

Kishida-Modi Summit: Reaffirmation of Strong Bilateral Ties

Purnendra Jain

Summary

The 2022 Fumio Kishida-Narendra Modi summit held in New Delhi was significant, as it came after postponements of two prime ministerial scheduled visits to India in 2019 and 2021. Although it lacked the previous warmth and optics of Shinzo Abe's visits to India, the relationship today stands firmly on a solid institutional structure and shared strategic outlook able to withstand current differences on approaching the Ukraine crisis.

Introduction

The March 2022 summit between Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and his Indian counterpart, Narendra Modi, was significant for three reasons. First, the annual summit held since 2006 alternatively in India and Japan could not take place after Modi's visit to Japan in 2018. The 2019 scheduled visit of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was postponed owing to ongoing political protests in Assam, the meeting venue, while Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga cancelled his India trip in 2021 because of rising COVID-19 cases in Japan. Second, 2022 marks the 70th anniversary of the signature of a peace treaty between the two nations in 1952. Third, although Kishida is [not new to India](#), this was his first visit to India as prime minister since he took office in October 2021, and comes ahead of his visits to the United States and other key partners in the Indo-Pacific such as Australia.

The Summit and Highlights

As is customary, the two leaders [issued a long joint statement](#) reviewing past commitments and reconfirming their cooperation and partnership in wide-ranging areas of mutual interests and global matters while also pledging to strengthen bilateral ties. However, unlike past visits of Japanese prime ministers, this was a rather short business-like visit that lacked the previous optics, personal warmth and hospitality on display when Abe visited India in 2007 and subsequently after 2012.

The key takeaways of this summit included an announcement of a plan to invest ¥5 trillion or US\$42 billion (S\$57 billion) in India over five years, in addition to the ¥3.5 trillion (S\$39.2 billion) that Abe had pledged in 2014. While plans of providing public and private finance show Japan's confidence in India's economy and its future, it is unclear who will invest and in which sectors. The figure of US\$42 billion (S\$56.99 billion) seems ambitious, given Japan invested only US\$32 billion (S\$43.45 billion) in India between 2000 and 2019 and [investment nosedived](#) in 2020 and 2021.

Besides the trillions of yen in investments to come from public and private sources, the two countries have also signed an exchange of notes of ¥300 billion (S\$3.36 billion) under

Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) programme, covering [seven infrastructure and development projects](#), including the Chennai Metro, and to improve the health system, water supply and connectivity. It is not unusual for visiting Japanese prime ministers to announce large sums of investment and make ODA commitments during their overseas trips, known as 'gift diplomacy' (*omiyage gaiko*), or special dispensation with strategic and diplomatic intentions, often to 'win friends and influence people'. Since China fell off Japan's ODA radar, India has become Japan's top aid destination with the [Mumbai-Ahmedabad Bullet train project](#) – currently underway – as the flagship of all ODA projects in India.

The Ukraine crisis was another highlight of the visit, particularly [underscored by Japanese media and commentators](#). Kishida, like the other Quad leaders, wanted to draw India into the Ukrainian crisis and asked Modi to take a clear stance condemning Russia. However, India would not be drawn into it, as the joint statement clearly showed. Both leaders simply "expressed their serious concern about the ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis in Ukraine and assessed its broader implications, particularly to the Indo-Pacific region." The joint statement also did not mention Russia but evinced that Tokyo and New Delhi "would undertake appropriate steps to address the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine". Following the summit talks with Modi, Kishida stated that that ["Russia's invasion of Ukraine had shaken the roots of international order" and required a clear and diplomatic response](#). But India has clearly and consistently indicated its stance, as India's External Affairs Minister, S Jaishankar, stated at [the Quad's foreign ministers meeting in Melbourne](#).

Solid Foundations of Bilateral Ties

Despite divergences on Ukraine and Tokyo's disappointment over New Delhi's last-minute withdrawal from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership in 2019, India-Japan relations have gained new heights, especially in defence and security. Today, both sides not only conduct joint military exercises bilaterally and multilaterally but also hold senior-level defence dialogues. In a landmark development, Japan and India signed the Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement in 2020, enhancing strategic depth in the bilateral relationship. They have also established a '2+2' dialogue between the foreign and defence ministers and the first meeting was held in 2019.

Overall, bilateral ties stand on solid ground, and are widening in scope and acquiring strategic depth. This is remarkable and [signifies their mutual trust and strategic maturity](#), after falling out in the wake of India's nuclear testing in 1998. There is always room for improvement, and the summit recognised that by recommitting their "partnership for a peaceful, stable and prosperous post-COVID world".

In Closing

In reference to the summit and Ukraine, veteran Japan specialist of India, Takenori Horimoto, observed that India still follows non-alignment and an omnidirectional foreign policy, supports Japan's Indo-Pacific vision and welcomes Japan's investment and technical know-how while buying the bulk of its weapons from Russia. Using a Japanese idiom, the author compared India to a ['pretty girl who tries to be charming to all'](#) (*happo bijin*).

There is a little disquiet in Tokyo about India's approach to the Ukraine crisis. However, Japan understands the critical role of India for Japan bilaterally and in realising the vision of the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' and for the Quad to succeed.

.

Professor Purnendra Jain is an Emeritus Professor at the Department of Asian Studies, School of Social Sciences, Faculty of Arts at the University of Adelaide, Australia. He can be contacted at purnendra.jain@adelaide.edu.au. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.