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MONDAY, DECEMBER 4, 2023

Diplomacy will do little to offset woes at home

PM's Dubai trip unlikely to pay dividends

\PhiFocus

During a visit to Dubai for the COP28 climate summit, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida spotlighted Japan's decarbonization efforts while urging Middle East leaders to cooperate in order to calm the situation in the Gaza Strip amid Israel's war with Hamas militants.

But the efforts to highlight his diplomatic skills at a time when his Cabinet approval rate has dipped to fresh lows don't appear to have paid off.

The trip was largely overshadowed by political fund scandals inside Kishida's ruling Liberal Democratic Party, including news of suspected slush funds related to the sales of fundraising party tickets by the LDP faction once headed by late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

The main purpose of Kishida's visit to Dubai was to deliver a speech at a summitlevel meeting held as part of the COP28

In that speech Friday, the first day of the two-day meeting, Kishida pledged that Japan will stop building new unabated coal-fired

thermal power plants in an effort to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions, while also calling for support in speeding up decarbonization efforts in developing and emerging nations.

Tokyo plans to maintain a certain level of coal-fired thermal power generation by reducing carbon dioxide emissions through a combustion technology in which ammonia is mixed with coal. Climate experts have questioned the tech, known as co-firing, calling it unproven and unlikely to lead to significant emissions reductions.

"I showed Japan's intention to lead the efforts for Asia's decarbonization," Kishida told reporters in Dubai on Saturday.

Kishida is also set to attend the first Asia Zero Emission Community summit, to be held in line with a special summit between Japan and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in Tokyo from Dec. 16. The AZEC summit is aimed at promoting Asia's decarbonization using Japanese tech.

A source close to the prime minister vowed that Japan would "lead Asia" on the issue, but in his speech Kishida did not touch on when existing thermal power plants in the country will be scrapped, drawing criti-



Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's trip to Dubai was largely overshadowed by a scandal within his Liberal Democratic Party. AFP-JIJI

cism from European countries.

Some in the ruling party, of which Kishida is president, also criticized the "international pledges," with one middle-ranking LDP lawmaker saying they "lacked freshness."

Kishida also hoped to use the Dubai visit to help stabilize the situation in the Middle East, where the war between Hamas and Israel has now resumed following a brief pause.

At meetings with Israeli President Issac Herzog and Sheik Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, the emir of Qatar, which brokered a temporary truce in the Israel-Hamas fighting, Kishida called for cooperation to calm the situation, including through improving the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip.

During the talks with Herzog, Kishida praised the Israeli agreement with Hamas

on the humanitarian pauses and the release of hostages — though Israel announced the restart of the fighting soon after the meeting.

Kishida called the announcement "regrettable," while a Japanese government official accompanying the prime minister on the Dubai trip was more specific.

"The situation has changed from what we had expected," the official said.

Stability in the Middle East is critically important for Japan, which depends on the region for over 90% of its crude oil imports. But what Japan can do for the region on the diplomatic front is limited.

'We have no choice but to highlight humanitarian aid," a Foreign Ministry official said.

This letdown in Dubai also came as the

Abe faction's funding scandal emerged, delivering yet another headache for Kishida. Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno and industry minister Yasutoshi

Nishimura, who had in the past served as the faction's secretary-general, have refused to offer explanations on the matter. Kishida said that he has instructed LDP Secretary-General Toshimitsu Motegi to

ensure that party factions correct their political fund reports if necessary and give full explanations.

Now, with debates slated for Friday during budget committee meetings in both chambers of parliament, Kishida's leadership will be tested as opposition parties look to grill him over his diplomatic record and the recent funding scandal.

Fears grow that Osprey crash could mar alliance

Focus

KEITA NAKAMURA

The fatal crash of a U.S. military Osprey aircraft in Japan last week has reignited safety concerns among local citizens, further fueled by Washington continuing to fly the tiltrotor aircraft despite a request by Tokyo to ground them.

Experts say the United States should respond to Japan's demand for better operations at its military bases in the country, while Tokyo should insist that Washington halt Osprey flights and provide detailed information related to the latest incident.

They warn that if the poor handling of the accident by the two governments erodes public support for their alliance, it could weaken their deterrence in the remote islands of southwestern Japan amid China's growing military assertiveness in nearby waters.

The crashed aircraft, one of the six U.S. CV-22 transport aircraft assigned to Yokota Air Base in the western suburbs of Tokyo, disappeared from radar on Wednesday afternoon off the island of Yakushima in Kagoshima Prefecture.

The U.S. Air Force said the Osprey, which was carrying out routine training, had eight airmen on board

The same day, the Japan Coast Guard confirmed the death of one crew member, marking the first-ever fatality in Japan resulting from an accident involving Ospreys. The fate of the remaining crew members is still unknown.

"Clearly, a thorough investigation regarding the safety of the aircraft is necessary," said Mike Mochizuki, an associate professor of political science and international affairs at George Washington University in the U.S. capital.

"If the United States does not comply with" Tokyo's request to ensure the safety of Osprey flights, it will undermine the "Japanese public's trust and support" for the bilateral alliance, the expert in relations between the two countries said.

Following the crash, Tokyo called on Washington to suspend Osprey flights, except for search and rescue operations, until safety is confirmed. The Self-Defense

Tokyo's new startup hub aims to boost ties with investors

KAZUAKI NAGATA STAFF WRITER

When the new upscale Azabudai Hills opened last month in central Tokyo, the spotlight focused more on how the complex boasts Japan's tallest skyscraper, diverse greenery and fancy commercial shops. But it also houses something that could be a gamechanger for Japanese startups: the Tokyo Venture Capital Hub.

As Japan has been looking to bolster its

startup ecosystem under Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, attention has typically centered around increasing the number of entrepreneurs and new businesses. What's equally critical, though, is the venture capital firms who fund the startups to keep nascent firms

That's just what Mori Building had in mind by creating what it says is Japan's first large-scale hub for venture capital firms — in hopes that it will ratchet up investment for startups and strengthen cooperation among

"When we considered how we can support startups from a broader perspective, we thought (it was necessary) to help boost the supply of investments through venture capital and corporate venture capital firms. That's why we decided to create this facility," said Kentaro Tobimatsu, a Mori Building official in charge of managing the new hub.

"The country needs more venture capital firms and their presence needs to be

Because lifetime employment at big companies was traditionally valued in Japan, becoming an entrepreneur has been a relatively rare career path, making the country a laggard compared with other top economies when it comes to startup investments.

The amount of startup investment in the U.S. totaled about \$376.1 billion in 2021, more than 100 times Japan's figure of \$3.5 billion, according to an analysis by the Nikkei business daily.

Other data from Uzabase, a Tokyo-based

media firm that also provides financial data services, shows that the amount of funds raised by startups last year stood at ¥877 billion (nearly \$6 billion based on current

With the Kishida administration aiming to raise the annual amount of startup investment by about tenfold to ¥10 trillion by 2027, Mori Building hopes its new facility can fill a role similar to Silicon Valley's Sand Hill Road, home to dozens of venture capital firms,

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How Japan's energy plans affect S.E. Asia

Push of unproven climate tech comes despite region's ample renewable potential

NITHIN COCA

CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Before the dust has even settled on key COP28 climate talks in the United Arab Emirates, Japan will host the first summit later this month on a zero carbon emission framework with Australia and Southeast Asian nations in Tokyo.

Taking place as Japan's Group of Seven presidency ends, it's perhaps a final opportunity for Prime Minister Fumio Kishida to demonstrate strong global leadership on climate and energy issues. The early indications show, however, that the discussion will focus not on expanding proven solutions like solar, wind and energy storage, but instead untested technologies being pushed by major Japanese companies.



For Asia, the continent now responsible for a majority of global greenhouse gas emissions due to rapid economic growth over the past two decades, achieving net zero likely means rapidly growing renewable energy and shifting away from fossil fuels. But, according to the Japanese government, much of the region lacks adequate solar and wind energy resources compared with Europe or North America, and Tokyo is

For Asia, achieving net zero likely means rapidly growing renewable energy and shifting away

from polluting fossil

fuels like coal.

REUTERS

instead pushing alternative — and in some cases, unproven — technologies such as carbon capture and storage (CCS), biomass and ammonia/hydrogen co-firing.

Independent projections paint a different picture, showing ample offshore wind potential, untapped geothermal possibilities and plenty of room for distributed solar to grow in both Japan and Southeast Asia, with the key issues being grid connectivity and transmission capacity, not renewable resources. Yet these analyses often fall on deaf ears partly due to policy - and financing — from Japan.

"Japan's choices permeate throughout ... infrastructure spending across the region," says Jacqueline Yujia Tao, Southeast Asia lead analyst at the nonprofit Transition Zero. "Japanese energy choices often reflect the decisions that Southeast Asia markets make."

Asia and renewables

At news conferences, in reports and at events such as the recent Task Force on Climate-Related Financial Disclosures summit in Tokyo, or the Asia CCUS Network meeting Continued on page $4 \rightarrow$

