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Japan set to roll out red carpet for PM

Najib's three-day visit will further boost bilateral relations, says ambassador

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HAVING closely observed the latest developments between Malaysia and China, Asia's other superpower Japan is preparing to roll out the red carpet for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

Tokyo will not want to be left too far behind in the pecking order and it will be timely to try and show a balance with China as far as relations with Malaysia go.

To have the Malaysian leader come over just after his much-publicised, multi-billion dollar worth visit to China will be symbolically important to the Land of the Rising Sun.

With news that Malaysia will sign a bilateral agreement with Singapore on Dec 5 on the High Speed Rail (HSR) project, Japan can be expected to make a last-minute pitch to land at least a part of the lucrative deal.

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"Najib's visit will be very important as Japan will want to gain a symbol of one-upmanship over China. On the PM's part, it will also show his strategic thinking in engaging the two Asian giants one after the other," a senior diplomatic official told *The Star*.

Najib arrives here today to start a three-day official visit in what will be his third consecutive annual trip to Japan as Prime Minister.

Malaysian Ambassador to Japan Datuk Ahmad Izlan said the Shinkansen bullet train technology would be among the items on the

agenda when Najib meets his Japanese counterpart Shinzo Abe on Thursday.

Japan is reputed to have the safest, most punctual high-speed rail system in the world.

Abe had invited his Malaysian guest to provide the keynote address at the International High Speed Rail Association 2016 forum in Kyoto on Thursday but this could not be accommodated due to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) Summit.

The association was set up in 2014 by four Japanese railway companies to promote the Shinkansen over other high-speed railway systems in Europe and China.

Najib, said Ahmad, would also meet a key official from one of Japan's top railway companies.

Other meetings will involve Japan's Minister of Land,

Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, and CEO of the Japan External Trade Organisation (Jetro).

Ahmad said he expected Najib's visit to further boost bilateral relations with Japan.

"I was here during the PM's visit last year and there has been quite a lot happening between our countries. Tokyo will be eager to hear from him again," the envoy told a press briefing here yesterday.

Malaysia is one of Japan's top tourism draws, with close to half a million arrivals last year. From January to August this year, the total number was 269,148.

Ahmad said Japan remained one of Malaysia's largest investors with about US\$27bil (RM118.8bil) pouring in last year.

"From January to August, 36 projects involving Japanese firms were approved in Malaysia.

"The total value was RM1.05bil," he added.

Japan, said Ahmad, would also be taking its security cooperation with Malaysia to a new high by donating two large offshore patrol vessels for the use of the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA).

Najib and Abe, he added, were also expected to discuss the latest developments after the shock victory of Donald Trump in last week's polls at the United States.

Abe will be the first world leader to meet Trump during his stopover in New York on Thursday, enroute to attending the Apec Summit.

Najib will be accompanied by his wife Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor, Urban Wellbeing, Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Seri Rahman Dahlan and Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim.