



# Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



## POLICY BRIEF

### Letter from Japan: The Tokyo Drift and India

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Delhi Policy Group

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Prime Minister Ishiba delivered remarks during the 6<sup>th</sup> Tokyo Global Dialogue held in Tokyo, on January 29, 2024. Source:

[Prime Minister's Office of Japan](#)

6<sup>th</sup> Tokyo Global Dialogue, Final Session on "Re-constructing Global Architecture?", January 30, 2025. Source: [JIIA](#)

US President Donald Trump hosted Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba at the White House for their first US-Japan summit, on February 7, 2025. Source: [X/@WhiteHouse](#)

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## Letter from Japan: The Tokyo Drift and India

by

Hemant Krishan Singh

### Foreword

Over the past four years, the global scene has been marked by escalating great power rivalry and brutal conflicts of suppression and retribution. The world is now adjusting to the new reality of US President Donald Trump's "America First" policies, which prioritise the primacy of US power, influence and interests ahead of longstanding commitments to a "liberal" rules-based order that sustains the dominance of the US-led West, its alliance system, and the exclusive Western institutions that are the determinants of global rule making and balance of power.

Having framed its post-Shinzo Abe policies based mainly on supporting the pre-eminence of Western interests and dominance in the global order, and burdened with a weaker leadership as well as growing uncertainties in domestic politics, Japan stands at a difficult crossroads.

This is particularly so as President Trump has indicated a clear preference for strong, sovereign states that serve their own interests first, and bring greater benefits of burden sharing for the US. There is considerable ambivalence regarding the role Trump envisages for traditional US allies; ideology-driven "liberal values" that were the centrepiece for the previous US administration have been replaced with a pragmatic and realist outlook that includes wider US engagement in search of greater peace and stability.

Japan is struggling with this changed reality, and what it can do to maintain the status quo in ties with the US while keeping alive the comfort of the "liberal international order", including by aligning more closely with Europe on issues ranging from security and geopolitics to trade.

The following impressions and observations flow from interactions and deliberations during and after the sixth edition of the flagship Tokyo Global Dialogue (TGD VI) hosted by The Japan Institute of International Affairs in Tokyo on January 29-30, 2025.

This commentary also outlines the changes in Japan's foreign policy and domestic politics in the post-Abe era, assesses the Trump-Ishiba summit, and examines the outlook for India-Japan relations going forward.

## The Tokyo Drift

The inspiration of Japan, and the promise that a transformed relationship with this major Asian power holds for the rise of India, has been a central pillar of India's foreign policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Japan's own turn towards "Broader Asia" in 2007, embracing India as a critical partner for regional stability and prosperity, has equally contributed to the momentum of what is now a special strategic and global partnership.

In terms of the popular imagination in India, the late and former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has been the embodiment of a mutual commitment to the advancement of India-Japan ties. His vision of Japan as a first tier power prioritised the US-Japan alliance but also envisaged cooperation with a coalition of Asian maritime democracies (the Quad) to uphold a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Abe's outreach was global and included dialogue with Russia; he met President Vladimir Putin 26 times, partly to try and overcome the burden of history, and partly to try and create space between Russia and China.

As we enter the third year after Abe's tragic demise at the hands of an assassin, his special vision for the shared future of the two leading maritime democracies of Asia is fading in the rear view mirror. Under his successors (Suga, Kishida and Ishiba), Japan's society, politics and foreign policy outlook have steadily drifted in new directions. As Japan has become more entrenched in a Western alliance mindset, the space and attention for India has progressively shrunk.

It is time for the Indian strategic community to take note and adjust to this reality, where Japan may well disappoint our high expectations as a dependable and leading economic and security partner for emerging India in the Indo-Pacific. In terms of both ideology and geopolitical posture, we are today dealing with a Japan that has moved away from its moorings of a decade (and more) ago.

While a rapidly transforming international situation and growing turmoil in domestic politics have no doubt impacted post-Abe Japan, the "Tokyo Drift", at least as far as India's aspirations are concerned, is now palpable and significant. The structural edifice and logic of India-Japan ties remains intact, but despite India's continuing efforts, there is greater ambiguity about the nature of Tokyo's political commitment to this relationship.

A week in Tokyo exchanging views with and listening to prominent thinkers and policymakers indicated the following prevailing trend: difficulty in adjusting to Trump's "America First" presidency; unease at the "Trump effect"

on the edifice of alliance-based Western dominance; discomfort with growing multipolarity and the need to accommodate the Global South in decision making and reformed multilateralism; persisting alignment with a hardline ("Let's make Russia small again") European approach towards Ukraine and leveraging the presumed Europe-Asia security linkage for deterrence in the Indo-Pacific; a rapidly progressing pace of normalising engagement with China on political, trade and investment, and people to people ties; further narrowing of the Indo-Pacific construct to an East Asia focus alone; a sense of growing leadership deficit in Japan; and a highly unsettled outlook for domestic politics in the coming months which could cause even further disarray.

In terms of security challenges outlined by Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba himself to participants at TGD VI, only Russia and the DPRK found mention.

From India's perspective, this moment of drift and uncertainty in Tokyo is hardly a desirable situation; Japan still has the potential to make immense contributions to Asia's rise in the global order. Japan will, of course, have to decide whether it can buttress Indo-Pacific stability, security and prosperity by engaging Western alliance frameworks alone, or needs to cast its net wider within the region as a longstanding Asian power, even as it maintains the centrality of the US-Japan alliance.

## The Backdrop

For Indian strategists and policymakers, it is important to understand and internalise the leftward tilt in the political evolution of Japan since the departure of Shinzo Abe from the national scene.

When he assumed office after the brief stint of Yoshihide Suga (2020-2021), Prime Minister Fumio Kishida (2021-2024) inherited Abe's powerful political legacy and strategic vision of Japan as a reprimed major power playing a leading role in the Indo-Pacific and on the world stage. Abe's influence on Japan's policy-making continued, particularly on national security and defence. This enabled Kishida, as a member of the LDP's most liberal faction, to announce a revised national security strategy in December, 2022 which discarded past hesitations, recognised the unprecedented security challenge posed by China's activities, pledged to double defence spending and build deterrence capability, and deepened alliance cooperation with the US. Trilateral security cooperation between the US, Japan and South Korea also expanded rapidly and significantly. These were major and positive achievements.

At the same time, Kishida's activist foreign policy led to Japan aligning itself more closely with the global interests of the West, devoting outsized attention to Europe, welcoming NATO's engagement with Asia, and abandoning Abe's carefully nuanced outreach to Russia. This last element became more pronounced after Presidents Putin and Xi established a close strategic alignment between Russia and China in February, 2022. Japan also went against the grain of its longstanding pacifist principles in providing unprecedented economic and military aid to Ukraine to underscore its commitment as a US ally, its solidarity with the G7, EU and NATO, and its role as the closest partner of the West in Asia.<sup>1</sup>

As a power which has always privileged alliances, Japan perhaps does not perceive that pushing NATO's presence in Asia could be taken to imply the strategic suppression of Asia by the West as it pursues dominance at both ends of the Indo-Pacific. However, Japan's engagement with the global rise of Asia became secondary to its US alliance commitments in Europe and elsewhere, resulting also in a lower priority for the strategic partnership with India.

It is true that Abe's paradigm-changing premise of India and Japan as bookends of the Indo-Pacific, shoring up regional stability across a seamless oceanic space, was in fact never fully reflected in bilateral security ties, given Japan's predominant focus on East Asia.<sup>2</sup>

However, as Kishida redirected attention from Abe's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) to a Free and Open International Order (FOIO), which regarded the security of Europe and the Indo-Pacific as "inseparable", the gap with India grew wider. Ukraine overshadowed India-Japan bilateral summits held in March 2022 and March 2023, resulting in further loss of momentum. In an important foreign policy address in New Delhi on March 20, 2023, Kishida spoke of "rule making through dialogue" and "equal partnership among nations", but this promising approach was not put in practice.

While Japan's Chairmanship of G7 in 2023 remained heavily focused on the collective economic and security interests of the advanced Western economies, India as Chair of G20 championed the interests of the Global South in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's powerful words: "No group can claim global leadership without listening to those most affected by its decisions."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Singh, Hemant Krishan. "India and Japan: Time to Refocus on Indo-Pacific Stability". Delhi Policy Group Policy Brief Volume VIII, Issue 23. July 28, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

This growing hiatus on foreign policy orientation deepened even further with major changes in Japan's domestic politics under Kishida's leadership. A scandal over misuse/misreporting of political fundraising became the reason for the targeted dismantlement of the LDP's largest, nationalist-conservative faction once led by Abe. Kishida also pushed for the breakup of all LDP factions, leaving the LDP adrift and without a compass, leading eventually to the loss of its majority in the lower house of the Diet.

Lacking both strong leadership and cohesion, the public standing of the LDP party is today at its weakest. Japan's domestic and global affairs are seen by observers as being run by the most "liberal" – and China-friendly – leaders in recent memory. Their overtures towards China are causing consternation among conservative elements in the LDP, who have no clear leader to coalesce around. Japan's business community is back to stepping up investments in China.

There are undertones of an "American hand" in pushing progressive ideologies in Japanese politics and society, but then US influence over the affairs of Japan is hardly a new phenomenon.

Overall, as one senior observer candidly remarked, the domestic political situation in Japan is like "a slow-moving train wreck".

## **The Ishiba-Trump Summit**

It was against this backdrop, and with low expectations, that Prime Minister Ishiba held a long awaited meeting with US President Donald Trump in Washington D.C. on February 7, 2025. If Ishiba's purpose was to avoid friction or a failed summit and maintain stability in US-Japan relations, he delivered as well as could have been expected.

The focus of the highly orchestrated, business-like summit, and the ensuing joint statement, was on a robust reaffirmation of bilateral alliance commitments, and the pursuit of peace and stability in a Free and Open Indo-Pacific through multilayered and aligned cooperation, including the Quad and various trilaterals. Security challenges posed by China and the DPRK were highlighted. There was no mention of Russia, Ukraine, Europe or NATO, something which would have been a given under the Biden administration.

This was also an indication for Japan to align itself with the new policy directions being set by President Trump.



Ishiba and Trump exchanged praise for each other's leadership and, notably, recalled the contributions of Shinzo Abe. Ishiba likened Trump's "America First" approach with his own push for "regional revitalisation" in Japan, welcomed Trump's desire for "world peace" and "regional stability", and endorsed Trump's readiness to reach out to DPRK leader Kim Jong Un in the interest of regional peace.

Issues of balanced trade and Trump's intention to pursue "reciprocal tariffs" were finessed, and the US President offered to broker Nippon Steel's investment in US Steel, with the ownership of this iconic company remaining in American hands.

If this more realist approach signalled by the Ishiba-Trump summit holds, it could mark some shift in Japan's foreign policy orientation, one centred more on the Indo-Pacific rather than recent preoccupation with affirming Europe-Asia security linkages. That would be a welcome change for India.

## The Outlook for India-Japan Relations

India and Japan will always approach the world of escalating great power rivalry from their distinct national perspectives, with strategically independent India seeking an equitable, inclusive and multipolar Asia and world order, and Japan as a US ally upholding the primacy of the US in the Indo-Pacific, as well as of the US-led West over global order. Neither India nor Japan can directly or fully address each other's security concerns, but they can certainly work together to mitigate Indo-Pacific security challenges where their interests converge.<sup>4</sup>

India-Japan relations today stand at an uncertain juncture. Trade and investment ties are listless, there are difficulties with flagship ODA projects, defence technology cooperation remains stuck, mobility and skilled migration issues are pending concrete outcomes, and people to people interactions are glaringly insufficient. There is need to re-instil greater ambition and energy to bilateral ties.

First and foremost, as leading Asian powers and strategic partners, India and Japan must redouble joint efforts to ensure that Asia's future is not set back by military conflict, economic coercion, or authoritarian expansionism.<sup>5</sup> It is important to sustain progress on growing defence exchanges, not least as a

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<sup>4</sup> Singh, Hemant Krishan. "India and Japan: Time to Refocus on Indo-Pacific Stability". Delhi Policy Group Policy Brief Volume VIII, Issue 23. July 28, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

breakthrough on defence equipment and technology cooperation remains elusive. The revised India-Japan Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation that is under negotiation is long overdue.

Second, the essential heart of the bilateral relationship – in terms of India's expectations from Japan – lies in the areas of trade, economy, investment, technology and infrastructure. While both sides are working to implement Japan's commitment to invest 5 trillion Yen in public and private financing in India during the 2022-2027 period, they should already be discussing even more ambitious targets, given India's robust economic growth. Greater cooperation in the areas of economic security and trust-based collaboration on critical and emerging technologies requires particular focus. There are promising opportunities for business and investment tie-ups in semiconductors that are under discussion but await finalisation.

And finally, the third and perhaps the most vital area for transforming India-Japan relations today is our people-to-people exchanges, critical for understanding each other's aspirations and working more closely with each other as friendly Asian peoples. There are woefully few Indian students, scholars and interns in Japan, and even the numbers of highly skilled professionals continue to be very low.

While gradual progress is being made, there is no escaping the fact that India and Japan must further sharpen their focus on building contemporary ties across the realms of language, culture, education, skills, mobility, and tourism. Travel between India and Japan must be made easier, with a reciprocal and harmonised visa regime cutting across all areas of travel.

The Abe-era heyday of India-Japan bonhomie and leadership-driven relations is now behind us, and perhaps there is reason to be more circumspect about the future trajectory of bilateral relations. But lowering expectations from the vast potential of these ties will not serve the interests of either nation. It is still time for India and Japan to recall Shinzo Abe's prescient vision and become the leading anchors of Asian stability and progress in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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