

TIGHTROPE WALK: ON THE INDIA AND JAPAN RELATIONSHIP AND CHALLENGES FROM GEOPOLITICAL ISSUES

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Since 2006, the Prime Ministers of India and Japan have exchanged visits for their “annual summit”, a meeting that has steered the course of this bilateral relationship. However, it was not the India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership that was at the heart of the [Japan Prime Minister Fumio Kishida’s mission during his quick “official visit” to Delhi this week](#). His focus was on two areas: coordinating the G-7 and G-20 agendas on food and energy security issues arising mainly from the Ukraine conflict as well as unveiling Japan’s \$75 billion [plan for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific \(FOIP\)](#), to work with countries in the region on avoiding debt traps, building infrastructure, and enhancing maritime and air security. Mr. Kishida appeared to be emphasising the need for a global consensus, especially including India, in tackling the challenges from Russia and China, where Japan is aligned with western powers. In talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Mr. Kishida is understood to have been “straightforward” about the need for India, as G-20 president, to come on board with the G-7’s plans to address the Ukraine issue and call out “Russian aggression”. While he did not name China directly, it is clear that Chinese actions in its neighbourhood have left Japan concerned, and his FOIP plan includes India as an “indispensable partner”. The timing of his visit was also pointed, coinciding with Chinese President Xi Jinping’s Moscow visit. And, as Mr. Xi met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in a show of strength on Tuesday, Mr. Kishida flew to Kiev to support Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, his first such visit since the war began.

For New Delhi, that has close ties with Tokyo, as bilateral and multilateral cooperation (the Quad), Mr. Kishida was a welcome guest. The two countries have many collaborations that include the Japanese loan for the much-delayed “Bullet train” project, and plans to work on infrastructure projects to link Bangladesh and India’s northeast. As presidents of the G-7 and G-20, both nations have much to gain from synchronising priorities and ensuring that the Global South gets its fair share of the outcomes of both summits. An end to the Ukraine war and a pushback against China’s aggression in its neighbourhood are also common goals. However, it would be wrong to assume that they share similar positions on them. Unlike India, Japan is part of the U.S.’s alliance. Japan has also joined sanctions against Russia, while India has refused to do so. India has been vocal about its concerns over China’s actions at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) but reticent in directly criticising China’s actions in the South China Sea, Taiwan Straits, etc. With Mr. Modi set to visit Hiroshima as a G-7 special invitee in May, and later host Mr. Xi and Mr. Putin at the Summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, any shift in New Delhi’s tightrope balancing act on geopolitical issues would seem a stretch, even at the behest of a dear

partner like Japan.

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