



@ 2021 Department of Japanese Studies
Vol.1, No.1, January 2022
Inaugural Issue, pp. 205-222
ISSN:2789-3014
<http://doi.org/10.55156/jjsem.dec2111>

India-Japan Partnership and Northeast India

Rajaram Panda*

Abstract– India-Japan partnership has moved to a new level committing development of the long-neglected region of India’s northeast. After the Narendra Damodardas Modi government launched its Act East Policy, India and Japan have found new added value in collaborating to develop this part of India. Many hurdles exist in achieving their objectives. India looks at the northeast region not just as a window for ASEAN in the context of its Act East Policy but as the epicentre of the three pillars- 3Cs – Communication, Commerce and Culture. Any partnership between India and Japan will find a sound foundation with the Northeast as a springboard. The main thrust in developing the region is cross-border connectivity and market linkages for the northeastern region with the ASEAN. Institutional forums are already worked out through which project management agrees to be executed. Some are already done, others are in the process, and new ones are being planned. India and Japan have identified three key areas - infrastructure development, institutions, and governance to make the partnership effective. Modi’s government focuses on exploring the extraordinary opportunities in the northeastern states and other states to enhance productivity for rapid growth. In this mission, Japan is a willing partner. Because of strategic reasons and the sensitiveness of the region, India has shied away from involving other countries in the development activities in the region. However, Japan’s position is unique because of both bonds and trust. Northeast India also serves as a bridge between India and the ASEAN region. So it is a win-win situation for both. The paper attempts to address some of these issues to understand the India-Japan partnership better to develop India’s northeastern region and see how both countries benefit in the process.

Keywords Act East Policy · Indo-Pacific construct · Connectivity · Infrastructure development · Seven Sisters · Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiatives · Maritime security · Fumio Kishida · Narendra Modi · International politics and diplomacy ·

* Currently, Professor Rajaram Panda is Senior Fellow at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Ministry of Culture, Government of India, New Delhi. Earlier, he was Senior Fellow at the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, ICCR (Ministry of External Affairs) Chair Professor at Reitaku University, Japan, and Lok Sabha Research Fellow, Parliament of India. E-mail: rajaram.panda@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Ever since India launched its Look East policy in the 1990s following its liberalisation of economic policies, its engagement strategy has been complemented by its civilisational links with Asia's East and Southeastern regions. The government of Narendra Modi injected a new element of dynamism by rechristening it as Act East policy, implying thereby a departure from mere rhetoric to the practical execution of projects embraced in the policy.¹

During the period that Modi has been in power, it is not difficult to discern the extent of understanding India has achieved in the political, economic and security/strategic domains vis-à-vis the region. One significant example of this engagement strategy was when India hosted all the ten heads of the ASEAN member states as its special guests instead of the customary one at the 69th Republic Day celebrations on January 26, 2018.

In this strategy to reach the ASEAN and bid to push its economy to integrate with the world's economies vigorously by more forward-looking policies, the Modi government worked out a specific foreign policy strategy. As India shares borders with the only member of the ASEAN, Myanmar, developing this gateway through connectivity projects and strengthening the infrastructural base in India's Northeast received priority. In this strategy, India joined hands with Japan in launching several developmental projects in the northeast. The development of India's Seven Sisters, as the seven states in India's northeast are often known, shall have deepening economic ties with neighbouring countries such as Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. The focus of this paper is limited to this aspect of cooperation between India and Japan to understand the enormity of economic and strategic significance of deepening relations with Southeast Asia by both India and Japan. Indeed, ASEAN is the fulcrum around which both India and Japan see sense to cooperate and develop the northeast region of India.

2. Geographical context

India's northeastern region has a unique standing in India because of several factors. The region has a complex ethnic composition, different experience of British control compared to the mainland, insurgency problems in the post-independent period, and a sensitive location bordering five countries. Due to these factors, the government in New Delhi has been careful that the involvement of foreign countries in the region is controlled. Such a line of thinking constrained the region's economic development and fuelled the sense of alienation among the region's people from the mainland. After Narendra Modi came to power in 2014,

¹ See, Prabir De, *Act East to Act Indo-Pacific: Expanding Neighbourhood*, (2020), K.W. Publisher, New Delhi, pp. 348

this policy changed. Intending to economically develop this region and remove the sense of alienation by the region's people, India decided to join hands with Japan to develop the region by launching several connectivity projects.

During World War II, the advancement of the Japanese army into the present Manipur and Nagaland states brought massive destruction and precipitated infrastructure development in the region and impacted the livelihood of the residents. However, this fact has hardly caught the public's attention in India and Japan. This paper intends to examine the changing narrative in the current times; investigate the conditions of connectivity in terms of economic and infrastructure development and human mobility within the region and with the neighbouring countries. The decision of India to cooperate with Japan for the development of northeast India presents a potential boost for the Modi government's Act East policy.

3. Strategic factor

The northeastern region of India is strategically important. The region is endowed with vast reserves of various natural resources such as uranium, coal, hydrocarbons, forests, oil and gas. However, the biggest shortcoming is poor connectivity, which hinders the full exploitation of such rich resources. In a far-reaching change of the narrative of keeping foreign powers away from this region, India invited Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo to visit New Delhi as the Chief Guest of India's 65th Republic Day Parade in 2014. It extended an invitation to Japan for partnering with India to invest and build overland infrastructure in the region.

After assuming power in May 2014, when Modi chose Japan for his first visit overseas in September 2014, it signalled a new approach to deepen ties with this friendly country. Interestingly, other issues such as the nuclear deal, deepening defence ties keeping in mind the changing geopolitical dynamics in the region, and the contract to build India's first bullet (Shinkansen) train network to connect Mumbai and Ahmedabad with the construction cost of \$18,148.15 million took precedence over the issue of developing India's northeastern region.² Subsequently, negotiations with Japan fructified to build better road connectivity and transform the region into a manufacturing hub. It was agreed that the Japanese state-owned development agency, Japan's International Cooperation Agency (JICA), would be the donor agency through which the aid would be disbursed. The National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation Ltd (NHIDCL) were identified as the local Indian partner delegated to work with JICA in the region. The projects to be undertaken by JICA and NHIDCL began in April 2016 after a detailed project report got the nod from JICA and the Department of Economic Affairs via the Ministry of Roads Transport and Highways.

² Ateetmani Brar, "Japan in Northeast India: A Potential Boost to New Delhi's 'Act East Policy'", 18 January 2016,

4. Defined projects

The two main projects defined were the widening and improving the Aizawl-Tuipang NH54 route (380 km) in Mizoram to connect India to Myanmar and the Tura-Dalu section (48 km) of NH51 in Meghalaya. This narrative's most considerable strategic significance can be deciphered from the fact that the northeast Indian states share 5,000 kilometres of international borders, with Myanmar, Bangladesh, China, Bhutan, and Nepal, providing vital links to foster economic development integration with both South and Southeast Asia. If the full potentials are realised, ensuring better connectivity between the northeastern states is central to ensuring border security and maintaining peace and stability. Such a policy option could probably also address the insurgency issue that has plagued the region for a long time.

As a critical driver of India's Act East policy aimed to sculpt partnerships with key states in the Indo-Pacific focusing on Japan, Vietnam, Australia and other ASEAN countries, developing the region economically can serve many economic, political and strategic objectives. In order to achieve this objective, improving connectivity in the region is of utmost importance. The path to do this is not easy. The challenges are enormous. It includes low road density, poor quality of existing roads, and inadequate intra-regional connectivity. Silchar and Dimapur are the only two main rail-heads in the area. Other existing rail and road infrastructure connecting to various state capitals cannot cope with the increase in goods and passenger traffic over the years.³ Changing this was felt necessary urgently. Indeed, if connectivity is improved by expanding road and rail links, it will provide a fillip to the local population who can find their produce better market access with remunerative prices, besides facilitating imports at competitive prices.

Japan is the only suitable country to partner with India to help in the socio-economic development projects in the country's northeast region. Though Japanese Official Development Assistance (ODA) has been made available since 1981 in critical fields such as energy, water supply, forestry and urban development, there is a need to augment the loan component. JICA's known expertise in constructing durable and environmentally sustainable roads access through mountainous terrains could help. Japan's JICA has executed similar projects in several countries such as in Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Ghana, Morocco and Tanzania in critical areas such as building roads, railways, seaports and airports, all of which have helped quicker routes for trade and transport of critical raw materials to the resource deficient Japan, besides contributing to the economies of the host countries. Better connectivity with JICA participation also helps other Japanese companies to operate, thereby creating a win-win situation

³ Ibid.

for both sides. If the connectivity projects are successfully executed, India's Act East policy would receive further boost.

The other area that demands attention is cross-border connectivity and market linkages between ASEAN and the northeastern region. A long-term vision for the India-Japan partnership for economic development in the region can be envisioned.

India is one of the fastest-growing countries today and catching up with the world in its growth rate, there is a greater need for convergence within the country, particularly between the central government and the states that are gradually growing economically. Therefore, three key areas need extra attention – infrastructure development, institutions, and governance. It goes to the credit of the Modi government that in this era of competitive federalism, he focused attention on exploiting the extraordinary opportunities that exist in the northeast states and other states across the country so that their productivity for rapid growth can be unleashed. However, the pandemic outbreak could slow down the process for some time. In such an endeavour, Japan appreciated the central government's commitment to develop the country's northeastern region and welcomed India's invitation to participate. In January 2017, the Japanese ambassador in India, Kenji Hiramatsu, visited Imphal, Kohima, and Assam to study on the spot and convey Japan's interest in engaging with the region.⁴ Hiramatsu discussed with Assam Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal various issues such as investment promotion, people-to-people exchanges and connectivity between Assam and Japan to boost bilateral relations. The potential areas for Japanese investment were identified, such as the state's organic sector, power distribution and transmission sector, besides teaming up with Assam in Start-up and Stand-up initiatives.

The government of Assam offered a chunk of land if the Japanese companies were eager to set up their plants. Hiramatsu evinced interests and was committed to encouraging Japanese companies to invest in organic sectors like tea, agriculture, horticulture, tourism, food processing and facilitating frequent student exchange programmes. The dredging of the Brahmaputra and setting up skill development centres were other areas that were identified for India and Japan to team up.

Besides the popularity of Assam tea in Japan, Japanese people are also familiar with Imphal and Kohima due to the fierce battles fought there more than 70 years ago against the British. For Japan, the expression North-East evokes a special meaning as the thoughts of a special relationship between India and Japan and global and strategic partnership instantly comes into mind. Viewed from a larger

⁴ "Japanese Ambassador to India meets Assam CM, discusses bilateral issues", 21 January 2017,

context, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced his foreign policy strategy as a “free and open Indo-Pacific”, which treated the Pacific and the Indian Ocean as a single vast entity resonates throughout the region. It creates the domain for improving intra and inter-region connectivity to promote the flow of people and goods. Given the thrust in Japan’s foreign policy and relations with India, one did not see any departure from Japan’s committed policy during the Yoshihide Suga administration and his successor government by Fumio Kishida.

To ensure maritime security to protect the free movement of people and goods, there exists a synergy between Japanese strategy and India’s Act East policy. Both India and Japan have strategic and political dialogues at various levels, including annual summit meetings and ministerial levels meetings, including 2+2 meetings between foreign and defence secretaries of both the countries. This 2+2 dialogue has now been elevated to the ministerial level. In Tokyo in October 2018, Prime Minister Modi announced that high-level ministerial dialogue involving their respective foreign and defence ministers to work for peace and stability in the world with Japan would commence soon. In a joint address, Modi remarked: “Without India and Japan’s cooperation, the 21st century cannot be an Asian century”.⁵ India started a similar 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue with the U.S. in September 2018. During the visit of Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono to India in early January 2019, it was agreed that the 2+2 dialogue framework be upgraded to the level of ministers.⁶ Kono reaffirmed the importance of cooperation in third countries and India’s northeastern region, thereby realise the shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific. Since India and Japan are already working closely to improve connectivity in India and between India and its vicinity, cooperation between the two countries in the northeastern region can be placed in this broader strategic context. India and Japan agreed to work together in third countries like Bangladesh to boost connectivity. Also, agreements were signed on cooperation between the two countries’ naval forces, healthcare, digital and new technologies, and food processing.

The long-festering perception that infrastructure and connectivity are the biggest impediments to economic development in the northeastern region is now being addressed, and Japan has joined to partner India in this mission. Like Japan, the northeastern region is mountainous and very vulnerable to the damage caused by heavy rain and natural disaster. It is one area where Japan’s role can be crucial since it has the expertise and the required technology.

As the Indian economy registers steady growth, more and more Japanese companies see business opportunities and are ready to invest in India. In the past

⁵ “In Tokyo, PM Modi Announces High-Level Ministerial Dialogue With Japan”, 29 October 2018,

⁶ “India, Japan will upgrade 2+2 dialogue”, *The Times of India*, 9 January 2019.

decade, Japanese direct investment in India has grown significantly. The Northeast region has vast economic potential – agriculture, food processing and many other industries – and by exploiting these potentials, the region can benefit. Abe often observed that a strong India is in Japan's interest and vice versa. A prosperous and peaceful region is therefore welcome. This new paradigm in India-Japan's partnership for the Northeast region's development will be a permanent strategy of the Seven Sisters and Sikkim. The states need to be proactive and become stakeholders in trade and commerce.

The Assam government has rightly announced a separate department for Act East Policy. The region is not just a window for ASEAN in the context of Act East Policy but would be the epicentre with three Cs as three pillars – Communication, Commerce and Culture. If realised, the corridor could turn into a golden corridor. Any partnership between India and Japan will find a sound foundation with the Northeast as a springboard. The Modi government has the vision to make the region an organic hub of the country. Assam is positioned to become a global business hub with Guwahati at the epicentre. The time is opportune for both India and Japan to partner to make the Northeast the new jewel of India.

While developing the region economically by joining hands with Japan is laudable, other challenges cannot be overlooked and must be factored in while making and executing projects. Not all the Seven States are at the same level of development. Even resources are scattered and unevenly endowed. For example, while Assam is a large state, it is not wealthy. On the other hand, Sikkim is a tiny state with a high per capita income. Therefore, the region cannot be considered one single entity in terms of economic development. Besides, the multiplicity of social systems prevalent in the region poses challenges, especially in very heterogeneous states. Manipur has a vast plain area, and the tension between plain and hill has been there for a long time. The three main tribes – Meitis, Kukis and Nagas – are not always on the same page. Therefore, such deep social and economic diversity needs to be considered while planning to develop the region economically through connectivity and infra projects. The governments in the states ought to ensure peace so that the private sector will have no worry to do business there. Besides Assam, Arunachal Pradesh is positioned to attract the private sector. However, what is shared among all seven states in the region is low population density. A development strategy in the region ought to begin from the agricultural sector. Farmers can benefit if they have better market access to their products, and therefore connectivity between states assumes greater importance.

Indeed, to attain inclusive, sustainable development for the whole of India, the northeastern region ought to get primacy of focus as it is also an essential gateway between India and ASEAN. Improving rural roads and forest projects could get priority. As the region is mountainous, the existing roads have little scope for

widening, and the existing road transport network is limited. In order to secure technology for the maintenance of soil and structures, JICA is implementing capacity building projects in the mountainous region.

There could be other reasons why infrastructure development in the region was delayed. Reasons for slow development could be geological issues, the soft soil, undulating terrain, law and order issues, and lack of equipment and human resources. The capacity and skills of the contractors need to be developed. The involvement of the community in infrastructure development is equally important.

While there may be no disagreement on acknowledging the importance of connectivity, it cannot be looked at in isolation as other issues come into perspective. Connectivity could be of many forms and dimensions: physical and non-physical connectivity, financial connectivity, people-to-people connectivity, and telecommunications connectivity. Similarly, infrastructure has three effects – one direct and two other indirect effects. Private businesses will be attracted if the developed infrastructure is available. There should be no compromise on quality, lest maintenance costs over the years shall skyrocket. The same argument shall apply beyond the region if integrating the economies of the ASEAN is aimed. There shall also be a need to open the window for small businesses along the highways and railways, and this home town investment should have easy access.

Regarding the people-to-people connectivity, private and personal education would require focused attention of the northeast expected to be an education hub with the ASEAN countries. Even here, if linkages are established with Japanese counterparts, that shall help enhance the quality of delivery of technical and professional education system.

Both the governments in India and Japan face new challenges in developing India's northeastern region as state-centric security issues could delay projects. The region remains underdeveloped because the triadic linkage between resource, production and trade could not occur in the past and changing this narrative quickly may face a roadblock. Markets of the neighbouring countries have remained important so far, and the main obstacle in the region remained market connectivity. This narrative can be changed in two ways: either through Bangladesh or South East Asia. The region has not benefitted as the whole trade takes place through the maritime route. However, there are potentials for trade-in items like pineapples, ginger and fish from the region.

As the northeastern region is an agriculture-based economy and agricultural revolution preceded the industrial revolution, India and Japan became natural partners as envisioned by India's Act East Policy. With Myanmar as the gateway to the ASEAN, this partnership looks promising. The military takeover in

Myanmar has not diminished a bit the relevance of engaging with Myanmar. Both India and Japan have a long history of engaging with previous military leaders, and therefore the current situation does not impact the military's foreign policy towards India and Japan. The strategic consideration remains overwhelming for India and Japan to keep both engaged lest China spreads its influence in Myanmar. Such a situation could adversely impact India-Japan cooperation to develop the northeastern region. Prime Minister Modi's vision about the northeast is changing and aims to fulfil people's aspirations. Japan is aware that the northeastern region is strategically vital for India to preserve the country's territorial integrity and, therefore, willing to work with India to develop the region. What both sides need is a result-oriented focus? Friendship with Japan is time immemorial. Memories of Japanese soldiers reaching India for the first time at Moirang in Manipur and Kohima in Nagaland during World War II are fresh in mind. The mantra for the region's development should be focused on three Es – Education, Electricity and Employment.

5. India-Japan Forum

An MoU was inked between Prime Minister Modi and his Japanese counterpart Abe in September 2017 at the end of the annual summit, and both agreed to establish the India-Japan Act East Forum. Subsequently, the Act East Forum aimed to provide a platform for India-Japan collaboration under the rubric of India's "Act East Policy" and Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" was launched. The aim is to identify specific projects for the economic modernisation of India's North-East region, including those about connectivity, developmental infrastructure, industrial linkages, and people-to-people contacts through tourism, culture, and sports-related activities.

To give a big infrastructure push in the northeast, both India and Japan set up the India-Japan Coordination Forum for North East to aggressively develop strategic infrastructure projects such as connectivity and road network development, electricity and disaster management. The first meeting was held in September 2017. The forum was tasked to identify priority development areas of cooperation to develop the northeastern region (DONER). The forum has representation from India's ministries of external affairs, road transport and highways, power and the department of economic affairs. From the Japanese side, the forum has representation from the Japanese Embassy and other government-affiliated Japanese organisations based in New Delhi. Sceptics sometimes view this partnership as an attempt to check China's influence through the Myanmar corridor.⁷ It is a strategic compulsion for both India and Japan, and this aspect

⁷ Utpal Bhaskar, "India, Japan join hands for big infrastructure push in Northeast", 3 August 2017,

cannot be discounted. However, the cooperation between India and Japan goes deeper than this. It is time-tested, and both continue to explore new frontiers of cooperation if such initiatives fetch them mutual dividends. This initiative came in the backdrop of Chinese troops making repeated incursions into the Indian territory. India and China have sparred over hydropower projects in Arunachal Pradesh, which borders China and has the highest potential for hydropower generation in India. Several multilateral lending agencies, including the World Bank, have been unwilling to fund projects in the so-called disputed border state in India's northeast region—seen as sensitive as parts of the region are claimed by China. More recently, China irked India by renaming many districts of Arunachal Pradesh in maps with Chinese names, implicitly telling India that the state is Chinese territory. India issued a demarche and warned Beijing not to interfere in India's internal matters. Such incidents provide additional heft for both India and Japan to find common viewpoints to partner in projects.

While for India, the development of the northeast is a priority and a key to promoting its Act East Policy, Japan places particular emphasis on cooperation in the northeast for its geographical importance connecting India to Southeast Asia and historical ties. Experts say that Japanese involvement in these projects may get expedited, triggering the Doklam incident.

India's decision to partner with Japan in the northeastern region has, therefore, substantial strategic significance as well as advantage. The region is adjacent to China, claiming Arunachal Pradesh as its territory, referring to it as "South Tibet". China is opposed to any foreign investment in the "disputed areas".⁸ Chinese discomfort is on expected lines, but India and Japan do not worry much but remain on guard. Indeed, with an eye on China, India is working on a slew of road and bridge projects to improve connectivity with Bangladesh, Nepal, and Myanmar. India is also keen on expediting the South Asia Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) road connectivity programme in the backdrop of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to connect around 60 countries across Asia, Africa and Europe. The BRI lacks transparency, and many small countries risk falling into a debt trap. Even Malaysia scrapped some projects that it had earlier agreed to join. India has been critical of the BRI from the very beginning. It has raised serious objections to developing China-Pakistan Economic Corridor as part of BRI, as it cuts through Gilgit and Baltistan areas of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.

Both India and Japan held the second meeting of the Japan-India Act East Forum in October 2018 in New Delhi ahead of the annual summit between the two countries in November when Modi visited Tokyo. Both sides agreed to deepen

⁸ Debarshi Dasgupta, "Strategic location of region seen as gateway to Asean markets", *Straits Times*, November 14, 2018,

cooperation in various sectors, including building infrastructure in the northeastern region and the forest management projects of Tripura and Meghalaya. A new initiative to utilise bamboo, available in abundance in the region and people-to-people exchanges were discussed.⁹

Elsewhere, Japan has been helping India with infrastructure projects such as the Mumbai-Ahmedabad high-speed rail corridors, bullet trains, Delhi metro, and others through JICA. Japan has been India's partner for a long time, and there is a certain degree of comfort. This aspect is beyond the scope of this paper.

To take the development further and reinforce Japanese commitment to engage with India in the northeast, JICA signed an agreement on October 30, 2018, to provide an ODA loan of 25,483 million Japanese yen (Rs. 1,575 crore) to improve the road network by constructing India's longest bridge across river Brahmaputra. Once constructed, the 4-lane bridge across the Brahmaputra would bridge the long-awaited gap between Meghalaya and Assam, and the travel time will considerably be reduced. The Project is expected to contribute to the "Japan-India Act East Forum", which aims to expand the cooperation between Japan and India in the northeast. The Executing Agency for the Project is National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation Limited (NHIDCL).¹⁰

The Phase-III of the Project includes constructing about 20 kilometres long four-lane bridge between Dhubri in Assam and Phulbari in Meghalaya over the Brahmaputra River. The bridge will be built with emergency staircases, approach sections and necessary traffic facilities. Under the Indian Road Congress (IRC), the width of each main road lane is 3.5 meters, with the design speed at 100km/h. The bridge structure comprises the navigational portion with 125 meters and the viaduct portion with 60 meters. When completed, it will become India's longest bridge, spanning more than 19 km, surpassing the Bhupen Hazarika Setu in the state of Assam, which is 9.15 kilometres across.¹¹ The bridge is expected to be completed by 2026-27. The bridge will cut the distance from 250 km to 19 km. The bridge would also prove significant for international traffic movement to other nations.

⁹ Huma Siddiqui, "Japan-India Act East Forum plans major projects for north-eastern region", Financial Express, 10 October 2018, <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/japan-india-act-east-forum-plans-major-projects-for-north-eastern-region/1344590/>. See also, <https://www.thestatesman.com/india/india-japan-to-step-up-cooperation-for-developing-north-eastern-states-1502695622.html>

¹⁰ https://www.jica.go.jp/india/english/office/topics/press181030_02.html

¹¹ Rupakjyoti Borah, "Japan's Infrastructure Push in Northeast India Builds on Trust Factor", 25 July 2018, <https://japan-forward.com/japans-infrastructure-push-in-northeast-india-builds-on-trust-factor/>

Including the amount extended for Phase–III, JICA has extended a cumulative ODA loan of 184,895 million Japanese Yen (approximately over Rs. 11,900 Crore) for the North East Road Connectivity Project. Phase-I covered improvement of National Highway (NH)-51 and NH-54 in Mizoram and Meghalaya states, respectively. Phase-II helped lay bypasses for NH-40 in Meghalaya and National Highway 54 bypasses in Mizoram. Both the Phases helped improve connectivity in the NER by upgrading Transit infrastructure.”¹²

Established by a specific law as an incorporated administrative institution under the Government of Japan, JICA aims to promote international cooperation as the sole Japanese governmental agency in charge of ODA implementation. JICA is the world’s largest bilateral donor agency. JICA works as a bridge between Japan and emerging countries and assists in loans, grants, and technical cooperation to strengthen their capabilities.

6. India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway Project

As a part of a larger initiative and besides cooperating with Japan, India is involved in the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway. The 1,360 kms long India-Myanmar Trilateral Highway is an initiative of India, Myanmar and Thailand. India is undertaking the construction of two sections of the Trilateral Highway in Myanmar, namely, the construction of the 120.74 km Kalewa-Yagyi road section and the construction of 69 bridges along with the approach road on the 149.70 km Tamu-Kyigone-Kalewa (TKK) road section.¹³

It was expected to be operational by the end of 2019 but is delayed because of the pandemic. Tokyo, which had deep engagement with Myanmar even during the rule by the military junta, now sees greater relevance to deepen ties with Myanmar as the country serves as India’s land-bridge in the ASEAN region. Japan has partnered with India, and other projects are the Guwahati Water supply scheme and the Nagaland Forest Management Project.

Why is this project important?

Under the rubric of India’s Indo-Pacific strategy with Act East policy as the anchor, Prime Minister Modi’s vision of SAGAR – Security and Growth for all in the Region - underpins India’s vision of the Indian Ocean region and the greater Indo-Pacific region.¹⁴ In this strategy, ASEAN countries remain central to

¹² https://www.jica.go.jp/india/english/office/topics/press181030_02.html

¹³ <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=187130>

¹⁴ See, Subhashis Sarangi, *Maritime Corridors in the Indo-Pacific: Geopolitical Implications for India* (2021), USI, New Delhi. Also see, Subhashis, *Unpacking SAGAR (Security and Growth for all in the Region)*, USI Occasional Paper, No. 2-2019,

realising India's vision of the Indo-Pacific. India's BIMSTEC¹⁵ and IORA initiatives and frameworks like Ganga-Mekong Cooperation bring India closer to the ASEAN.¹⁶ India's northeast, which is being transformed by connectivity projects in cooperation with Japan, provides a land bridge with ASEAN. If understood from this larger perspective, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway currently under construction is an important project in India's Act East strategy. When completed, it will connect Moreh in India with Mae Sot in Thailand via Myanmar. By linking other highways in other ASEAN states such as Vietnam and Laos, this project will boost economic growth in the region.

What is the project's history, and how did it originate? The trilateral highway project was first proposed during a ministerial meeting in Yangon in April 2002. The approximate length of the highways is 1,360 km. The 160 km long India-Myanmar Friendship road linking Moreh-Tamu-Kalmey-Kalewa forms the trilateral highway. It was built first by the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) and was inaugurated on February 13, 2001. The BRO maintained it until 2009 when full ownership was transferred to Myanmar. India and ASEAN plan to extend the Trilateral highway route to Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. This connectivity will generate annually an estimated \$70 billion in incremental GDP and 20 million in total aggregate employment by 2025.

India initiated a preliminary survey to determine the feasibility of establishing a rail link parallel to the trilateral highway in January 2018. Japan expressed interest in collaborating with India and funding the proposed rail link. The trilateral highway project is crucial because it opens the gate to the ASEAN through the land. The project will boost trade and commerce in the India-ASEAN Free Trade Area and the rest of Southeast Asia.

In order to deepen people-to-people contact, Japan has introduced the IRIS programme, named after a mysterious link between Japan and the northeast region of India, linking one species of iris called *Kombirei* that grows mainly around Loktak Lake near Imphal and is commonly used in festivals and was found to be a new species in India and identical with "Kakitsubata", which was known as "Japanese iris"¹⁷ and considered an indigenous species of Japan for more than one thousand years. Under the IRIS program, 23 young talents from Manipur and Nagaland were invited to visit Japan from October 28, 2017, to November 4.

¹⁵ See, "BIMSTEC: A Desirable Alternative to SAARC and an Extra Feather to India's Act East Policy", 12 OCTOBER 2017, [HTTPS://THEKOOTNEETI.IN/2017/10/12/BIMSTEC-A-DESIRABLE-ALTERNATIVE-TO-SAARC-AND-AN-EXTRA-FEATHER-TO-INDIAS-ACT-EAST-POLICY/](https://thekootneeti.in/2017/10/12/BIMSTEC-A-DESIRABLE-ALTERNATIVE-TO-SAARC-AND-AN-EXTRA-FEATHER-TO-INDIAS-ACT-EAST-POLICY/)

¹⁶ Rajaram Panda, "Significance of the Mekong-Ganga Initiative- Analysis", 5 August 2021,

¹⁷ Borah, n. 10. Also, see https://www.in.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_en/00_000442.html

During the visit, the group visited Tokyo, Saitama, Chiba and Hiroshima and had wide-ranging experiences such as participating in environment and disaster prevention programs, besides meeting Parliament Secretary for Foreign Affairs and learning a local government's efforts to boost eco-tourism. Japanese Ambassador Hiramatsu announced the program at the commemoration of the 73rd anniversary of the Battle of Imphal in May 2017. Japan hopes that the IRIS program shall bear fruits and seeds and eventually bloom as flowers between Japan and the Northeast region of India.

Notwithstanding the thrust to boost such soft power diplomacy, the challenges are enormous. Besides the lack of good quality infrastructure that requires the infusion of a large amount of capital, employment opportunities are few. However, the level of literacy rate is relatively high than in many parts of the country. An insurgency may have waned, but stray incidents of extortions in some states in the region could pose a security risk for foreigners to work there. All the seven states being stakeholders, proper coordination in executing projects shall be extremely important.

Being a sensitive region from the security point of view, India has welcomed Japan to partner in the region's development, demonstrating the level of trust, confidence, and bonhomie that both share. If projects are executed as planned, one can expect a dramatic turnaround in the region's economic prosperity and its people.

Like the outgoing ambassador Kenji Hiramatsu, his successor Satoshi Suzuki too is upbeat about deepening ties with the northeast region of India by partnering with India to enhance connectivity. The ambassador is convinced that connectivity is the best area to showcase how both countries can bring about tangible benefits to the entire region.¹⁸ Indeed, Japan's decision to become the lead country for the connectivity pillar of IPOI was a strong reaffirmation of Japan's commitment to the enhancement of connectivity. India and Japan have been advancing various connectivity projects in India and third countries.

There is no difference of opinion that both India and Japan are committed to developing India's northeast region in the quest for a free and open Indo-Pacific. Since none of the northeastern Seven Sisters has an outlet to the sea, both India and Japan work closely to upgrade highways to the border with Bangladesh. It has emerged as a vital footprint of India-Japan collaboration in the northeast.

Indeed, linking the northeast region with the outside world is the new narrative in the Indo-Pacific construct. To take the initiative further, Prime Minister Modi inaugurated

¹⁸ Ateet Sharma, "India, Japan to step up work to link northeast region with Indo-Pacific", 20 March 2021,

the ‘Maitri Setu’ bridge between India and Bangladesh in March 2021. It has been built over the Feni River, which flows between the Indian state of Tripura and Bangladesh. The 1.9 km long bridge joins Sabroom in south Tripura with Ramgarh in Bangladesh. Tripura is set to become the ‘Gateway of North East’ with access to Chittagong Port of Bangladesh, just 80 km from Sabroom. From Ramgarh to Baraiyarhat, India builds a road while Japan constructs eight bridges. Ambassador Suzuki explained that if one looks at all these joint efforts by India and Japan in a holistic way, one can notice a dynamic connectivity network in which India-Japan collaboration provides the landlocked northeast with access to the Bay of Bengal and beyond, most notably to ASEAN countries. Indeed, the Indo-Pacific maritime domain is the source of growth and prosperity, and therefore better access to these Oceans is vital for improving people’s lives. Japan is also partnering with India in building the 20km, a four-lane bridge between Dhubri in Assam and Phulbari in Meghalaya.

Under the aegis of the Japan-India Act East Forum, both countries are also committed to boosting health care in the northeast, including a 400 bedded hospital in Kohima, Nagaland, and a Super Speciality Cancer and Research Centre in Mizoram, besides the project on Strengthening of Health Systems and Excellence of Medical Education in Assam. In January 2021, the two countries also discussed other areas of cooperation besides reviewing the status of projects under implementation in India’s sensitive northeast, including roads, water supply and hydel power. The discussion took place under the Act East Forum framework, headed by India’s foreign secretary on the Indian side and the Japanese ambassador in India on the Japanese side. As mentioned earlier, the Act East Forum was established in 2007.¹⁹ It frames, evaluates and facilitates Japan-India collaboration in connectivity and developmental projects in and with the northeastern region of India.²⁰

The ongoing projects in the region are worth 231 billion yen or approximately ₹1,600 crores. Other potential areas of cooperation include agriculture, fisheries, agro-industries, tourism promotion, urban development, forestry and connectivity.

A Japanese embassy official observed: “Japan attaches great importance to the cooperation for developing India’s North East, anchored by its historical ties, trust and friendship. The North East stands at a place strategically important to realise a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific; and Japan is proud to have been a partner with the people of North East in their aspirations for a better and sustainable future”.²¹ Japan is one of few countries involved in development activity in the

¹⁹ https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29154/Launch_of_IndiaJapan_Act_East_Forum

²⁰ Elizabeth Roche, “India, Japan review implementation of projects in North-eastern region”, 28 January 2021,

²¹ Quoted in Ibid.

region – one of the others being Singapore. New Delhi views the region as a natural link with Southeast Asia. New Delhi has been looking to step up cooperation between its northeast and the neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Myanmar besides the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to raise people's living standards given that the region has been under-developed a hotbed of militancy and separatists' groups. In recent years, the Indian government has signed peace pacts with key militant and separatist groups, which has brought peace to the region.

Indeed, enhancing connectivity in the Indo-Pacific region by utilising their expertise and complementarities is the broader vision of the India-Japan partnership. Modi and Suga also highlighted this important issue during the Quad Leaders' Summit in March 2021. India-Japan collaborative initiative is a step in honing the synergy between India's Act East policy and Japan's Partnership for Quality Infrastructure. Both are committed to developing and strengthening reliable, sustainable, and resilient infrastructures that augment connectivity within India and between India and other Indo-Pacific regions. For a long time, India has stressed the importance of connectivity in the Indo-Pacific region as a uniting factor rather than just enhancing trade and prosperity. Indeed, near or far, robust connectivity with regional countries is deep-rooted in Indian civilisational history. Indian culture has been enriched by ancient linkages with the rest of the world, just as the light of the Indian culture has shone in lands connected across land and seas by emissaries and merchants.²²

The Indian diplomats stress that India has devoted more resources to building connectivity in its immediate neighbourhood. Since 2005-06, India has extended Lines of Credit worth nearly \$ 31 billion to more than 64 countries. Its Act East Policy is at the centre of its connectivity orientation and a fulcrum of its broader approach to the Indo-Pacific. India's efforts are focused on connecting the North-East with the dynamic economies of South East Asia and enhancing connectivity within the North East itself. Given Japan's expertise in the development of quality infrastructure, India hopes that Japan's lead on the connectivity pillar of IPOI will give a boost to connectivity in the region and contribute to unlocking the potential for an equitable, positive and forward-looking change in the region contributing to security and growth of the Indo-Pacific.²³

²² https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/33680/Address_by_Secretary_East_at_the_Virtual_Seminar_on_Connectivity_Cooperation_for_a_Free_Open_and_Inclusive_IndoPacific

²³ Premesha Saha and Abhishek Mishra, "The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative: Towards a Coherent Indo-Pacific Policy for India", ORF Occasional Papers, 23 December 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/indo-pacific-oceans-initiative-towards-coherent-indo-pacific-policy-india/>

Japan finds compelling reasons to collaborate in Northeast India's development. Japan is convinced that this is an integral part of India's Act East Policy with its technology and infrastructure development. If both sides partner with commitment, it can help lift the region's economy.²⁴ Indeed, interest in Japan's development assistance and technology is high in northeast India. Ambassador Suzuki's visit to Assam in February is therefore significant. Japan's interest in India's northeast region stems from historical connection with Japanese troops fighting in Nagaland and Manipur, which gels with India's Act East Policy.²⁵ JETRO is also trying to set up an industrial township in the region. Another reason for Japan's attraction to India's northeast that is often overlooked is that both India and Japan have not participated in the China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is why collaboration between the two countries to develop India's northeast region assumes added significance.

Because of strategic reasons and the sensitiveness of the region, India has shied away from involving other countries in the development activities in the region. However, Japan's position is unique because of the bond and trusts both India and Japan share. Northeast India also serves as a bridge between India and the ASEAN region. So it is a win-win situation for both.

However, several hurdles have to be overcome in taking the joint India-Japan development projects to fruition. Coordination between Japanese entities and different northeastern states is necessary at the local level, and it is not easy given the cultural differences and exclusive mindsets of peoples of which there are many tribes with varying priorities. Moreover, the level of development in the Seven Sisters is not uniform. The positive aspect of these projects is that the region's people are willing to welcome the Japanese as a brother. Therefore, coordination between different agencies at the central and regional levels and the corporate and national levels are unlikely to face many hurdles.

As it transpires, Northeast India has been an essential part of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision, which has been the highlight of Japanese foreign policy ever since the administration of the former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. It continued into the Suga Administration and will continue during the Kishida administration as well. Change in leadership in Japan does not affect Japan's priority focus towards India. So, there shall be continuity. India-Japan collaboration for developing India's northeastern region is a true example of their commitment, trust, and friendship, which will hone the partnership's broader security and strategic visions.

²⁴ Rupakjyoti Borah, "Japan Shares Good Reasons to Collaborate on Northeast India's Development", Japan Forward, 15 March 2021, <https://japan-forward.com/japan-shares-good-reasons-to-collaborate-in-northeast-indias-development/>

²⁵ Ibid.

Acknowledgements- The author would like to acknowledge that research for this paper is just a small part of the larger project on India-Japan Relations supported by a fellowship by the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, where the author is a Senior Fellow now. Inputs received from several quarters are too many and must remain anonymous. Though adequate care was taken to check facts, the author accepts the responsibility for any errors that may have inadvertently crept into the article.

References

- Prabir De, *Act East to Act Indo-Pacific: Expanding Neighbourhood*, (2020), K.W. Publisher, New Delhi, pp. 348
- Rupakjyoti Borah, "Japan Shares Good Reasons to Collaborate on Northeast India's Development", *Japan Forward*, March 15 2021, <https://japan-forward.com/japan-shares-good-reasons-to-collaborate-in-northeast-indias-development/>
- Premesha Saha and Abhishek Mishra, "The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative: Towards a Coherent Indo-Pacific Policy for India", ORF Occasional Papers, December 23 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/indo-pacific-oceans-initiative-towards-coherent-indo-pacific-policy-india/>https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/33680/Address_by_Secretary_East_at_the_Virtual_Seminar_on_Connectivity_Cooperation_for_a_Free_Open_and_Inclusive_IndoPacific
- Rajaram Panda, "Significance of the Mekong-Ganga Initiative- Analysis", August 5 2021, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/05082021-significance-of-the-mekong-ganga-cooperation-initiative-analysis/>
- Ateetmani Brar, "Japan in Northeast India: A Potential Boost to New Delhi's Act East Policy, January 18 2016, http://www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=4960
- Ateet Sharma, "India, Japan to step up work to link northeast region with Indo-Pacific", March 20 2021, <https://daijiworld.com/news/newsDisplay?newsID=814286>
- Embassy of Japan in India, www.in.emb-japan.go.jp
- Official Development Assistance, <https://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-standards/official-development-assistance.htm>,
- Subhashis Sarangi, *Maritime Corridors in the Indo-Pacific: Geopolitical Implications for India* (2021), USI, New Delhi. Also see, Subhashis, *Unpacking SAGAR (Security and Growth for all in the Region)*, USI Occasional Paper, No. 2-2019, https://usiofindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/USI-Occasional-Paper_2_19-Unpacking-SAGAR-Final-print-File-1.pdf