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Japan teams up with India for Northeast, to extend Rs 2,239-crore loans

BY [DIPANJAN ROY CHAUDHURY](#), ET BUREAU | SEP 16, 2017, 10.25 AM IST

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NEW DELHI: A memorandum of understanding to set up India Japan Act East Forum with an aim to marry India's Act East Policy with Japan's Free and Open Asia-Pacific strategy in the backdrop of China's One Belt One Road initiative is among the major agreements signed during Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to India for the 12th Indo-Japan annual summit, experts said.

The forum will enhance connectivity and promote developmental projects in India's [Northeast](#) region in an efficient and effective manner, according to the MoU signed following the summit in Gandhinagar on Thursday.

Japan has a historic connection to the Northeast and is among the few countries that India has allowed a presence in the eight landlocked states which are the country's gateway to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations members.

India and Japan on Thursday also signed a document on Japanese loan and aid for highway development in the Northeast that can complement India's connectivity initiatives in Bangladesh, Myanmar and beyond, besides BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) and BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) Motor Vehicle Agreements.

Japan will extend a loan of Rs 2,239 crore to India for 'North East Road Network Connectivity Improvement Project' to improve the National Highway 40 (NH-40) and construct a bypass on NH-54 in the Northeast. The project is expected to contribute to the improvement of the intra-regional and international connectivity through regional economic development.

Japan is keen to expand infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia amid China's OBOR initiative and, along with India, it is exploring opportunities to develop projects in ASEAN. This is part of Indo-Japan corridor conceived last year for the Indo-Pacific region that also extends to Eastern Africa under Asia Africa Growth Corridor, an initiative that would provide an alternative to OBOR, which is being implemented in a non-transparent fashion dictated by China's interests. Interestingly Act East Forum is taking shape when Bangladesh-India-China-Myanmar or BCIM that will involve Northeast is yet to be concretised.

India and Japan agree that improving connectivity between Asia and Africa is vital for achieving prosperity of the entire region. The two countries have decided to seek synergy between India's 'Act East' Policy and Japan's 'Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure', by closely coordinating, bilaterally and with other partners, for better regional integration and improved connectivity as well as industrial networks based on principles of mutual consultation and trust.

Development of the Northeast is a priority for India and a key to promote its Act East Policy. Japan has also placed a special emphasis on cooperation in the Northeast for its geographical importance of connecting India to Southeast Asia and historical ties (Japanese forces had fought British in Manipur during World War II), according to informed officials.

Japan has cooperated with a variety of development projects in the Northeast, ranging from connectivity infrastructure such as roads and electricity, water supply and sewage, to forest resource management and biodiversity. Further, there is a great potential for people-to-people and cultural exchanges between Japan and the Northeast, given Japan's historical connection with the region. Against this background, Japan and India last month launched the Coordination Forum in order to explore and expand cooperation in the north-

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eastern region.

Beyond infrastructure development, Japan is looking to build a cultural link with the region which physically connects India to Southeast Asia. The Japanese Ambassador to India, Kenji Hiramatsu, took a delegation of 38 Japanese companies based in Delhi to Imphal, Manipur on May 20-21 to encourage investments in the region. The visit was organised particularly to mark the commemoration of the 73rd Anniversary of the Battle of Imphal, fought between Japanese Army and the Allied Forces in 1944. The Ambassador in his speech on the occasion pledged to invest and develop the region to help it overcome the devastating effects of the war.

Japan is particularly keen to invest in Assam, Manipur and Nagaland, states with which it shares a “historic emotional link”. “Japanese presence in building roads, railways and other infrastructure in Northeast India is testimony to the strong element of trust in the Indo-Japan relationship,” said Darshana M. Baruah, a research analyst at Carnegie India.

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