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Kishida defends rules-based order on global swing

Key takeaways

- Prime Minister Kishida Fumio used trips to France, Brazil, and Paraguay to build support for his vision of a free and open international order.
- He simultaneously looked to forge closer relations with other industrialized powers and strengthen Japan's presence and credibility in the "Global South."
- Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yōko also delivered this message on a trip to brought her to Africa and South Asia.

Prime Minister Kishida Fumio used Japan's Golden Week holidays to advance his government's global economic policy agenda, with the prime minister visiting France, Brazil, and Paraguay, and Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yōko visiting Madagascar, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, and Nepal as well as joining Kishida in Paris. Economy Minister Saitō Ken was also in Paris. These itineraries reveal a two-pronged approach to what Kishida described in a speech to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as "maintaining and expanding a rules-based, free and fair economic order."

The Kishida government is simultaneously seeking closer ties with its peers in the developed world and working to deepen its engagement with the "Global South," hoping to induce the latter to embrace what Kishida has taken to calling the "free and open international order" and reject challenges to that order mounted by China and Russia. In these pursuits, the Kishida government has shown that Japan is increasingly comfortable playing a global leadership role, using its clout to shape the international agenda – and is also prepared to work with partners other than the United States, which may not necessarily amount to a hedge against a more inward-looking US but suggests

that even as the US and Japan have forged a [global partnership](#), there are nevertheless differences in their approaches to global economic governance.

Closing ranks with developed world peers

Both Kishida and Kamikawa used their time in Paris to bolster coordination with other developed countries. In meetings with French President Emmanuel Macron and French Prime Minister Gabriel Attal, Kishida touted economic and technological cooperation, while Economy Minister Saitō met with his French counterpart Bruno Le Maire and signed an agreement on critical mineral supply chains in which they pledged to share information on vulnerabilities and risk reduction measures; pursue joint projects in third countries between Japanese and French companies; and promote responsible and transparent supply chains for critical minerals.

However, the more important bilateral meeting in Paris may have been a high-level economic dialogue between Saitō, Kamikawa, and Valdis Dombrovskis, the European Commission's Executive Vice President for an Economy that Works for People and Trade Commissioner. Both the Japanese government and the European Union have sought to deepen their relationship, building on the Japan-EU strategic partnership agreement (which was signed in 2018 but finally entered into force in April) and the Japan-EU economic partnership agreement (which entered into force in 2019). At the dialogue, the ministers agreed to the launch of the "Transparent, Resilient and Sustainable Supply Chains Initiative"; discussed the importance of countering economic coercion and market-distorting subsidies; and marked Japan's ratification of a protocol on data flows added to the Japan-EU economic partnership agreement. It is particularly notable that, in contrast to US-Japan bilateral coordination on global economic governance, Japan and the EU emphasized the importance of the World Trade Organization (WTO) as the "core" of the international rules-based trading system. In short, while both Japan and the EU recognize the importance of cooperation among likeminded industrial democracies to address common challenges, they share a commitment to maintaining existing institutions, a commitment that has at times flagged in the US, particularly concerning the WTO.

Finally, the main purpose for Kishida's visit to Paris was the opening ceremony for the OECD's Ministerial Council Meeting on 2 May, where he delivered remarks stressing the importance of efforts by Japan and likeminded countries to uphold the free and open international order. Kishida's participation at the OECD also included attendance at an event on rulemaking for generative AI, where he sought to advance the Hiroshima AI Process, a 49-country group launched under Japan's G7 presidency working to implement a code of conduct for generative AI.

Outreach to the Global South

But Kishida also used his attendance at the OECD meeting to make the case for a new approach to the Global South. During his premiership, Kishida has emphasized a “humbler” approach to developing countries, partly in recognition that Global South countries have become more important economically and politically but are often taken for granted by developed countries. As he said in his address at the OECD, “Rather than imposing values, it is essential for the OECD to act as a companion in growth and development.”

Kishida delivered a similar message in bilateral meetings with Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Paraguayan President Santiago Peña, as well as in an address delivered at the University of Sao Paulo on 4 May. While Kishida warned of challenges to the free and open international order, he emphasized respect for Latin America’s desire to choose its own path, effectively restating the message that he delivered in Delhi in 2023, when he said that Japan’s goal was to help increase the options available to developing countries. While Kishida did not explicitly refer to China, his pitch was clearly aimed at offering Japanese partnership as an alternative to China, which has deepened its presence in Latin America in recent decades. In Brazil in particular Kishida emphasized new opportunities for Japan to support Brazil’s development, highlighting new initiatives to encourage sustainable development, promote decarbonization, and combat climate change.

With less fanfare, Foreign Minister Kamikawa delivered a similar message in Africa, where she was the first Japanese foreign minister to visit Madagascar, and the first in forty-five years to visit Côte d’Ivoire and Nigeria, and in South Asia, where she stopped in Sri Lanka and Nepal. The implied message in these bilateral meetings is that Japan is not prepared to cede influence in the developing world to China and will deploy public and private economic tools to support development, aiming to foster trust that eventually translates into greater support for Japan’s vision of the international order. This approach has shaped Japan’s policies in Southeast Asia for decades – with the result that Japan has substantial credibility with ASEAN partners – but it remains to be seen whether Tokyo will enjoy the same success in Africa and Latin America.

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