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Japan in Northeast India: Raising the Stakes

One of the important facets of Japan's growing ties with India is its involvement in India's Northeastern region. Apart from the connectivity factor, Northeast India is key for both Japan's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' strategy and India's 'Act-East' policy. Given Northeast India's physical proximity to Southeast Asia (a region where Japan has a huge economic stake), its importance in India's bilateral ties with Japan is only set to grow in the immediate future.

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It was at Moirang in Manipur in Northeast India on 14 April 1944 that the Indian flag was unfurled for the first time on Indian soil by soldiers from the Indian National Army, supported by the Japanese.² However, they were later defeated by the Allied Forces in the Battles of Imphal and Kohima, which became one of the turning points of the Second World War as the Japanese soldiers retreated after this setback.

Much time has passed since then. New Delhi has, once again, come close to Tokyo, especially in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War. One of the important aspects of New

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² "Tri-Colour's First Hoisting Commemorated At Moirang", *Kangla Online*, 15 April 2014. <http://kanglaonline.com/2014/04/tricolours-first-hoisting-commemorated-at-moirang/>. Accessed on 7 July 2018.

Delhi's growing ties with Tokyo has been the burgeoning cooperation between Japan and Northeast India. Recently, on 21 June 2018, it was reported that the contract for the almost 20-kilometre Dhubri-Phulbari bridge in Northeast India would be awarded by the end of this year. When completed, it will become India's longest bridge, surpassing the Bhupen Hazarika Setu in Assam, which is 9.15 kilometres long.³ Funded by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the proposed Dhubri-Phulbari bridge is emblematic of the growing involvement of Japan in India's Northeast.

Why is Japan Interested in Northeast India?

During the visit of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to India last September, the two countries "welcomed the India-Japan cooperation on development of India's North Eastern Region as a concrete symbol of developing synergies between India's 'Act-East Policy' and Japan's Free and Open Indo Pacific Strategy."⁴

A host of factors have fuelled Tokyo's interest in Northeast India.

First, under Abe, Japan has embarked on the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' strategy which aims at "promoting connectivity between Asia, the Middle East and Africa." It actually builds on Abe's landmark speech before the Indian Parliament in August 2007 (during his earlier term in office) titled "Confluence of the Two Seas" where he noted that "the Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity."⁵

Second, in light of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) [formerly called the One Belt One Road], Japan is trying, in its own way, to increase its presence in the infrastructure sector in Asia and across the world with initiatives like the 'Partnership for Quality Infrastructure'.

³ "Dhubri-Phulbari bridge work likely to be awarded this year", *The Assam Tribune*, 21 June 2018. <http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=jun2118/at062>. Accessed on 27 June 2018.

⁴ Ministry of External Affairs (India), India-Japan Joint Statement during visit of Prime Minister of Japan to India, 14 September 2017, <http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28946/IndiaJapan+Joint+Statement+during+visit+of+Prime+Minister+of+Japan+to+India+September+14+2017>. Accessed on 26 June 2018.

⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Confluence of the Two Seas", 22 August 2007. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>. Accessed on 27 June 2018.

Tokyo has already been closely involved economically in the Association of Southeast Nations (ASEAN)-member countries like Myanmar, a country which also serves as India's land-bridge to the ASEAN region. Given the Northeast's physical proximity to ASEAN, it has naturally evoked interest in Japan since it already has close ties with ASEAN. Japan is ASEAN's third largest trading partner.⁶

Third, while Japan has already been involved in various big-ticket infrastructure projects in the rest of India, this somehow was not the case in the Northeastern region of India until recently because of reticence on the part of both India and Japan. However, this seems to be changing now.

Fourth, it also symbolises the growing trust levels between India and Japan as New Delhi has been wary of allowing external parties to invest in India's Northeast, due to its strategic location.

Japanese Projects in Northeast India

Tokyo has contributed to many infrastructure development projects in Northeast India.

First, it has provided Official Development Assistance (ODA) loans for the North East Road Network Connectivity Improvement Project (which includes the National Highway 51 in Meghalaya and the NH54 in Mizoram) and will extend a loan to the tune of ₹2,239 crore⁷ (\$4.5 billion). This will support the expansion and upgradation of the Shillong-Dawki strip in Meghalaya and the construction of a new bridge in Dawki (on the border with Bangladesh), replacing the existing 90-year old bridge.

Second, Japanese organisations, such as the Nippon Foundation, have provided financial support for the construction of the Imphal War Museum in Manipur in memory of the nearly

⁶ Dandan Wan, "China and Japan rivalry in ASEAN", 23 February 2018. http://www.eu-asiacentre.eu/pub_details.php?pub_id=233. Accessed on 6 August 2018.

⁷ "Japan teams up with India for Northeast, to extend Rs 2239-crore loans", *The Economic Times*, 18 September 2017, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/infrastructure/japan-teams-up-with-india-for-northeast-to-extend-rs-2239-crore-loans/articleshow/60703906.cms> accessed on 27 June 2018.

70,000 Japanese soldiers who are believed to have died in the Battles of Imphal and Kohima during the Second World War.⁸

Third, the Japanese government's IRIS programme saw the visit of 23 young talents from the Northeastern part of India to Japan in October 2017. Announced by Japanese Ambassador to India, Kenji Hiramatsu, at the commemoration of the 73rd anniversary of Battle of Imphal in May 2017, the programme aims to enhance friendship between Japan and the Northeast region of India.⁹

Fourth, following up on the memorandum of cooperation, signed during the visit of Abe to India, to establish the India-Japan Act East Forum, India's Ministry of External Affairs and the Embassy of Japan in India held the first joint meeting of the Forum in December 2017. This meeting was co-chaired by the former Indian Foreign Secretary S Jaishankar and Hiramatsu.

The meeting also included representatives from India's Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region, the Department of Economic Affairs in the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Northeastern states. From the Japanese side, there was representation from JICA, the Japan External Trade Organization, the Japan Foundation and the Japan National Tourism Organization.¹⁰

Fifth, Japan is also involved in a host of other projects in Northeast India in sectors such as water supply, sewerage, forest management, agriculture, youth exchange and biodiversity, among others. These projects include the Guwahati Water Supply Project and the Guwahati Sewerage Project in Assam; the Project on Capacity Enhancement for Sustainable Agriculture and Irrigation Development in Mizoram; the Tripura Forest Environmental Improvement and Poverty Alleviation Project; the Capacity Development for Forest Management and Personnel Training Project in Assam, Mizoram and Nagaland; the Sikkim Biodiversity Conservation and Forest Management Project; the Nagaland Forest Resource

⁸ "Japan to build war museum in Manipur", *The Hindu*, 21 May 2017, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/japan-to-build-war-museum-in-manipur/article18519330.ece>. Accessed on 7 July 2018.

⁹ "IRIS Program: Ambassador Hiramatsu saw off 23 young talents from Manipur and Nagaland visiting Japan", Embassy of Japan, 30 October 2017. http://www.in.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_en/00_000442.html. Accessed on 10 August 2018.

¹⁰ Ministry of External Affairs, India, Launch of India-Japan Act East Forum. http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29154/Launch_of_IndiaJapan_Act_East_Forum. Accessed on 6 July 2018.

Management Project; the Innovative Asia for the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT)-Guwahati in Assam; the Japan-East Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youths Programme; the Japan-Asia Youth Exchange Program in Science; the DBT-AIST International Laboratory for Advanced Biomedicine at Sikkim University; and the IIT-Guwahati.

Japan has also contributed in the field of hydro-electricity, which is one of the strengths in Northeast India. These include projects such as the Uiam Stage II Hydropower Station Renovation and Modernisation Project in Meghalaya.

Sixth, in May last year, Hiramatsu led a delegation of 38 Japanese companies to Imphal in a bid to encourage investments in the Northeast. The Northeastern states are now trying their best to kick start the industrialisation process in this part of the country. In February this year, Assam organised a Global Investors Summit for the first time. Participating in this event, Hiramatsu remarked that, “Japan wants to expand the special ties with the Northeast and Assam. The key sectors which could witness further tie-ups in the future include manufacturing, smart city models and exchanges in educational, cultural and sports arenas.”¹¹

Seventh, Tokyo is also hoping to receive more interns from the Northeast under the rubric of the Technical Intern Training Programme in Japan, in areas like elderly care, which is a major concern for Japan, especially given its ageing population. Tokyo is also conducting capacity development programmes for forest management and income diversification in the Northeastern part of India.

Finally, Japan and India are also working towards holding joint counter-terrorism exercises at the Counter-Insurgency Jungle Warfare School in Mizoram. In addition, Tokyo and New Delhi are also looking at cooperation in the field of sports, especially with Tokyo hosting the Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2020. Sports persons from the Northeast have excelled both on the national and the international stage and Japan is mulling about cooperation with Manipur National Sports University.¹²

¹¹ “Japan keen to increase people-to-people relation with Assam: Ambassador”, *Hindustan Times*, 3 February 2018, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/japan-keen-to-increase-people-to-people-relation-with-assam-ambassador/story-cXBc2579Fj7RdKhXiQ1MyJ.html>. Accessed on 6 July 2018.

¹² Embassy of Japan in India, Ambassador’s Meghalaya Visit: Ambassador’s speech at Asian Confluence’s Seminar. http://www.in.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_en/00_000607.html. Accessed on 8 July 2018.

Challenges

However, there may be quite a few challenges for both Tokyo and New Delhi as they join forces to give a leg-up to infrastructure development in India's Northeastern region.

First, Northeast India requires a huge and sustained infusion of capital in the infrastructure sector. There are also differences in the quality of infrastructure in the different Northeastern states and they need to be standardised, for example, Assam has much better infrastructure than the other Northeastern states. Second, there could be issues in coordination between the different state governments, the central government in India and the Japanese government since different political dispensations are in power in the Northeastern states and, at times, they differ in their viewpoints from that of the central government.

Third, there is the China factor when it comes to cooperation in states like Arunachal Pradesh. The Chinese foreign ministry, in response to Japan-India collaboration in the Northeast, noted that, "you must be very clear that boundary of the India-China border area has not been totally delimited and we have disputes in the eastern section of the boundary."¹³ It remains to be seen how far New Delhi and Tokyo would be willing to push China on this issue especially because both of them need to manage their relations with Beijing.

Conclusion

Tokyo has already been providing ODA to India since 1958 and it is New Delhi's biggest bilateral donor. It has also been involved in many other flagship infrastructure development projects in India, such as the upcoming Mumbai-Ahmedabad bullet train project, the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor, the Chennai-Bangalore Industrial Corridor, the Delhi Metro and some others. It was during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Japan in September 2014 that Tokyo pledged to invest ¥3.5 trillion (\$43 billion) in public and private investments in India in the next five years. In addition, Japanese foreign direct investment to India has also been increasing. In the financial year 2016-17, it stood at US\$4.7 billion (\$6.4

¹³ "China reacts to India-Japan cooperation in northeast, says no room for 'third party'", *Hindustan Times*, 15 September 2017, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/japan-should-not-get-involved-in-china-india-border-dispute-beijing/story-IE9M3uxuTGTT6j4HHgVCcM.html>. Accessed on 6 July 2018.

billion), which was an increase of 80 per cent from the previous year, while total Japanese investments into India since 2000 stand at US\$25.7 billion (S\$35.1 billion).

The Modi government has already been laying stress on speeding up development initiatives in Northeast India. While laying the foundation stone of the Indian Council of Agriculture Research's third Indian Agriculture Research Institute at Gogamukh in Assam, Modi noted that, "Northeast was known as NE, but from now on it will be known as new economy, new energy, new empowerment – in a way it will become a new engine for India's growth."¹⁴

Japan's financial help will give a much-needed boost to India's 'Act-East' policy and speed up New Delhi's engagement, not only with Japan, but also with the ASEAN region and could very well be a game-changer as far as infrastructure development in Northeast India is concerned. New Delhi is already working on the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway, which will connect Moreh in Northeastern India all the way to Mae Sot in Thailand. In the future, there are plans to connect it all the way to Vietnam. New Delhi is also working on other initiatives like the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal initiative Motor Vehicles Act which aims to ensure the free movement of cargo and passengers between these four countries, though it was rejected by the Upper House of the Bhutanese Parliament, since it is worried about the sudden influx of vehicles and people from these countries.

Japan's growing involvement in Northeast India will be yet another shot-in-the-arm for what Abe has described as the relationship with the "greatest potential of any bilateral relationship in the world"¹⁵ and is likely to raise the stakes as far as infrastructure development in Northeast India is concerned.

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¹⁴ "Northeast should be the 'New Engine' for India's growth: Narendra Modi in Assam", *Hindustan Times*, 26 May 2017, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/northeast-should-be-the-new-engine-for-india-s-growth-narendra-modi-in-assam/story-iT7zgfARNbT0zGhRLvGYoL.html>. Accessed on 10 July 2018.

¹⁵ "India-Japan bilateral relationship has greatest potential: Abe", *The Hindu*, date. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/indiajapan-bilateral-relationship-has-greatest-potential-abe/article7904075.ece>. Accessed on 27 June 2018.