

East India Summit –Creating a Sustainable Infrastructure Roadmap for East and North East India –Linking Global Investments (Special focus: Ports, Railways, Aviation and Future Mobility), Inaugural Session, International Cooperation through Bilateral linkages for Investment opportunities in the East and North East

Address by Ambassador Suzuki at the Inaugural Session, 28 September 2021

- Mr. Gangapuram Kishan Reddy, Hon'ble Minister of Development of North Eastern Region,
- Mr. Amitabh Kant, Chief Executive Officer, NITI AAYOG
- Mr. Vijay Dewan, Chairman of CII Eastern Region,
- My colleague Ambassadors and High Commissioners,

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honor to be here amongst you and indeed a privilege to witness the inauguration of this East India Summit.

First of all, I would like to take this opportunity to express my heartfelt gratitude to CII for the excellent cooperation and extraordinary dedication towards strengthening our economic ties.

I understand that this Summit will discuss a sustainable infrastructure roadmap with a focus on development in critical infrastructure. I am confident that the series of upcoming discussions will provide an amazing opportunity for all of us to explore ways to enhance the global partnership for development in the Eastern and North Eastern regions. These regions have beyond doubt attained importance in many ways for India and its global partners including Japan, as they are the gateway between ASEAN and South Asia. Enhanced connectivity is the key for growth and stability in the region.

I would like to briefly describe why Japan has been actively engaged in the evolution of the infrastructure investment landscape in Eastern and Northeastern India.

The Eastern and Northeastern regions are full of potential not only for their own or India's further development, but also for the stability and prosperity of a wider region. That is why Japan has been a staunch and reliable partner in these regions.

The Eastern and Northeastern regions are located at a strategically and economically important juncture on the border of Southeast Asia as well as at the center of the BIMSTEC countries.

If I may touch upon the Northeastern region first, Japan and India have placed particular importance to our cooperation in the North East, which has been clearly and repeatedly stated in our successive Joint Statements during our summit meetings since 2014.

In September 2014, Prime Minister Modi chose Japan as the first destination for his bilateral visits outside India's immediate neighborhood. He described this decision as a reflection of Japan's importance in India's foreign policy and economic development as well as Japan's place at the heart of India's Act East Policy. During the 2014 visit, Prime Minister Modi and then Japanese Prime Minister Abe placed special emphasis on Japan's cooperation for enhanced connectivity and development in the North East. The two leaders shared the view that linking the region to other economic corridors in India and Southeast Asia would catalyze economic development and increase prosperity. Indeed, the North East is where our Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision and India's "Act East Policy" converge.

In February this year, I had the privilege of visiting the State of Assam with External Affairs Minister Dr. Jaishankar, when he said, historically, "India was a great country only when eastern India was prosperous and secure." I fully agree with him.

When we look closely at the map of the North East, it is not hard to understand that the shortage of transport infrastructure has limited its access to the markets of Myanmar and Bangladesh. Without better connectivity, the region cannot make full use of its

potential.

Therefore, it is both natural and necessary for India to enhance connectivity in the North East and on its Eastern border. This is not simply because of geopolitical reality that exists at India's western border, but because the future of Asia lies in that direction. The link to the East, from Bangladesh to ASEAN to Japan, is the source for further growth of India and its North East. From this perspective, Japan has provided ODA loan amounting to approximately 161.5 billion JPY in total to the "North East Road Network Connectivity Improvement Project", in order to improve the national highways in the region and make them disaster resilient. At the same time, Japan is also conducting a technical assistance project called "The Capacity Development Project on Highways in Mountainous Regions". Our national highway projects, be it in Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, or Tripura, will be extended to the border of Bangladesh. Japan and India have been working on road connection improvement projects in Bangladesh as well. With these road network projects, the North East will find outlets to the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean and to ASEAN, via ports in Chittagong and Matarbari. The North East will no longer be a land-locked place.

The Brahmaputra River in Assam is an important traffic means, but this enormous river has long disrupted road traffic, as people have had to make a long detour to cross the river. However, Japan's assistance in the construction of the Dhubri-Phulbari bridge, whose foundation laying ceremony was held in the presence of Prime Minister Modi in February this year, will completely change the lives of the people of the North East. This is going to be the longest river bridge in India and is expected to cut short the travel time across the river from more than 8 hours to less than 30 minutes. Furthermore, the bridge will create a corridor stretching from Bhutan, through Assam and Meghalaya, to Bangladesh. This is the power of connectivity.

Japan is the only country that holds a dedicated forum with India for the development of the North East. The Act East Forum embodies our commitment to the development of the North East, anchored on the trust and friendship that Japan and India have long nurtured. At the end of January this year, I had the honour

of co-chairing the fifth round table meeting of the Act East Forum, together with Foreign Secretary Shringla, and had fruitful discussions that provided orientation for our future cooperation in the region. My visit to Assam in mid-February with Dr. Jaishankar, which was my second visit to that State, was to demonstrate our commitment to the region. On that occasion, I had meaningful interactions with the Chief Minister and other leading Ministers of Assam, when I learned first-hand the priorities for the State and the region.

In addition to our cooperation in the North East, I would also like to touch upon our connectivity initiatives in the Eastern part of India. In the urban area of Kolkata, Japan is supporting the construction of the Metro that extends to 16 km in length. By meeting the increasing demand for transport, the project is expected to reduce traffic congestion and pollution from motor vehicles, thereby contributing to the development of more sustainable infrastructure.

Sustainability requires innovation. Three young Japanese entrepreneurs of Terra Motors India, one of the start-up companies in Kolkata, are assembling e-rickshaws, which are providing eco-friendly mobility to the people of the North East. This is a good example of local contribution to the global effort for carbon neutrality. I hope the expansion of such business and new start-ups will bring about further innovative solutions.

Japan and India are Asia's two largest and oldest democracies, with ancient cultural links and enduring goodwill between their peoples. In the year of 2022, when we will celebrate the 75th Anniversary of India's independence, we will also march into the 70th Anniversary of Japan-India Diplomatic Relations. Our bilateral relations have a long history and vast potentials just as the East and North East regions do. I hope this special year of 2022 will provide us with a renewed opportunity to unleash the potential for regional connectivity and development in the East and North East, which, I am confident, will continue to be a key driver for our strong partnership in the next year and beyond.

Thank you.