

India-Japan partnership is transforming Northeast: Where historic ties meet the future

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Japan's role in Northeast India is unmatched in depth, longevity, and trust, with India opening this sensitive border region more than to any other partner. From roads and bridges to water systems, it is evolving into a strategic compact placing the Northeast at the centre of a Bay of Bengal economic zone and a China-resilient supply network



Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi is received by her Indian counterpart Narendra Modi after she arrived to attend her ceremonial reception at the Rashtrapati Bhavan presidential palace in New Delhi, India. File/Reuters

India and Japan describe their relationship as a “special strategic and global partnership”, a designation reached in 2014 after the bond was upgraded from a global partnership (2000) to a strategic and global partnership (2006). Beneath these diplomatic labels lies an unusually deep civilisational rapport – from the Indian monk Bodhisena consecrating the Great Buddha at Nara’s Todaiji temple in 752 AD to Rabindranath Tagore’s visits and Justice Radha Binod Pal’s dissent at the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, which remains honoured in Japan. Today, Japan is among India’s most reliable development partners and its largest source of Official Development Assistance (ODA). Nowhere is that partnership more distinctive than in India’s Northeast, where Japan is the only foreign country India has actively invited to undertake socio-economic development.

Why the Northeast and Why Japan

The Northeast – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim – is a landlocked, mountainous region tethered to the rest of India by the narrow Siliguri Corridor, yet it shares borders with countries like Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and China. This makes it India's land bridge to Southeast Asia and the fulcrum of New Delhi's Act East Policy, launched in 2014 as the successor to the Look East Policy. For Japan, engagement dovetails with its "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" vision and offers a quiet counterweight to China's regional influence. There is even a layer of historical reconciliation: the Battle of Imphal and the occupation of Kohima in 1944 were among the bloodiest of the Second World War, and Japanese involvement today is sometimes framed as turning a site of past conflict into one of shared prosperity.

The partnership was institutionalised in December 2017 with the India-Japan Act East Forum, a standing platform that identifies concrete projects in connectivity, infrastructure, industrial linkages and people-to-people contact. It marries India's Act East policy with Japan's Indo-Pacific perspective and feeds into sub-regional groupings such as BIMSTEC. In March 2023, then-Prime Minister Fumio Kishida went further, unveiling the "Bay of Bengal–Northeast India industrial value chain" concept, which reimagines the Bay of Bengal — ringed by India, Bangladesh and Myanmar — as a single integrated economic zone with the Northeast at its heart.

The Concrete Footprint: Roads, Bridges and More

The most visible Japanese contribution is physical infrastructure delivered through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), which has financed projects in energy, water, forestry and urban development in the region since 1981. JICA has supported the construction of more than 750 kilometres of new roads across the Northeast. Its flagship Northeast Road Network Connectivity Improvement Programme spans multiple phases. In February 2024 alone, JICA signed loans of roughly ₹877 crore to upgrade National Highway 127B between Phulbari and Goeragre in Meghalaya and ₹1,946 crore as a second tranche for the Dhubri–Phulbari Bridge – India's longest river bridge, which will link Assam and Meghalaya across the Brahmaputra and is targeted for completion in 2028. More recently the agency committed about ₹1,592 crore to three Meghalaya corridors, including the Shillong–Dawki road that runs toward the Bangladesh border. These corridors are designed

not merely to move people but to bridge “missing links” to neighbouring countries and turn the Northeast into a manufacturing and trade hub.

Japanese cooperation extends well beyond highways. Tokyo has committed around ₹13,000 crore (roughly 205.8 billion yen) to a portfolio that includes the Guwahati water supply and sewerage schemes, biodiversity conservation in Sikkim, sustainable forest management in Tripura and Nagaland, and technical cooperation for sustainable agriculture and irrigation in Mizoram.

A particularly creative initiative is the Bamboo Value Chain Initiative, launched in 2022. Backed by JICA, the National Bamboo Mission and the North East Cane and Bamboo Development Council, it uses a hub-and-spokes model to upgrade product design, train artisans and explore novel uses such as bamboo-based animal feed and paving materials — converting one of the region’s most abundant resources into a modern industry. Together these projects address the region’s core handicaps: its lack of a sound industrial base and the difficulty of building a self-sustaining economy within mountainous, isolated terrain.

Expanding into Futuristic Frontiers

For all this progress, the relationship has room to grow. Bilateral trade still lags the ambition behind Japan’s pledged investment target of ¥5 trillion by 2027, and infrastructure alone cannot transform the region. The next phase of India-Japan cooperation — increasingly framed around “economic security” and resilient supply chains — opens several futuristic avenues in which the Northeast can participate rather than merely receive. There is a need for the creation of an India–Japan–ASEAN supply chain and logistics hub in Guwahati.

Clean Energy and Green Fuels

This is the most natural fit. The Northeast’s forests, rivers, and biodiversity make it a proving ground for India’s net-zero-by-2070 goal, and Japan is already engaged through sustainable agriculture and forestry projects. Japanese firms such as Sumitomo Corporation, together with green-ammonia export agreements to Tokyo, point toward a future in which the region’s hydropower and biomass feed green-hydrogen and ammonia value chains. Pairing Japanese financing and technology with the Northeast’s renewable potential could make the region an exporter of clean fuels rather than a perennial aid recipient.

Semiconductors and Electronics

The 2023 India-Japan Semiconductor Supply Chain Partnership and tie-ups such as Renesas with Indian research institutions and Tokyo Electron with Tata Electronics have so far concentrated in Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. Over time, design, assembly and testing units could be seeded in the Northeast — especially if the dedicated Japanese business park proposed near Guwahati materialises, supported by skilling and testing centres for Japan’s technical intern programmes. It would be feasible to also work on the establishment of an Assam–Japan semiconductor and electronics ecosystem.

Critical Minerals

Both countries are racing to reduce dependence on Chinese-dominated supply chains for rare earths and critical minerals, cooperating through the Mineral Security Partnership and Quad initiatives. The Northeast’s underexplored geology could, with responsible Japanese investment in exploration, processing and recycling, become part of a trusted minerals network rather than a blank spot on the map.

Digital Infrastructure and Human Capital

Japanese interest in 5G, Open RAN, AI, and data centres, already visible in NEC’s partnership with Reliance Jio and NTT’s expanding footprint, can be channelled toward connecting the Northeast’s remote districts. Equally important are people: Assam’s request for technical-intern testing centres hints at skilling pipelines that would send trained Northeastern youth to Japan’s ageing, labour-short economy while building local capacity. Tourism, leveraging the region’s waterfalls and untouched landscapes, rounds out the menu of high-value, low-footprint sectors. Recently Prime Minister Takaichi, in her visit to Vietnam, mentioned the “FOIP Digital Corridor Concept”, and this plan could be expanded among the other Southeast Asian countries and link to India’s Northeast, which would help support and benefit Prime Minister Takaichi’s initiative regionally as well.

Climate Change and Disaster Management Upskilling

With the developments in climate change, it is vital to also work on climate change efforts, as even in the recent situation, the Pacific Ring of Fire experienced earthquakes, and Northeast India also faces regular earthquakes and tremors, and so

it would be vital to work in coordination and set up a Climate Plus Disaster Management and Resilience Network among the Northeast States and the different prefectures in Japan, which will help the sub-national aspect of relations between India and Japan. Through the case studies in their specific countries, India and Japan can also co-create a playbook on best possible solutions and outcomes which can be shared with other like-minded countries.

Food Security and Biotechnology Strategies

Another point which is interlinked to climate change is food security. As there are possible transitions taking place in the global climate crisis, with an advent of floods, droughts and effects of El Niño leading to extremities in the climate situation, food is bound to be scarce, and so India and Japan must look at developing and researching methods linked to biotechnology for future agricultural developments, medicinal needs and environmental protection strategies.

Conclusion

Japan's role in Northeast India is unique in its depth, longevity, and the trust it reflects; India has opened a sensitive border region to no other foreign partner so fully. What began as roads, bridges and water systems is maturing into a strategic compact that could place the Northeast at the centre of a Bay of Bengal economic zone and a China-resilient supply network. If clean energy, semiconductors, critical minerals, digital infrastructure and skilling are woven into the connectivity backbone already being laid, Japanese support can help transform the Northeast from India's remote frontier into a dynamic gateway linking South and Southeast Asia – a fitting culmination of a partnership rooted in centuries of goodwill and sharpened by the strategic logic of the present.

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