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India in Kishida's Year of 'Summit Diplomacy'



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Image Source: The Government of Japan



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Within months of securing an expectation-defying¹ victory for the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in October 2021,² Kishida's leadership was tested both domestically with the spread of the Omicron variant, and internationally with rapidly rising tensions in the Indo-Pacific. An old hand at foreign policy – as Japan's longest-serving Foreign Minister under Abe's cabinet – Kishida declared 2022 the year of "summit diplomacy" with a refocus on "deft handling of diplomatic and security issues" and the "establishment of a stable administration".³ Where will India – one of Japan's closest partners in the region – figure in Kishida's foreign policy manifesto and Indo-Pacific outlook?

Kishida in 2022: New-Era Realism Diplomacy

Thus far, Kishida's foreign policy agenda has been overshadowed by urgent issues at home, as he failed to produce sufficient traction and visibility for his 'new-era realism diplomacy' owing to the rapid spread of the Omicron variant.⁴ In 2022, Kishida has committed to boldly pursue an inclusive transformation of Japan's economy and society through astute diplomacy on the international front. This includes a focus on three pillars: *first*, promoting universal values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law – which includes promoting a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and outreach to its Northeast Asian neighborhood (South Korea and Russia); *second*, tackling global challenges like climate change, nuclear disarmament and the pandemic; and *thirdly*, resolutely protecting the lives and livelihoods of Japanese citizens.⁵

Despite touting such a bold and forward-looking diplomatic agenda, Kishida has accorded only a modicum of focus to the Japan-India bilateral in his statements. Kishida has already met with Biden on the sidelines of the 26th Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP26), and held a substantial virtual meeting on January 21, which point to US being a top priority for Kishida.⁶ In contrast, since assuming leadership in October 2021, Kishida has interacted with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi only once in a 25-minute phone call where Modi congratulated him and both reaffirmed a desire to further strengthen ties.⁷ Although Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi and Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar agreed to plans for Kishida to visit India,⁸ although this has been halted as in-person diplomatic engagements took a hit amid the Omicron crisis.

India barely gained a mention alongside (and in comparison to) Quad partners, the United States (US) and Australia, in Kishida's address to Japan's Diet in January 2022.⁹ While he emphasized Tokyo's plans to hold in-person talks with US President Biden to further

reinforce their alliance as a “cornerstone” of Japanese diplomacy and security, and highlighted the Japan-Australia Reciprocal Access Agreement as a significant upgrade to their defense cooperation, India only merited a passing reference as a Quad partner state; accordingly, in context of India, Kishida’s focus seems largely limited to Quad initiatives on vaccine assistance and high-quality infrastructure that form core areas of interest of the Quad.¹⁰

To some extent, this complacency is prevalent because India and Japan already share a well-institutionalized relationship with ample synergy in the Indo-Pacific. Despite Kishida’s push for robust in-person diplomacy, determining a fixed agenda for face-to-face interactions between Tokyo and New Delhi has taken a back seat while Kishida remains occupied with domestic concerns. Kishida’s most pressing political challenge is perhaps ensuring domestic stability to avoid becoming a revolving-door leader, and while he prioritizes making favorable impressions as the LDP gears up for Upper House elections, his diplomatic front has lagged in focus. To champion his own policy agenda, Kishida – a party man through and through – will need to wait and see how much political capital he possesses post-election.¹¹

New Areas for Cooperation

Over the past decade, under the personal camaraderie built between Modi and Abe, the two states have swiftly expanded their bilateral relationship into Asia’s most pivotal and fastest growing partnership. However, notwithstanding their progress in building an action-oriented partnership, it is vital that both states carefully and regularly nurture ties to successfully charter the uncertain regional geopolitics. There remain several nuanced gaps and missed opportunities between India and Japan to which both must accord attention. Over and above continued cooperation in infrastructure development (in India’s Northeast and third-country projects in the Bay of Bengal and Africa), and defense (with institutionalized dialogues and joint exercises), both states must pursue cooperation in four key areas in 2022.

Supply Chain Resilience

De-risking supply chains for instance has emerged as a key area for India-Japan cooperation through both bilateral and minilateral arrangements like the Quad and India-Japan-Australia-led Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI). Here, cooperation with like-minded third partners like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), South Korea, Taiwan and the European Union (EU), and in critical areas (such as semiconductors, renewable energy and batteries) must be pursued.

Strengthening Industrial Competitiveness

Amid Japan's slow but steady industrial chain exodus from China,¹² Japanese companies have quickly diversified to the highly competitive Southeast Asian region. However, in India, there are limited success stories of Japanese companies, pointing to a cultural gap that has hindered Japanese participation in India's manufacturing sector. Now, with Japan's subsidy support to firms shifting production out of China and to India, and India's Production-Linked Incentive Scheme – that focusses extensively on areas like automotive, batteries and electronics (see Image 1) that are vital to electric vehicle (EV) manufacturing and therefore a core focus for Japan – immense cooperation that can be pursued in this area.

India: Approved outlays for the Production-Linked Incentive scheme (INRbn)

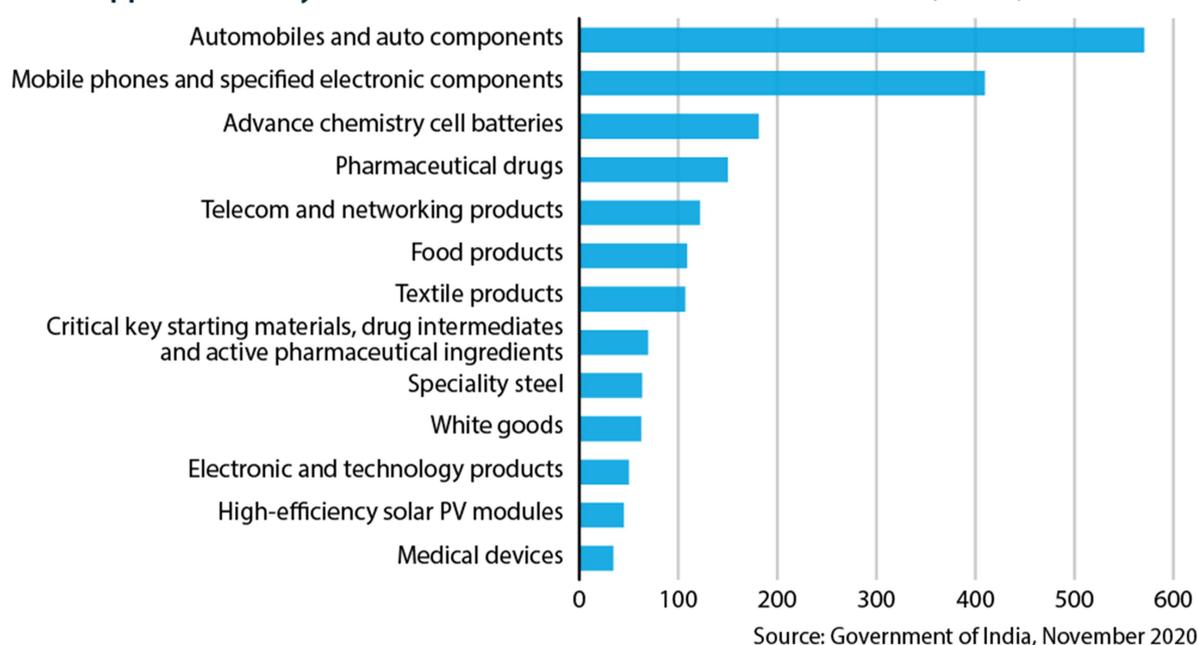


Image 1: Approved Outlays for India's Production-Linked Incentive Scheme

Source: Oxford Analytica Daily Brief¹³

Advanced Technologies

Apart from strengthening industrial competitiveness in the new sustainability-driven era, India and Japan need greater engagement in domains like Open-RAN networks¹⁴ – which remains steeped in geopolitics but critical to cost-effective 5G development – and research and development on 6G (and its international standards). Japan and the US are already working in this direction under their Competitiveness and Resilience (CoRe) partnership,¹⁵ while India has recently begun exploring the field independently with aims to launch locally by 2024.¹⁶

Defense

Security cooperation amid a shared China threat remains a bedrock of the India-Japan partnership. For instance, both countries accelerated air power cooperation by initiating joint air combat drills involving India's Su-30 flanker fighter jets in "view of the China threat"; this marked a rare opportunity for Japan to get familiar with the basic capabilities of the Su-30 family, which could prove invaluable in both a close-range dogfight and long-range air-to-air combat.¹⁷ However, beyond this, greater technical cooperation in co-development of weapon systems, including AI-driven sixth-generation aircrafts, as India plans to integrate sixth-generation technologies in its Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft Mark-2 (AMCA Mk2) variant, and Japan looks to develop engine demonstrators for sixth-generation fighters.¹⁸ Additionally, India has much to gain from collaborating with Japan in ship-building – a strategic industry where Japan (and South Korea) hold significant expertise while India remains sorely lacking.¹⁹

Conclusion

With 2022 marking the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between New Delhi and Tokyo, the timing is opportune for both states to take another leap forward and elevate their 'Special Strategic and Global Partnership'. While Kishida faces challenges abound on both the domestic and international fronts, New Delhi must take up the mantle and push for increased exchanges and cooperation with Tokyo. Only sustained collaborations can ensure that the India-Japan partnership emerges as a strategic and stable anchor in the Indo-Pacific and yields rich dividends.

NOTES

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