



How Trump's 'Pearl Harbor' joke caught Japanese PM Takaichi off guard

US President Donald Trump had a bilateral meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi at the White House on Thursday

By [Sarath Ramesh Kuniyl](#) | Updated: March 20, 2026 10:18 IST



US President Donald Trump with Japan's Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington | AFP

Trust US President Donald Trump to spring a surprise!

During a bilateral meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi at the White House on Thursday, Trump made a gaffe when he invoked Japan's 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor. The meeting started on a lighter note, with the US president praising Takaichi for her understanding of the English language. When a journalist tried to pose a question to Trump, he stopped her and said that Takaichi's translator will translate it for the PM. "It's okay," Takaichi, however, said. Is that okay?" Trump asked, and added: "Do you understand? It's very good, I'll tell you. I mean, it's so nice that we don't have to sit (through translation) no, it's very good.

I haven't, I haven't picked up your language, so the next time you come, I will have your language back," he said, suggesting he will try and learn Japanese.

However, the awkward moment came when Trump, in response to a question about why allies like Japan were not notified of strikes in Iran, jokingly referred to the attack on Pearl Harbor. "We didn't tell anybody about it because we wanted surprise. Who knows better about surprise than Japan? Why didn't you tell me about Pearl Harbor? OK?," he said, looking at the Japanese PM. Takaichi's smile appeared to fade as Trump made this comment, and her eyebrows were raised.

Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, killed more than 2,400 Americans and led the United States to enter World War II. The US later dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to devastating effect, recording the only use of nuclear weapons in history.

Takaichi is among the first allied leaders to meet Trump since the US and Israel launched strikes on Iran on February 28. The meeting followed his public remarks suggesting that Japan was among the nations that had not promptly joined his call to help secure the Strait of Hormuz.

During their discussions, Takaichi conveyed Japan's firm opposition to Iran's nuclear programme. Speaking through an interpreter, she described the current situation in the Middle East and globally as "very severe". "Even against that backdrop, I firmly believe that it is only you, Donald, who can achieve peace across the world," she said.

Trump, too, referred to Takaichi as a "popular, powerful woman". "This is a spectacular woman, and it's an honour to have you at the White House." The Japanese PM, speaking through an interpreter, referred to the leaders as "best buddies" and then said in English, "Japan is back."

Earlier on Thursday, leaders from five European countries and Japan had released a joint statement, urging Iran to cease attacks on the Strait of Hormuz, which disrupt commercial shipping. They also indicated readiness to contribute to "appropriate efforts" to ensure safe passage for vessels, although details were not given.

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Trump informed reporters that he and Takaichi would discuss Japan's level of support for US actions concerning the Strait of Hormuz, saying, "They are really stepping up to the plate." The US President later said that a significant portion of the oil Japan depends on travels through the Strait of Hormuz, suggesting, "So that's a big reason to step up." He also mentioned the scale of US defence spending in Japan and the presence of US troops there.

"I expect Japan to step up, you know, because we have that kind of relationship," Trump said.

Following the meeting, Takaichi informed reporters that both leaders agreed on the critical importance of securing the Strait of

Hormuz. However, she provided President Trump with a detailed explanation of the actions Japan can and cannot undertake according to its national laws.

In addition to discussions on Iran, Takaichi and Trump finalised a nuclear reactor deal valued at \$40 billion, as confirmed by the White House.

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