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Why Is Japan's Kishida Travelling to India?

Is the Japanese PM making up for his foreign minister's absence at the G-20, or is there more to the trip?

By **Srabani Roy Choudhury**

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (right) meets Kishida Fumio in Tokyo, Japan, Oct. 29, 2018.

Credit: [Indian Ministry of External Affairs](#)

Kishida is visiting India on March 20-21, as part of a bilateral summit meeting that India and Japan have been engaging in since 2006. What, then, makes this visit stand out? According to the protocol of bilateral visits, it is Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's turn to visit Japan.

By visiting India last March, Kishida revived the face-to-face bilateral meeting. Following this, Modi has visited Japan twice – for the Quad summit and funeral of late Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, holding brief meetings with Kishida, reinforcing the significance of India-Japan relations. Yet, this time round, when it was Modi's turn to visit Japan for the bilateral summit, Kishida is travelling to India instead. This has led to some speculation.

The sudden visit of Kishida is seen by many analysts as making amends for Japanese Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa's absence at the Foreign Ministers meeting of G-20 hosted by India, in early March. Instead, State Minister of Japan Yamada Kenji was deputed as his representative. While Hayashi's absence

was explained as stemming from the traditional need for cabinet members to appear before Japan's parliamentary budget committee, it has been pointed out that he spoke for merely [53 seconds](#) on the issue of loneliness faced by overseas Japanese residents.

Considering Kishida has been vocal about Russia's aggression on Ukraine – he has stated, [“Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow”](#) – and is constantly drawing attention to the developments in the East and South China Seas, missing the opportunity to use the forum goes against expectations. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang, Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, U.K. Foreign Secretary James Cleverly, and European Union High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell were all present, making for a rare grouping. The absence was subject to further scrutiny as Hayashi participated in the Quad Ministerial Meeting and Raisina Dialogue the following day.

Having been a foreign minister himself, Kishida is well aware of the importance of being present at an [overseas talk-fest](#). Can it be speculated that since the G-20 Finance Minister and Board of Governors meeting that preceded the G-20 Foreign Ministers' meeting in February did not result in a joint statement, the expectation of any definitive development in this forum was so low that it did not augur Hayashi's presence?

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Whatever the reason, at a time when Japan is advancing its geopolitical significance and positioning, its foreign minister's absence sent the message that the Quad is more important for Japan than the G-20.

While the snap tour by Kishida to India can be construed as an appeasement tour, sparked by Hayashi's absence at the G-20 Foreign Ministers meeting, other significant issues warrant the attention of both leaders. The in-person meeting would help chart a productive course of actions.

This year is significant as India holds the chair of G-20 and Japan that of G-7. Definitely, the two leaders will use this in-person meeting to consult on the agenda of these two forums. The [“rule of law”](#) is the foremost agenda that Japan is upholding in the G-7, which targets Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This very issue is primarily holding back a consensus in the G-20. Thus, in this Kishida-Modi meeting, there will be some compulsions on Japan to help India navigate its leadership and ensure that the Ukraine war issue does not derail India's agenda at the G-20.

Further, the recent positive developments in Australia and India relations, which includes the inking of the [comprehensive economic partnership](#), establishment of working groups, and frequent visits by officials, including Prime Minister Anthony Albanese this year, influences Kishida to discuss and comprehend what India envisages as its trajectory in its relationship with Australia. In addition, he will look at how Japan can align itself to further that vision. As these nations also constitute three-fourths of the Quad, strong bilateral cooperation on all sides will deepen the relationship, facilitating the strategic agenda.

Beyond this, two important matters for consultation will be the digital economy and supply chain concerns. These two areas figure in both the bilateral and Quad agenda and hold critical importance. In the digital economy, the discussion must look beyond the bilateral to include actively pursuing collaboration in a third nation. On supply

chains, India will bring forth the insignificant movement by Japanese companies to India under the “China plus one” initiative of Japan. Also on the agenda will be the near non-functioning of the Resilient Supply Chain Initiative of the Quad in which India, Japan, and Australia were to look at alternative supply chains to counter the “[weaponization of trade](#).”

Apart from this, Kishida and Modi will seek to take stock of commitments made in the previous joint agreement. Defense and railway cooperation will draw attention, along with security concerns due to Russia and China's stand on the international stage. Taking into consideration the Indian economy's stability, further investment from Japan in new areas of critical technologies, which working groups have explored, will come up for discussion.

Japan plans to integrate Northeast India with the rest of Southeast Asia under the bigger plan of a “[Free and Open Indo-Pacific](#).” So far, this has manifested in investment via Japan's Overseas Development Assistance in infrastructure development to enable connectivity. The connectivity looks beyond Northeast India and encompasses Bhutan, Nepal, and Bangladesh. Cooperation on this front is expected to be reviewed, with a focus on encouraging the private Japanese investors to make a more substantial commitment in this region.

Further, with China's growing presence in the Indo-Pacific region, Kishida will outline Japan's new agenda of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, which is expected to expand beyond infrastructure development. As part of their conversation, climate change, Sustainable Development Goals, the energy transition, and health issues will be weighed and commitment should be expected as these areas are part of India's G-20 leadership agenda.

India and Japan celebrated 70 years of friendship in 2022. Reflecting on how this relationship has developed from a “[Global Partnership](#)” to a “[Special Strategic and Global Partnership](#),” we can see gaps in economic partnership and people-to-people connect. While the economic partnership was the pillar on which this relationship took shape, the two leaders will unquestionably direct the policymakers of both nations to scrutinize and reflect on how to enhance this pillar. Moreover, much-touted civilizational linkages have not translated into robust people-to-people connections. The sense is that Kishida and Modi will put forth various schemes to enable exchanges of people, namely youth, workforce, and artists, along with a stronger emphasis on tourism.

Therefore, Kishida's trip to India is not limited to amending a diplomatic faux pas. Instead, given the fact that the ability to reach a joint statement in the G-20 is under question, a detailed discussion between Japan and India as leaders of G-20 and G-7 consortiums will hopefully pave the way. Further, Kishida intends to reveal the new agenda of Japan for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, reinforcing India's geostrategic and geopolitical position. Along with this, the regional dynamics and bilateral agenda will also have due considerations.

AUTHORS

GUEST AUTHOR

Srabani Roy Choudhury

Srabani Roy Choudhury is a professor at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

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