



## ***POST-ABE INDIA-JAPAN TIES: DOES KISHIDA HAVE WHAT IT TAKES?***

BY DR. JAGANNATH PANDA

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Two Japan-India summit meetings between prime ministers Kishida Fumio and Narendra Modi in 2022 underscore their accelerating [Special Strategic and Global Partnership](#). This partnership is [based](#) on the shared values of freedom, humanism, democracy, tolerance, and non-violence, outlined in the Abe-Modi vision statement of 2018.

In [Modi's](#) words, “The best is yet to come.”

Indeed, 2022 is proving pivotal for India and Japan in their search for geopolitical power and for the trajectory of their bilateral relations. That this is their 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic relations is incidental. Both are seen as increasingly relevant partners in uncertain times—the difference is that Japan is a natural, credible partner of the West, whereas India is walking a tightrope amid [enticement](#) from both China and the West. Modi's and Kishida's personal diplomacy in the wake of the Ukraine war is largely responsible for this growing attention. But will they be able to achieve the “[Broader Asia](#)” vision that the former (late) Prime Minister Abe Shinzo promoted, to build a united (and stronger) Indo-Pacific that is already geographically and spatially in motion? Can Kishida endure the [political void](#) (and maturity) in India-Japan ties left by Abe's assassination?

The primary aim of Kishida's March visit was to convince India to take a stand against Russia, yet their bilateral ties have remained unaffected amid the dissonance. The [meeting](#) covered a range of issues including economic security, supply chains, climate action, sustainable development in India's northeast, trade and investment, loan provisions, digital partnerships, and connectivity.

Although the heads of state met after a gap of four years, Kishida continued the momentum of his predecessors—particularly Abe—amid [speculations](#) of Kishida's differences from Abe and his intent to carve out his own niche. Abe, as leader of the largest political faction (Seiwakai) in the Liberal Democratic Party, wielded tremendous clout, even after his 2020 resignation. Abe was instrumental in not only building multidirectional India-Japan ties but in persuading Modi to embrace the “free and open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) construct, a bulwark against China. As chairman of the Japan-India Association since May, the loss of Abe's guidance will be felt in both countries.

Moving forward, the synergy Abe achieved must be accorded special focus and significance by successive Japanese (and Indian) administrations. On the economic front, Japan's [investment](#) of 5 trillion yen (\$42 billion) in India over five years will take forward the legacy of the target set during Abe's tenure. Their bilateral connect is set for a fillip through the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework ([IPEF](#)) covering digital trade, supply chains, and clean energy, etc. which would ensure greater market access and secure digital infrastructure. This would help their outreach with Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

One area where progress remains slow is India-Japan cooperation in third countries, or the region at large. This includes bilateral collaboration in Indian Ocean countries, the Middle East, African countries (via barely developed initiatives like the [Asia-Africa Growth Corridor](#)), and Southeast Asia. Unexplored outreach in Northeast Asia is also compelling, especially amid this year's [increased nuclear threat](#) from North Korea. The “global” nature of the India-Japan partnership is yet to fully develop.

Tokyo has emerged a major developmental partner for India, with collaborative projects across the country. This bilateral infrastructure cooperation must now go forward, and Abe's envisioned expansion of India-Japan infrastructure projects to Bay of Bengal countries and, eventually, Southeast Asian states is key. Japan has long been a major, highly trusted infrastructure [partner](#) for ASEAN. Much scope remains for the two countries to realize their vision of a global partnership through greater trilateral [India-Japan-ASEAN](#) cooperation.

In Northeast Asia, amid the deteriorating security architecture (due to China and North Korea), one way to push forward a joint endeavor is via a Japan-India-South Korea trilateral—a realistic ambition after South Korea's increasing embrace of the FOIP concept and the promise of closer Japan-South Korea ties under President Yoon Suk Yeol.

Two critical regions in need of further impetus are the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean. In the Bay of Bengal—where India's Act East Policy and Japan's FOIP through the Expanded Partnership of Quality Infrastructure show confluence amid increasing Chinese influence—they could promote information sharing, capacity building, and maritime security via [joint military exercises](#), the connectivity initiatives of the East Asia Forum, and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue's maritime diplomacy. In the Indian Ocean, where Japan's FOIP and India's Security and Growth for All in the Region visions converge, Japan already [leads](#) the Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative's connectivity pillar. However, under current circumstances, a trilateral with France—an active collaborator with India—and coalescing with other Quad states would strengthen the regional security landscape.

To boost the Indo-Pacific security architecture and balance the largely US-led initiatives, a India-Japan-European Union trilateral would [create](#) a much-needed “global value-oriented, trustworthy and confidence-inducing grouping.” The recent antagonism by China, including Russian support for “[indivisible security](#),” tactics in the beleaguered regions of Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans, and its vetoing (with Russia) of additional

United Nations sanctions against North Korea, fuels a shared threat perception between the three. Collaboration via the European Union's Global Gateway and India and Japan's Supply Chain Resilience Initiative will further infrastructure connectivity and help in gradual decoupling from China.

Further, Kishida's sharp policy maneuvers (voicing support for Taiwan and attending the NATO Madrid summit) targeting China will likely favor India's stand and Delhi's emerging position in global geopolitics—his [declaration](#) of strengthening like-minded partnerships amid increasing defense capabilities is a more than a nod to Abe's hawkish China policy.

In view of their joint vision for the region and the vital role they play in the Indo-Pacific, both countries must join their efforts and initiate more projects for the benefit of their neighborhoods. As middle powers, combining their strengths—such as through minilateral groupings, coordinated positions in multilateral frameworks, and formation of a maritime corridor stretching from India to Japan (via ASEAN)—will be crucial for both countries to make a real impact in the region, as well as advance Abe's legacy of shaping a universal values-oriented international order.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.*