. Each time, I was struck by listening traditions, codes and the way audiences express their attention. Everywhere, I felt great respect for musicians, but expressed according to very different sensibilities.

Which concert marked you the most in these experiences?

I enjoy performing in France because there is often someone I know in the audience. Abroad, this is not the case, but it sometimes leads me to choose one person in the hall and tell myself that, that evening, I am playing for them.

It creates a particular, even silent, bond. The concert that marked me most remains undoubtedly the first one we gave in China, in Shanghai. It was a major first, in a magnificent hall, in a country I was very eager to discover. The moment was both solemn and deeply moving. Another very strong memory is the release concert for my latest album, *Bleu Nuit*. I was particularly emotional, as it marked the culmination of a project that meant a great deal to me.

Looking ahead to 2026, what are your projects?

I am currently working very intensively on completing my first solo album. My last record was a duo with violinist Florestan Raës ; this time, I will carry the album alone and, for the first time, it will bring together my own compositions. Its release will be followed by a tour in China of around twenty-five concerts, in a four-musician



chamber music formation combining classical repertoire and film music. In summer 2026, I will also continue developing the festival I organize, before going back on tour, notably in Scandinavia.

Through your activities as producer, composer and musician, how do you assume your role as a leader in a very demanding musical environment?

At first, I had many doubts. I partly chose to step outside the traditional system in order not to be confined within certain expectations. The environment in which I was trained does not always encourage musicians to produce their own projects—and even less so women musicians.

I accepted fairly early on that any work would be criticized. And ultimately, if people talk about it, even critically, it means it exists. That helped me gain distance. Moving slightly away from a more academic framework does not mean rejecting it, since that is how I acquired my skills. But I needed another space in which to develop my vision. My choice to live in the South is also part of this approach. That breathing space allows me to take distance and perform better.

I am not sure I was “born a leader,” but I have always wanted to defend my vision. I learn every day to delegate and to lead in a healthy way. In reality, music initiates us very early into leadership dynamics. The orchestra is structured by a precise hierarchy. From childhood, I aspired to be principal cellist. Even today, I know what I wish to carry artistically and I am ready to defend it, while keeping in mind that collective balance remains essential for a project to function.

What does being a “Young Leader” mean to you today? What do you take away from your experience within the Young Leaders program of the Fondation France-Asie, whose second session will soon be held in China?

I found this experience particularly enriching. It allowed me to exchange with people from backgrounds different from my own, who have a concrete perspective on project management, business development or the structuring of an activity. These exchanges nourished me greatly. The organization of the program strongly encouraged dialogue, and I was able to speak with all participants. I was then in the midst of preparing my festival, which made these discussions all the more inspiring. One often hears that culture cannot generate a viable economic model.

Yet I am convinced that there are ways to imagine solid artistic projects with a possible financial balance. This experience also helped evolve my vision, sometimes still very academic, of things. It encouraged me to think differently about the articulation between artistic exigency and project viability. I made very meaningful encounters and I look forward with great enthusiasm to the continuation of the program.

On the eve of this tour in China, do you wish to pursue and develop your musical work in Asia in the years to come?

Yes, absolutely. I would very much like to strengthen these ties and anchor my work over the long term in Asia. I am also considering surrounding myself more locally. The idea would be to create genuine artistic bridges with different Asian countries and to deploy my projects there over the long term.

Which piece from your album *Bleu Nuit* would you recommend listening to while reading this interview?

Since we have spoken at length about nature, I would recommend listening to *Morgen* by Richard Strauss, included on the album *Bleu Nuit*. It is a piece that resonates particularly with this universe. Perhaps also *Soir* by Mel Bonis, a French composer whom I greatly admire.

Clara Germont

Clara Germont is a French concert cellist and entrepreneur whose career is already remarkable. Trained at the Conservatoire de Paris, the Hochschule in Bern, and the École Normale de Musique de Paris, she studied under great masters such as Philippe Muller and Henri Demarquette. A prizewinner in several international competitions, she has performed on numerous stages in France and abroad. At the age of 22, she founded the Festival des Cours parisiennes, before co-founding the label Nouvelle Vague Records in 2024. In 2025, she released her first album, *Bleu Nuit*, acclaimed by both audiences and critics, which quickly surpassed one million streams. This recording, both sensitive and immersive, reflects her singular artistic universe, nourished by nature, sonic poetry, and the dialogue between classical repertoire and contemporary inspirations. Clara Germont also directs the ensemble SÉLÉNÉ, which she created to explore a repertoire ranging from Vivaldi to contemporary creation. Curious and committed, she develops cross-disciplinary projects combining music, heritage, wine, and gastronomy, and has published an essay devoted to the role of art during the First World War. Between stage performance, creation, and production, she embodies a new generation of artists—free, bold, and fully anchored in their time.



**FONDATION
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