

## **Kishida Visits India: Signifying Delhi's Importance in Tokyo's Strategic Outlook**

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### **Summary**

*Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida visited India on 20 and 21 March 2023 to discuss multilateral and global issues and the role of Japan and India in the G7 and G20 meetings. He also delivered a significant speech on his vision of a new Indo-Pacific plan. Kishida aimed to strengthen the bilateral relationship, which had slowed since Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's resignation, and to convince India to take a tough stance on Russia's invasion of Ukraine.*

Just one year ago, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida visited India for a summit meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in March 2022, and on 20 March 2023, he travelled to Delhi again. This visit was unusual since the annual prime ministerial summit was due this year in Tokyo, with Modi travelling to Japan.

Kishida's visit aimed to hold "delegation level talks" with Modi. He had two key objectives in mind. First, while reasserting the importance of bilateral relations, Kishida aimed to discuss multilateral and global issues and the role Japan and India could play as the leaders and hosts of this year's G7 and G20 respectively. The second purpose was to deliver a significant speech and offer his vision of a new "Indo-Pacific plan" in an era that Kishida has described as the "paradigm shifts" because of the global pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Kishida also aimed to discuss with Modi in person the common agendas and challenges such as food security, climate change and energy facing the global community that should be addressed in the G7 and G20 meetings. He expects to offer solutions to those challenges through a coordinated response between the industrialised group of the G7 and the G20 grouping representing the world's significant economies.

In an op-ed piece in [Indian Express](#), published on his arrival in Delhi, Kishida highlighted India's importance and called it "the land where the dynamics of the world – the Pacific and the Indian Oceans – converge". Delivering the [41<sup>st</sup> Sapru House Lecture](#) in Delhi, Kishida called India an "indispensable partner" in maintaining freedom and the rule of law.

While strategic convergence has brought the two countries closer, developed especially during Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's two terms in 2006-07 and 2012-20, the intensity of the bilateral relationship slowed following Abe's resignation in 2020. Leadership change in Tokyo was one reason. Abe's successor, Yoshihide Suga, resigned after one year, with Kishida replacing him in late 2021. Abe and Modi had developed a strong personal bond that helped lift the bilateral relationship to a new height. With leadership changes, the personal touch weakened.

Furthermore, India's decision not to join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and Delhi's response to the war in Ukraine by not directly condemning Russia and maintaining closer ties with Moscow have frustrated Tokyo. Japan expected India to join the RCEP as a balancer against China, and Kishida's Delhi visit in 2022 aimed to persuade India to be tough on Russia. India, however, has maintained its long-held strong partnership with Russia.

When Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi did not attend the G20 foreign ministers meeting in February this year because of his domestic commitments, he received rebukes from Japan's opposition parties while also giving wrong signals to India, the host of the meeting. [Some Indian media outlets](#) regarded his absence as an "unbelievable" decision and warned of a "potential blow to bilateral ties". However, Hayashi quickly righted his action by attending the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue foreign ministers meeting soon after the G20 foreign ministers meeting.

Kishida's visit has put those concerns to rest and symbolised India's importance in Japan's overall foreign policy objectives. India's importance also increases significantly as a leader of the global south whose voice is likely to become louder on the world stage. During his visit, Kishida personally invited Modi as one of the special invitees to the G7 meeting in Hiroshima scheduled for May this year. He reassured his Indian counterpart of Japan's commitment to the unique and strategic partnership between the two nations, notwithstanding their differing approaches on some global and regional matters.

Kishida's choice of New Delhi as the venue to outline his major foreign policy speech also attests to India's centrality in Japan's vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). Although Abe developed the FOIP concept in his speech in Nairobi in 2016, its genesis can be traced to Abe's "[confluence of the two seas](#)" speech in 2007 in the Indian parliament. Kishida [acknowledged](#) that "India is the place where FOIP came into being".

During his Shangri La Dialogue speech in Singapore last year, the Japanese prime minister advanced a five-pillar "[Kishida vision for peace](#)". Of these pillars, the first pillar was his commitment to maintaining and strengthening a rules-based free and open international order. To that end, he announced to lay out a "[Free and Open Indo-Pacific Plan for Peace](#)" by early 2023. At the Sapru House lecture, Kishida outlined his "four pillars of cooperation for FOIP" that included principles for peace and rules for prosperity. In each of these pillars, he emphasised the role of Japan and India as partners.

One mission of Kishida was to convince the Modi government to take a tough stance on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Japan and India have followed different approaches to the war in Ukraine. While Japan has acted in concert with the United States and Europe in imposing sanctions on Russia and helping Ukraine within Japan's constitutional restrictions on military cooperation, India has not condemned Russia directly nor imposed any sanctions. On the contrary, India-Russia relations have been business as usual, with more significant imports of Russian oil since the war broke out in February 2022.

Although no new and significant announcements were made about the bilateral relationship during Kishida's visit, his two-day trip signified the continued importance of India in Japan's

overall strategic outlook and the centrality of India as a partner in maintaining a global order based on the rule of law.

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