

**Opening Remarks by  
H.E. Ambassador Kenji Hiramatsu  
Regional Connectivity Conference  
South Asia in the Indo-Pacific Context  
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Mr. Satu Limaye, Director, East-West Center,

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Ambassador Kenneth I. Juster of the United States,

Mr. Vijay Gokhale, Foreign Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me begin by thanking CUTS International, East-West Center, FICCI, the Government of the United States and all the rest for organizing this wonderful conference. I am particularly pleased to share this podium with my good friends, Ambassador Ken Juster and Foreign Secretary Gokhale, and delve ourselves into discussions of the topic of the day, regional connectivity.

I am fresh out of another successful Japan-India summit meeting and have just returned to Delhi about 9 hours ago. But hearing the theme of this conference, I could not keep myself away.

It is my pleasure to report to you that our two leaders had another truly substantial summit. Connectivity, or I would say, strategic connectivity, and Japan-India cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, were the themes high on their agenda.

It was in 2016, when Prime Minister Abe first espoused the vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, at TICAD VI in Kenya, an international conference on Africa. This is an innovative vision, which has transformed how we view the world.

Until then, we had tended to look at Asia, serving as the world's growth center, and Africa, endowed with huge potential, as two separate, unconnected entities. But I would like you to imagine a world map.

Through the confluence of the Pacific and the Indian Oceans, stretching from the Asia-Pacific to Africa, you can now visualize the strong currents of peace, stability and prosperity we can unleash. And I am fortunate to be right in the middle of this confluence, serving in India, which is literally located at the heart of the Indo-Pacific region.

So let me come back to how Prime Minister Modi and Prime Minister Abe have advanced this agenda.

India and Japan have been intensifying their discussions on how they can contribute to a free, open and prosperous Indo-Pacific. Already, last year, the two Prime Ministers had affirmed that Japan and India shall align their efforts on Act East Policy and towards a free and open Indo-Pacific.

They had further confirmed that connectivity infrastructure should be developed and used in an open, transparent and non-exclusive manner, based on international standards and responsible debt financing practices. In essence, they affirmed the need of “quality infrastructure.” And I am pleased to learn that this conference will further deepen discussions focusing on these points, later today.

This year, our two leaders raised the level of our coordination a notch higher. They reiterated their unwavering commitments to working together towards a free and open Indo-Pacific. Their vision for the Indo-Pacific has gained a higher level of convergence as they repeatedly meet. Based on the shared vision, Japan and India have agreed to cooperate on specific projects, contributing to better connectivity in the region.

For example, in Bangladesh, India will construct roads, while Japan will provide bridges to better connect them. Japan will construct the Jamuna Railway Bridge, on which rolling stocks provided by India will run.

In Myanmar, we will cooperate in the Rakhine State by aligning our housing, school and electricity projects. In Sri Lanka, Japan and India are closely cooperating with Sri Lanka for the development of LNG-related infrastructure.

Connectivity is not only about infrastructure. People’s connectivity should be enhanced, too. The Japan-India connectivity projects also address the development needs of Africa. It was not a coincidence that Prime Minister Abe’s free and open Indo-Pacific vision was announced on the African continent.

In Kenya, India and Japan will cooperate to develop a hospital for cancer treatment and continue our collaborative efforts to support small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

Speaking of business, our two countries will work towards establishing an India-Japan Business Platform to enhance exchanges between businesses to develop industrial corridors and network in the region, including Africa.

I must here add that not only bilateral but also trilateral partnership plays a crucial role. Notably, Japan, India and the United States are engaged themselves in how we can move forward on a promising road of better connectivity. The trilateral conversation has now turned into operative discussions on concrete projects.

Japan will also continue to cooperate with India in developing its North East Region. For that purpose, we have established the Japan-India Act East Forum last year, in which Foreign Secretary Gokhale and I serve as the co-chairs.

Japan’s commitment to the North East is rooted in history, going back to the time of

World War II. I frequently visit the region, to pay homage to the war victims and to build a lasting friendship. I am pleased to return to the North East the week after next, meeting good friends, including Mr. Sangma, Chief Minister of Meghalaya, and Mr. Sonowal, Chief Minister of Assam. This will be my seventh visit to the region in less than three years.

India's North East is full of promise. It bears the possibility to be a gateway to South East Asia, Bhutan and beyond. With that in mind, our two Prime Ministers welcomed the progress made in the Act East Forum.

Japan will work in tandem with Indian counterparts on the construction of roads and a bridge, among other infrastructure projects. For example, on the occasion of Prime Minister Modi's visit to Japan, exchange of notes was made on a huge bridge project across the Brahmaputra River, linking Dhubri in Assam with Phulbari in Meghalaya.

Indeed, this will be the longest bridge in India, let alone the North East, shortening the journey from a lengthy over eight hours to mere 20 minutes. This bridge will be an important part of Gelephu (Assam-Bhutan border) and Dalu (Meghalaya and Bangladesh border) corridor project which we decided to pursue to realize together with the ADB in the last Act East Forum.

These quality infrastructures will improve the connectivity within the North East Region as well as with their neighboring countries. A good example is National Highway 40 in Meghalaya which Japan assists to improve.

This Highway will bring Shillong, State Capital of Meghalaya, to be directly connected to Dhaka, Bangladesh; and further, through other cross-border connectivity projects of Japan, to Kolkata of India and Teknaf of Myanmar. These really exemplify our efforts for enhanced connectivity in action.

As I said, people-to-people connectivity is another key. Japan and India are now collaborating on aligning their respective healthcare policies. I see a great potential for nurses and caregivers of the North East to come to Japan to build their skills under the Technical Intern Training Program (TITP). So this is another area we would like to pursue, together with more and more people-to-people and cultural exchanges.

Japan will also contribute to disaster and forest management programs in the region.

At the summit meeting, the two leaders also confirmed their cooperation to improve the domestic connectivity in India. As you know, Japan is cooperating with India on the Mumbai-Ahmedabad High Speed Railway, which could dramatically shorten the journey from 7 hours to 2 hours. This large-scale project would not only transform the railway system of India but also its socio-economic dynamism.

We are cooperating on metros in various cities, including Delhi Metro, which some of you might have used today to come to this venue. I am pleased to report that Delhi Metro has just made a further extension with the assistance of Japan, opening another 17.9 km in Pink Line yesterday. Importantly, Japan is contributing to "Skill India" and

“Make in India” through these projects.

Why are these cooperation projects significant? Connectivity is ultimately about our people’s future and bringing them closer. It will facilitate free movement of people and goods, creating a new and better value chain. You will trade with and get to know different people. You will visit different places and learn about their history and cultures. Better connectivity will lead us to prosperity, stability, and ultimately, peace.

To conclude, I hope you will have a fruitful discussion on this promising subject. My best wishes for a successful conference.

Thank you very much.