

Defence, connectivity key in PM Modi's Japan visit

MEET PM to visit Japan on Oct 28-29 for annual summit with Japanese counterpart Shinzo Abe

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NEW DELHI: Defence and connectivity, with an eye to China, will top the agenda when Prime Minister Narendra Modi makes his two-day state visit to Japan from October 28. The two governments will make announcements regarding two agreements allowing closer naval cooperation. Modi and Japanese PM Shinzo Abe, said Japanese ambassador Kenji Hiramatsu, will unveil "a concrete infrastructure project implemented together" in South Asia.

He said Abe, who had been impressed at the crowds who had greeted him when he visited Gandhinagar last year, was planning "a very personal arrangement and discussion."

Japan, say Indian officials, has become India's most important strategic partner in Asia. Few governments align their foreign policies as closely to New Delhi's as Tokyo. Even fewer have committed as much aid and investment to boost India's economy.

"A strong India is in Japan's best interest and for that, we must provide even more support," said Hiramatsu.

Trade and investment have dominated relations. "Defence and security now need to catch



■ A Japanese envoy says that PM Shinzo Abe was planning "a very personal arrangement and discussion" with PM Modi. PTIFILE

up," the ambassador added.

An agreement on maritime domain awareness will be signed while talks on another on naval logistics will be initiated. Japan declined to bid for a recent Indian Navy submarine tender because, the ambassador indicated, New Delhi was holding separate talks over Japan's Soryu-class attack submarine. "This is now being processed internally by India," he said, and talks were on with a private sector Indian partner.

Besides the high-profile trilateral Malabar Exercises, this

month India and Japan are holding bilateral maritime exercises and the first-ever joint army exercises in November.

Indian officials have in the past expressed unhappiness at Tokyo's reluctance to provide defence equipment and technology. While Abe has been enthusiastic, his bureaucrats have dragged their heels citing the country's pacifist constitution.

Japan is a world leader in anti-submarine warfare and maritime awareness equipment. Its fifth-generation fighter prototype is undergoing flight tests.

India and Japan have made common cause in countering the geopolitical consequences of China's Belt Road Initiative.

Hiramatsu noted the two countries have an agreement to carry out joint connectivity and infrastructure projects in the Indo-Pacific area. He indicated a new project would be announced at the summit in Tokyo. Expectations are that it would help connect India with one of its smaller neighbours.

Japan recently identified more roads it would build or upgrade in the Northeast, including connectors to Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Future discussions will identify more such projects.

Indo-Japanese strategic cooperation has had its share of problems. Plans for India to buy and manufacture a Japanese maritime seaplane have foundered on technology issues. Nothing has come out of a civil nuclear agreement signed two years ago, in part because a key Japanese firm sold off its reactor business.

The most ambitious project, a high-speed train between Ahmedabad and Mumbai, is facing land acquisition problems. Hiramatsu said he was confident the train project "will be completed as scheduled." This will be Modi's third visit to Japan as the Prime Minister.