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THE TIMES OF INDIA

Wary of OBOR, India and Japan look to ramp up regional connectivity

TNN | Sep 13, 2017, 05.32 AM IST



GANDHINAGAR/ AHMEDABAD: While the groundbreaking ceremony of India's first bullet train will be the highlight of PM Shinzo Abe's visit starting Wednesday, the two countries are quietly firming up plans to take their ties "beyond the bilateral" in the form of cooperation in building infrastructure and connectivity in third countries.

With an eye on China's OBOR, India and Japan are looking to ensure that Abe's fourth summit with his counterpart provides an impetus to shared initiatives like Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), Tokyo's participation in development of Chabahar port project and the commitment to ensuring "free and open Indo-Pacific".

The twin cities here are decked out with flags of the two countries with Modi all set to kick off Abe's visit with a road show from the airport to Sabarmati Ashram. The road show, complete with cultural programmes performed by artistes all along the 8-km route, will perhaps be the one noticeable difference from the otherwise grand welcome offered to Chinese President Xi Jinping when he came here in 2015.

Another significant highlight is expected to be the scheduled visit of Modi and Abe Wednesday evening to Ahmedabad's iconic Sidi Sayyed mosque where Modi is expected to play the role of Abe's guide. The mosque was built by the Gujarat Sultanate which was annexed by the Mughals in the late 16th century.

Behind the scenes though, officials from the two countries are busy thrashing out the agenda for the bilateral engagement on

Thursday. After the civil nuclear agreement came into effect earlier this year, there are no real outstanding issues left between the two countries and both believe it is now time to take the special strategic partnership to another level. Civil nuclear cooperation and the defence partnership, with Tokyo willing to supply military technology, are likely to emerge as the two strongest pillars of cooperation between India and Japan.

Both countries believe that Japan's generous financing and India's presence and the goodwill it enjoys in parts of Africa can together help improve connectivity between the two continents. The visit is likely to see the formal launch of AAGC with India and Japan showcasing it as an initiative based—unlike what's the case with China's OBOR—on rule of law and transparency.

The joint statement which will be issued after the Modi-Abe dialogue is likely to again reflect the synergy between India's Act East policy and Japan's Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure meant to facilitate better regional integration.

The two countries are also likely to further discuss cooperation in improving cooperation on the Chabahar port project in Iran. During the last summit, Modi and Abe had called for discussions to facilitate Japan's involvement and Tokyo remains keen to improve connectivity for the project which will help India overcome geographical constraints in accessing Afghanistan and central Asia.

Earlier this year, Afghanistan confirmed Japan's pledge to develop access for Chabahar after a visit to Kabul by a Japanese minister. India, Iran and Afghanistan signed a trilateral agreement last year in May for establishing transport and transit corridors for the strategically located port in Iran.