



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



POLICY BRIEF

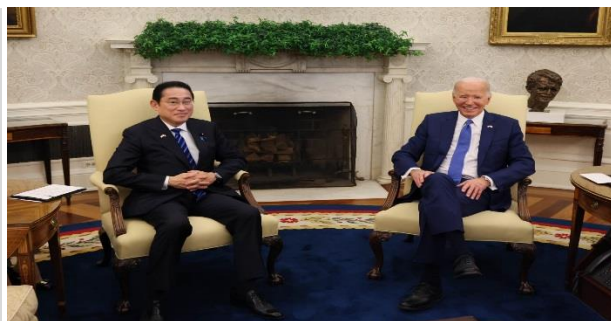
Japan's Decisive Alignment with the West

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Volume IX, Issue 12

April 26, 2024



Delhi Policy Group

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www.delhipolicygroup.org



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Cover Photographs:

Prime Minister Kishida Fumio and President Joe Biden at the Japan – US Summit in Washington DC, April 10, 2024. Source: Japan.kantei.go.jp

USS Mobile, JS Akebono, HMAS Warramunga and BRP Antonio Luna during a multilateral maritime cooperative activity off the coast of the Philippines, April 7, 2024. Source: Australian DOD

Prime Minister Kishida addressing the joint session of Congress in Washington DC, April 11, 2024. Source: Japan.kantei.go.jp

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by
Lalit Kapur

Shinzo Abe's August 2016 Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision had envisaged India and Japan as regional bookends, working with the US to promote the rule of law, freedom of navigation and commerce; pursue economic prosperity and build regional capacities; and provide humanitarian assistance in the Indo-Pacific.

Russia's war in Ukraine, and growing tensions in East Asia over Taiwan, have resulted in Prime Minister Fumio Kishida pivoting decisively towards the US-led West, in the process re-shaping the original FOIP vision to one of a global Free and Open International Order.¹ This policy orientation has been further reinforced during Kishida's state visit to Washington D.C. from April 09-12, 2024.

The purpose of Kishida's visit was twofold: ensuring that the US remains engaged in East Asia and, towards that end, expanding Japan's own engagement for greater burden-sharing under US leadership. Addressing the US Congress on the world's continued need for US leadership in shaping the international order, he unequivocally identified China's current external stance and military actions as presenting an unprecedented strategic challenge, not just to the peace and security of Japan but also to the peace and stability of the international community at large.² He noted (with dismay) an undercurrent of self-doubt about what America's role in the world should be, at a time when freedom and democracy were under threat and the world was at an inflection point that would define the next stage of human history. He highlighted North Korea's nuclear and missile program as a direct threat, and condemned Russia's continued war of aggression against Ukraine. Calling on the US to continue playing its pivotal leadership role in the affairs of nations even as Japan transformed itself from a reticent to a committed ally, he said, "the people of Japan are with you, side by side, to assure the survival of liberty, not just for our people, but for all people."³

¹ Outlines of the enlarged vision were unveiled at New Delhi. See "Policy Speech by Prime Minister KISHIDA Fumio at the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA)", March 20, 2023, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101_kishida/statement/202303/_00013.html

² Address by Prime Minister KISHIDA Fumio at a Joint Meeting of the United States Congress ("For the Future: Our Global Partnership"), April 11, 2024, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101_kishida/statement/202404/11speech.html

³ Ibid.

The Japan-US Joint Statement titled “Global Partners for the Future” released after the Biden-Kishida summit has set out an expansive vision for the alliance.⁴ It commits both sides to synchronising strategy on over 70 deliverables, spread over five thematic areas. Describing defence and security cooperation as the core of their global partnership, the leaders announced their intention to upgrade their respective command and control networks to enable seamless integration of operations and capabilities; decided to deepen Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance cooperation; agreed to Japan’s participation in some AUKUS Pillar II advanced capability projects including a Glide Phase Interceptor cooperative development programme to counter high-end, hypersonic threats; announced US-Japan-Australia cooperation on a networked air defence architecture for the Western Pacific; and put in place measures to enable integration of Japan’s industrial base for co-production of advanced missiles and for the maintenance of US ships and aircraft in Japan.

The inaugural Japan-Philippines-US trilateral summit, the second trilateral involving the US and Japan (the first was the Japan-ROK-US trilateral, initiated at the Camp David Summit in August 2023), also took place on April 11, 2024. It committed Japan and the US to a trilateral partnership with the Philippines, with economic and security underpinnings, to create a second mutually supporting alliance structure to compete with China.

Shinzo Abe’s strategic vision had focused on gradually moving Japan towards a “normal nation” status, assuming greater responsibility for its own security as well as that of the larger Indo-Pacific, including in response to emerging isolationist trends in the US. Towards this end, Abe had formulated his FOIP policy, strengthened Japan’s relationship with India, engaged extensively in the Indo-Pacific, began the process of modifying rules for export of defence equipment made in Japan, initiated debates on amending Article 9 constraints, pursued a process of rapprochement with Russia, and even opened up debate on Japan’s future nuclear status. His actions were directed towards creating a more nuanced posture for Japan, strongly linked to the US alliance but with the ability to play a leading role in Asia and the world as a top tier power.

Kishida’s approach, which maintains the strong focus on building Japan’s own defence capability initiated by Abe, is marked by an even greater dependence on the US, an embrace of the Anglosphere, relative downplaying of Japan’s relationship with strategically independent India, and the subordination of Asia’s interests to those of Europe and the West. Not surprisingly, the G7 is

⁴ United States-Japan Joint Leaders Statement “Global Partners for the Future”, April 10, 2024, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/04/10/united-states-japan-joint-leaders-statement/>

prioritised over the G20. To enhance Japan's cooperation with NATO, an individually tailored partnership program for 2023-2026 has been put in place. Economic and military support for Ukraine (over US \$ 12 billion) has been accorded top priority, leading to a continued evolution of Japan's rules for overseas transfers of lethal equipment. The Global Combat Air Program with the UK and Italy as partners is moving ahead. Meanwhile, the Quad and the Indo-Pacific construct has been put on the back burner, though engagements continue.

The newly defined US-Japan partnership vision is ambitious and potentially path-breaking, but several major factors will have to be managed to ensure its realisation.

First among these is Japan's ability to sustain the US commitment to Asia and pay the associated costs, materially, militarily and economically. Japan's underlying concern that pressures and costs of leading the world are weighing heavily on the US and prompting a turn to isolationism is well founded, but does not reflect the complete picture. The reality that Japan faces is that despite the much talked about rebalance to Asia, an over-extended US has not been able to focus adequately on the Indo-Pacific, the region it proclaims as the most consequential for the future of world order. A series of regional crises and policy failures – the inability to deter China's seizure of the Scarborough Shoal in 2012, Russia's occupation of Crimea in 2014, China's building of its wall of sand in the South China Sea in 2015, China's flagrant disregard of the Permanent Court of Arbitration's Award in 2016, the disastrous US pullout from Afghanistan in 2021, continuing threats to Taiwan, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Hamas attack on Israel and ensuing conflict in 2023, and Iran's ability to launch missile strikes on Israel with relative impunity – are not only distracting the US focus from China's looming shadow over Asia, but are also creating uncertainty about America's future direction. Will Japan's vigorous support prove sufficient to strengthen US resolve, help address problems that are hindering attention to Asia, and effectively deter continuing revisionist actions by China?

The costs to Japan have mounted. Kishida has transformed Japan's National Security Strategy, announced a substantial increase in the defence budget to 2% of GDP by FY 2027 (if provisioned, this will make Japan among the world's biggest military spenders, after the US and China), acquired counterstrike capability, modified long held guidelines regarding sales of defence equipment to war zones to enable exports of lethal equipment (via the US) to Ukraine, burnt all bridges with Russia, antagonised Japan's second-largest trading partner (China) by unambiguously identifying it as a global threat, and strengthened a

still tenuous relationship with South Korea which impacts Japan's ties with both North Korea and China.

Meanwhile, Kishida's domestic approval rating has steadily declined to low, crisis levels. Whether Kishida's search for greater integration with US policies and interests will pay dividends, and elicit public support, remains to be seen. This questioning will become sharper in the event of a change of administration in the US.

Looking ahead, the Japan-US Global Partnership will have to address some difficult questions, among them the nature of command relationships between the Japan and US militaries. Japan is to transition to a new joint command structure by March 2025. The US may position a four-star officer to lead all US forces in Japan. A new model to upgrade command and control networks and permit seamless integration of operations and capabilities will have to be evolved.

The larger question is whether this will involve Japanese forces being more closely integrated with the US military; placing the JSDF under US command is unlikely to be acceptable to the Japanese public. Moving up the scale from being a forward basing ally to a joint operational and fighting US ally will require a major change in Japan's longstanding pacifist outlook. Kishida may not have the political capital to effect such a decisive change.

Apart from encroachments in the Senkakus which preoccupy the Japan Coast Guard and MSDF, three regional contingencies will have to be jointly deterred alongside the US: China's military actions against Taiwan (a blockade or an invasion), continued coercion of the Philippines in the South China Sea, and the provocative actions of North Korea. Any one of these contingencies could involve Japan in conflict. Public opinion will have to be shaped accordingly.

Finally, it remains an open question whether Europe can make any meaningful security commitment to the Indo-Pacific, something that Japan's insertion into the conflict in Europe appears to anticipate. Although seven European countries and the EU have announced Indo-Pacific strategies, these are aspirational and largely limited to the economic dimension, with limited contributions to providing security for sea lanes during peacetime. The occasional deployment of a ship or two from Europe will not do much to deter China, or ease the growing burden on Japan to manage regional security threats.

In sum, the expansion of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision to one of becoming a global partner of the US in bringing about a Free and Open International Order may prove to be over ambitious, given Japan's lingering pacifist outlook and its near total dependence on the US for its own security. Only time will tell whether Japan's security and future will be better served by its now complete alignment with the interests and policies of the US-led West. Meanwhile, Japan's posture under Kishida will have repercussions for its image and influence with the emerging and developing nations of the Global South.

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