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**India’s strategic autonomy:**

**A lesson for Japan**

BY Tomoko Kiyota

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Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio’s official visit to India in mid-March in the midst of the Ukraine crisis highlighted the two countries’ differing stances on international affairs. While the statement issued during his visit shows that these two countries have deepened defense and security cooperation since the early 2000s, they could not agree on a strong message against Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. This disagreement is unlikely to impact their relationship in the immediate future but could be a good lesson for Tokyo on Delhi’s strategic autonomy—and w6 ahat that might mean for a future crisis for Japan.

**Kishida’s visit to India**

Kishida’s official visit on March 19-20 kicked off the 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Japan and India. It also restarted annual mutual visits, halted in 2019 due to unrest in India, and not resumed due to the pandemic. Though several summit meetings between the two, both virtual and in-person, took place during the pandemic, resumption of mutual visits symbolically reconfirms ties.

After their summit meeting, Kishida and Modi [issued](https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100319162.pdf) a joint statement covering a variety of security issues, including the South China Sea, North Korea, Afghanistan, terrorism, Myanmar, and cybersecurity. They welcomed the first 2+2 meeting of their foreign and defense ministers since November 2019 and operationalization of the [Agreement](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_002896.html) Concerning Reciprocal Provision of Supplies and Services between the two forces. They directed ministers to identify concrete areas for future cooperation in defense equipment and technology, beyond ongoing collaboration in unmanned ground vehicles (UGV) and robotics.

They also expressed serious concern about the ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, reiterating their call for an immediate cessation of violence.

The statement, however, avoided naming Russia.

**India’s strategic autonomy**

That New Delhi would continue its traditional stance toward international affairs was obvious as soon as Russia started its “special military operation” in Ukraine on Feb. 24. While Japan, the United States, Australia, and European nations condemned Moscow’s action and imposed economic sanctions, India refrained from criticizing its old friend Russia directly. US President Joe Biden and his senior staff have had several consultations with Indian counterparts and urged them to take a clear position since the incident occurred, but these consultations have not gone according to Washington’s plans. India was one of the minority of countries abstaining from the United Nations resolution condemning Russia for invading Ukraine. US President Joe Biden told a business forum on March 22 that India is being “[somewhat shaky](https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-says-india-somewhat-shaky-russia-over-ukraine-2022-03-22/)”compared to Japan and Australia.

India prefers realpolitik over morals, as Dev Goswami, a senior assistant editor at *India Today*, writes. He justifies this position as two-thirds of India’s military equipment has Russian [origins](https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/india-russia-ukraine-war-united-nations-abstain-diplomacy-1921692-2022-03-07), which India cannot afford to risk when it faces a potential “two-front” (China and Pakistan) war. Russian oil could attract India as well. Indian Oil Corp., India’s top refiner, recently [ordered](https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/indias-oil-imports-us-rise-amid-criticism-russian-purchases-2022-03-19/) 3 million barrels of Russian oil, while Hindustan Petroleum Corp has booked 2 million barrels.

That said, India also abstained from the UN resolution submitted by Russia on the humanitarian situation in Ukraine. In addition, India has “unequivocally condemned” killings in Bucha in Ukraine by Russian soldiers at the UN on April 6. This also shows how India maintains its strategic autonomy or “[proactive neutrality](https://asiatimes.com/2022/03/indias-ukraine-policy-becoming-focus-of-us-western-allies/).” Since its independence from British colonialism, India has vowed to chart an independent course in its foreign relations. It led the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War to avoid involvement in the conflict between the Western and the Eastern blocs. Even though India signed the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 1971 after the Indo-Pakistan War, many Indians have long hesitated to call their relationship an alliance.

**Leading power**

Why, then, does India participate in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (“Quad”) with Japan, the United States, and Australia? Rivalry with China could be one of the factors, but a driver could also be India’s interest to become a “leading power” in the world. Indian leaders have been interested in reaching this status since independence, but that interest has grown considerably with its economic rise in the 2000s. India must engage with countries like the United States, Russia, China, Australia, and Japan to become a leading power. In the last 20 years, India’s steps have oscillated between maintaining strategic autonomy and pursuing world power status. It finally became a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) led by Russia and China in 2017, in addition to agreeing to an in-person summit meeting among the Quad leaders last September. 

At the same time, New Delhi is also strengthening its leadership as a “big brother” among smaller neighbors as Modi [launched](https://indiafoundation.in/articles-and-commentaries/neighbourhood-policy-of-modi-government-challenges-and-opportunities/) “Neighbourhood First”—focused on the good relations and co-development of South Asian countries—or “Act East”—strengthening India’s relations with Southeast Asia—policies during his first term. This clearly appeared when India started “Vaccine Maitri (friendship)” and [supplied vaccines](https://mea.gov.in/vaccine-supply.htm) to nearly 100 countries.

Japan and like-minded partners, then, should leverage this crisis to enable India to play an important role between Russia and the United States. Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar told Indian parliamentarians in late March that India’s position is based on six principles—1) to “stand for peace,” and the immediate cessation of violence and hostilities, 2) dialogue and diplomacy, 3) the global order anchored on international law, 4) humanitarian access, 5) to provide humanitarian assistance, and 6) for India to stay in touch with the leadership of both Russia and Ukraine. He further said that Modi has [spoken](https://indianexpress.com/article/india/peace-no-question-linking-ukraine-situation-trade-s-jaishankar-7834457/) with Russian President Vladimir Putin three times and to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy twice, and suggested a direct conversation between two parties.

**Conclusions**

New Delhi’s response to the Ukraine crisis might disappoint Tokyo but will not impact Japan-India relations immediately. Although Kishida reacted sharply against Russia, Tokyo usually shows an ambivalent attitude toward international affairs, not so dissimilar to India. Due to wartime experiences and their prioritizing of economic relations, Japan is not like those Western nations that have a proclivity to compel other countries to behave like them. Ukraine is too far away for both countries to damage the relationship that has developed over the last 20 years.

Still, a good lesson for Japanese is how their counterparts in India react to an international crisis. India does not align with a majority of the world when their policy might harm its national interest. It means that India also might not support Japan even when it faces a crisis. Tokyo should not expect too much from India, yet many in Japan still want to believe that expansion of security cooperation between two countries, as well as face-to-face summits among Quad members, are evidence that the ties could lead to a significant upgrade, perhaps to a quasi-alliance in the near future.

Japan should remember that India does not promise anything.

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