

Modi-Abe summit: Strengthening of defence, trade ties will top agenda, says Japanese envoy

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Strengthening of ties in key areas of defence, trade and infrastructure will top the agenda when Prime Minister Narendra Modi meets his Japanese counterpart Shinzo Abe in Japan next week, the country's envoy Kenji Hiramatsu said Monday.

At an interaction at the Brookings India think tank, Kenji said talks are on between the two sides on strengthening maritime cooperation, including the signing of the Mutual Logistical Support Agreement.

"We are also expecting to sign agreement between Indian Navy and Japan's Naval Defence Force with regard to maritime domain awareness and security issues. We would like more cooperation in this domain too," he said.

Kenji said the two sides are hoping to start a formal negotiation process on the Mutual Logistical Support Agreement.

"Also defence equipment and technology cooperation, we have agreed to have joint research activities with regard to unmanned vehicles and robotics," he said.

The envoy, however, added that he cannot "predict what will happen" during the visit and anything concrete can come out only after discussions between the two prime ministers.

The defence forces of the two countries share a robust security cooperation with the two sides participating in bilateral and trilateral drills.

He said for the first time the armies of the two countries will participate in a joint military drill in Mizoram next month, while Japan will be an observer in 'Cope India' -- an Air Force drill between India and the US.

Modi will be in Japan on October 28 and 29 for the annual summit between the prime ministers of the two countries. It will be the fifth annual summit between Modi and Abe and their 12th meeting overall since 2014.

"Under the framework of the Special Strategic and Global Partnership between India and Japan, the two leaders will have wide-ranging discussions over two days on bilateral, regional and global issues of mutual interest," the Ministry of External Affairs said on the visit last week.

Responding to a question on India wanting to procure the Soryu-class submarine from Japan, Kenji said, "We are in the process of discussing (the matter) between the Japanese government and private sector," he said, adding that there is no final decision on collaborating with India for the project yet.

With regard to US-2 amphibious aircraft, he said discussion is on with the Indian side on the project and some progress will be made in due course.

India and Japan are collaborating on high-speed railway, which has been planned between Mumbai and Ahmedabad. The project has been facing resistance over acquisition of land.

Japan is also funding the project and Kenji said the first tranche of loan has been transferred.

Responding to a question on the topic, he said the initiative is "very symbolic" between the two countries, and Modi and Abe had decided to go ahead with "this very important project".

He exuded confidence it "will be completed on time as scheduled".

Land acquisition, he noted, is a very important aspect of the project and the Japanese and Indian team is working very closely.

Kenji said he has "100 per cent trust" on the Indian team dealing with high-speed railway and hoped that the Centre and the state government will find way to ensure the project is completed.

He said that to boost connectivity, India has identified several infrastructure projects in the northeastern states that would eventually help in connecting India with neighbouring countries.

Kenji noted that Japan was the biggest donor of Official Development Assistance (ODA) to India and will continue to do so.

Asked about the Asia-Africa growth corridor, a joint initiative of India and Japan, he said the two countries and their private companies are trying to identify concrete projects and collaboration prospects.

Speaking on Quad, a grouping of India, Australia, Japan and the US to promote the shared vision on Indo-Pacific, he said the process is steadily growing.

He added that there are other formats such as Japan-India-USA trilateral dialogue and Japan-India-Australia trilateral dialogue and many avenues to achieve common goal.

"Quad is not sole mechanism to promote this," Kenji said.

Both countries have "convergence" of views on Indo-Pacific, he said. The Indo-Pacific region has been witnessing growing assertiveness of China.

Kenji said maritime cooperation was very important in the region and India and Japan are looking at ASEAN countries, including Indonesia and Vietnam, for a trilateral cooperation. He, however, added that there was nothing concrete to elaborate further on the matter.

On the progress made after the signing of India-Japan nuclear deal, he said Japanese firms are interested in providing high-technology equipment to India and discussions have begun on this.

When asked on Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), he said ministers and negotiators are working very hard for this. At the bilateral level, he said, there have been lots of discussion to address each other's concerns.

The RCEP is an ambitious proposal which intends to bring in the three largest economies of Asia -- China, India and Japan -- into a regional trading bloc, along with ASEAN member-countries Australia, South Korea and New Zealand.