



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



POLICY BRIEF

India and Japan: Time to Refocus on Indo-Pacific Stability

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Cover Photographs:

Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Japan's former Prime Ministers Shinzo Abe and Yoshiro Mori at the Japan-India Association meeting in Tokyo on May 24, 2022. (Source: [PM Narendra Modi/ Official Twitter](#))

Prime Minister Narendra Modi at summit meeting with Prime Minister Kishida Fumio of Japan in New Delhi on March 20, 2023. (Source: [Prime Minister's Office of Japan/ Official Website](#))

Prime Minister Narendra Modi meeting with Prime Minister Anthony Albanese of Australia, Prime Minister Kishida Fumio of Japan, and President Joseph Biden of the United States, at the 2023 Quad Leaders' Summit in Hiroshima on May 20, 2023. (Source: [President Biden/Official Twitter](#))

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India and Japan: Time to Refocus on Indo-Pacific Stability

by

Hemant Krishan Singh

A year after the tragic assassination of Japan's former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, his political legacy and strategic vision of Japan as a reprimed major power playing a leading role in the Indo-Pacific, and on the world stage, continue to influence Japan's policy making, particularly on national security and defence.

This has been most evident in Japan's revised National Security Strategy (NSS), National Defence Strategy, and Defence Plan, which were adopted by Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's cabinet on December 16, 2022.

Japan's NSS recognised that China's activities posed an "unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge in ensuring the peace and security of Japan and the peace and stability of the international community." For a nation that is heavily interdependent with China in the areas of trade, technology and investment, this was a major step. Furthermore, the NSS and its accompanying documents discarded the hesitation and ambivalence of the past, and underlined Japan's commitment to double defence spending, build defence capability to deter and combat regional threats, accumulate comprehensive national power, further deepen alliance cooperation with the US, and pursue international security cooperation with like-minded partners, including India. Prospects for Japan's own contributions to regional security have risen, and it is also looking to revise its longstanding three principles for defence transfers.

This trend in Japan's security posture has continued with the release of its annual Defence White Paper on July 28, 2023. While noting that the international community is "entering a new era of crisis", the "global balance of power has shifted dramatically", and the "competition between China and the United States is expected to intensify", the White Paper again describes China as Japan's "greatest strategic challenge". It also highlights concerns about the accelerating momentum of China's military modernisation and its nuclear buildup, China's growing military actions around Taiwan, Russia's deepening military cooperation with China, and ever more imminent threats to Japan from the DPRK. The White Paper reiterates Japan's intention of doubling defence spending to 2% of GDP by 2027, while elaborating on the decision to acquire "counter-strike" capability for enhanced deterrence.

Before his death, Shinzo Abe had increasingly underlined the need to shed ambiguity over support for Taiwan, and had recognised its strategic importance for Japan's security. Under PM Kishida, Japan has taken this

further, affirming strong opposition to unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion regardless of wherever they occur, and joining hands with the US and South Korea in emphasising the importance of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as an indispensable element of the security and prosperity of the international community. Trilateral security cooperation between the US, Japan and South Korea has expanded rapidly and significantly.

The Quadrilateral security dialogue (Quad), initiated by Abe in 2007 and revived in 2017 amidst vastly changed strategic circumstances, showcases the success of interests-based minilateral diplomacy among the leading maritime democracies of the Indo-Pacific. Raised by the US to the summit level, the Quad is continuing to progress; receptivity towards it as a factor of reassurance is growing in South East Asia. It is also expanding its outreach to existing regional institutions (ASEAN, IORA, PIF), and is broadening its ambit to include the Indian Ocean. The Quad is not a military alliance; its purpose is shaping a favourable strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific. For India and Japan, it provides an additional opportunity to work with the US and Australia on practical cooperation to provide regional public goods, enhance maritime security, and promote rules-based architecture.

However, while there is considerable policy continuity in post-Abe Japan, there is also some change in its overall security and foreign policy outlook, which needs to be better understood in the context of enhancing bilateral diplomatic and strategic coordination, as well as security and defence cooperation, between India and Japan.

PM Kishida has pursued an activist foreign policy that has been well received by domestic public opinion. Under his leadership, Japan has allied itself more closely with the interests of the West, devoted what some might see as outsized attention to Europe, welcomed NATO engagement with Asia, and abandoned Abe's carefully nuanced outreach to Russia. Japan has provided unprecedented economic and non-lethal military aid to Ukraine, underscoring its commitment as a US ally, its solidarity with the G7, EU and NATO, and its role as the closest partner of the West in Asia.

Abe's vision for the Indo-Pacific recognised India as an integral component of Asia's strategic balance, with Japan and India as book ends shoring up regional stability across a seamless oceanic space. This paradigm changing premise has never been fully reflected in bilateral security ties, given Japan's predominant focus on East Asia. It could now recede further, as PM Kishida redirects attention from Abe's Free and Open Indo-Pacific to a Free and Open

International Order, which regards the security of Europe and the Indo-Pacific as “inseparable”, and prioritises US alliance frameworks.

Not surprisingly, given the current orientation of Japan’s security policy, the Ukraine issue has overshadowed India-Japan bilateral summits held in March 2022 and March 2023, to the extent that the latter summit did not conclude with a Joint Statement on agreed outcomes. This did not reflect well on the state of the India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership (SSGP).

In a public address in New Delhi on March 20, 2023¹, PM Kishida spoke of moving the international community in the direction of cooperation rather than division and confrontation; respecting diversity, inclusiveness and openness; “rule making through dialogue”; “equal partnership” among countries; and a “people” centric approach. These important precepts resonate well with India’s own policies in the international arena.

However, over the summer, Japan’s decision making has been largely confined within the G7 framework, and has remained heavily focused on the collective economic and security interests of the advanced Western economies. Marginalised from global decision making, while at the same time bearing the consequences of stalled multilateral cooperation and widespread economic disruption, the Global South received modest attention at the G7 summit chaired by Japan.

Meanwhile, as Chair of G20, India has been working constructively for global economic growth and development, and towards a more balanced and equitable distribution of global finance, technology and resources to the post-pandemic, debt-burdened, nations of the Global South. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has described India’s approach in the following words: “No group can claim global leadership without listening to those most affected by its decisions.”

In terms of regional architecture in the Indo-Pacific, India’s initiatives envisage flexible and inclusive partnerships among equal stakeholders, and contribute meaningfully towards cooperative, rules-based order.

In line with its decision to deepen cooperation with NATO as it increases engagement in the Indo-Pacific, Japan concluded an Individually Tailored

¹ Policy Speech by Prime Minister KISHIDA Fumio at the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), New Delhi, March 20, 2023, entitled: “The Future of the Indo-Pacific—Japan’s New Plan for a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ – ‘Together with India, as an Indispensable Partner’ ” https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/pc/page1e_000586.html

Partnership Programme (ITPP) with NATO for the period 2023-26 on July 12, 2023. The Japan-NATO ITPP will strengthen strategic dialogue and consultations, enhance resilience, and build interoperability between the two sides. This has been described as a step-up in Japan's cooperation with the world's most powerful military alliance, amid shared concerns about Russia and China. There is talk of jointly exploring with NATO how and where the security of the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific intersect.

But Japan's desire to seek a wider network of security partnerships going beyond the Indo-Pacific is meeting some resistance from Europe itself. A proposal to set up a NATO liaison office in Tokyo was shelved at the NATO summit held on July 11-12, 2023. While affirming that NATO must keep its focus firmly on the North Atlantic region, French President Emmanuel Macron bluntly declared: "Geography is stubborn – the Indo-Pacific is not the North Atlantic". Apparently, the age of Atlantic-Pacific security partnership has not yet arrived, and NATO is not about to become a global military alliance based on the contention that "security is not regional, security is global".

At the same time, several major European powers have adopted extensive Indo-Pacific strategies, and have increased their military presence in and joint exercises with countries in the region, thereby contributing towards deterrence and bolstering support for rules-based order in the maritime domain, from East Asia to the Indian Ocean.

The reality today is that beyond US allies in the Indo-Pacific, the conflict in Europe is not being seen as a defining issue for Asia. Irrespective of its eventual outcome, Asia will remain the hub of global economic dynamism, and its geopolitical significance will continue to rise.

India and Japan approach the world of escalating great power rivalry from their distinct national perspectives, with strategically independent India seeking an equitable, inclusive and multipolar Asia and world order, and Japan as a US ally upholding the primacy of the US in the Indo-Pacific, as well as of the US-led Western global order. Neither India nor Japan can directly or fully address each other's security concerns, but if they retain the broader Indo-Pacific security outlook envisaged by Abe, they can certainly work together to mitigate challenges where their interests converge.

The 15th India-Japan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue was held in New Delhi on July 27, 2023, providing a timely opportunity for comprehensive discussions to deepen the bilateral SSGP in diverse fields, and setting the stage for enhanced collaboration on regional and global issues.

As leading Asian powers and strategic partners, India and Japan have a primary stake in ensuring regional stability in the Indo-Pacific, and must redouble joint efforts to ensure that Asia's future is not set back by military conflict, economic coercion, or authoritarian expansionism. Updating the bilateral Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation, which dates back to 2008, and the accompanying Action Plan of 2009, to reflect current day security challenges, should be an immediate priority for both nations. It is time for India and Japan to recall Shinzo Abe's prescient vision and refocus attention on their vital interests in the Indo-Pacific.



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