

## Japan keen on joint foreign infra projects with India

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(HT)

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Tokyo is interested in setting up joint infrastructure development projects abroad with India, said top officials of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA).

Saito Mitsunori, Chief Representative of JICA India, pointed to possible collaboration in India's immediate neighbourhood. Joint planning, design and execution of infrastructure projects in countries like Nepal, where both countries already undertake projects, could help New Delhi and Tokyo maximise their impact, he added.

This proposal comes in the backdrop of heightened geopolitical competition in South Asia. China's Belt and Road Initiative has allowed Beijing to utilize infrastructure aid to step up its clout in the region. However, Chinese funding has been dogged by

allegations of “debt-trap diplomacy”. With infrastructure now a key feature of the region’s brewing diplomatic rivalry, the four-nation Quad set up a working group on infrastructure.

While India has built the Sittwe port in Myanmar, Japan’s efforts have been concentrated on Yangon port. Similarly, Japan has been active in India’s neighbourhood by helping Bangladesh build the Matabari port. Mint had earlier reported that Japan sees the development of Matabari Port as a key imperative for regional economic connectivity. The port will allow Indian business to establish a foothold in Southeast Asia.

Proposals for India-Japan cooperation in foreign infrastructure projects are not new. In 2017, the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) was floated as a joint Indo-Japanese vision for boosting connectivity and trade in Africa. Progress on that front has been limited, according to numerous reports.

Saito pointed out that Japan’s capabilities in hard infrastructure could be complemented by India’s experience in setting up digital infrastructure. According to him, India’s digital offerings, which are cheaper and less cutting edge, suit the needs of developing countries, particularly in Southeast Asia. Japanese firms and public sector organizations have been active in infrastructure development in Vietnam, Indonesia, Cambodia and East Africa.

While Japan is keen to cooperate with official agencies like JICA, Saito added there have been no substantive discussions with the Indian government on specific foreign projects.

When queried about possible Indian participation in Japan’s infrastructure building projects in Southeast Asia, Saito remarked that an Indian presence was welcome. However, he averred that there hasn’t been an indication of interest on India’s part. Foreign infrastructure projects, he added, were often undertaken by private Japanese construction firms funded by JICA.

Supporting India’s efforts at regional connectivity remains a key focus for Japan. Mint earlier reported that New Delhi is currently planning a 5,000-kilometre international waterways network. The project, christened the Eastern Waterways Connectivity

Transport Grid, hopes to connect India's North-East with Southeast Asian nations like Myanmar and Thailand.

While JICA's focus has traditionally been on facilitating India's efforts in road building and land-based physical infrastructure, Saito confirmed that JICA would be interested in exploring cooperation on India's ambitious new project. "Water logistics has huge potential", he went on to add.

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