

FRS – Japan Program

RELATIONS BETWEEN JAPAN AND FRANCE, AN EXCEPTIONAL PARTNERSHIP

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Ambassador Junichi IHARA has been serving as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Japan to France since December 2019. Previously, he served as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary and Permanent Representative of Japan to the International Organizations in Geneva since November 2015. He served as Chair of the WTO General Council from March 2018 until February 2019. Ambassador Ihara joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan in 1979 and his past positions include: Director of WTO Division (Economic Affairs Bureau), Consul-General of Japan in Los Angeles, Director General of North American Affairs Bureau, Director-General of Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau.

Question 1: In July 2019, President Macron visited Japan and a roadmap has been signed between the two countries. How can France, the only European country with an official Indo-Pacific strategy, be a major strategic partner for Japan?

Japan and France are bound together by an "exceptional partnership", making the two countries each other's essential strategic partners. I think there are three reasons for this.

(1) Japan and France are both leading nations in Asia and Europe that fully share the fundamental values which should regulate the international community: freedom, democracy, the

rule of law and respect for Human Rights. The two countries share a responsibility to maintain and strengthen these values, which are the foundation of the existing international order, and they are partners who work together on global issues such as the digital economy, the environment and sustainable development. In that sense, their cooperation as the host countries of the G7 and the G20 Summits last year is symbolic.

(2) Japan and France being both Indo-Pacific nations, they are partners who work together to ensure that this area, which is essential for global growth and stability, remains a free and open space. During President Macron's visit to Japan

last June, the two leaders agreed to further materialize the Japan-France cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. They agreed to focus on (1) freedom of navigation and maritime security, (2) climate change, environment and biodiversity, and (3) high-quality infrastructures.

More specifically, the French aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle was dispatched to the region in May last year to participate in multinational exercises with Japan, France, the United States and Australia. In September of the same year, the first Japan-France Comprehensive Maritime Dialogue was held in Nouméa, New Caledonia, and the two governments notably agreed to reinforce the sharing of maritime security information, and to seek to conduct more joint exercises in the future.

In addition, the two countries' international cooperation agencies, the JICA and the AFD, signed a comprehensive memorandum of cooperation in order to develop regional cooperation in the environmental and infrastructure fields, and efforts are being made to work out concrete projects.

(3) The strategic relationship between Japan and France is not limited to just security or political and diplomatic aspects. Their collaboration in the fields of economy, energy, industry and sciences contributes to global innovation. In addition, I think that such a partnership is based on the mutual attachment and the respect of the peoples of Japan and France for each other's culture. Like "Japonismes 2018: les âmes en résonance" contributed to enhancing France's affinity for Japan, "Saison de la France au Japon 2021" (the French culture season in Japan 2021) will also increase Japan's affinity for France.

These are the essential foundations of our strategic partnership.

Question 2: Paris is in favour of greater « strategic autonomy ». The European Union, while supporting Nato, has also demonstrated its interest for the concept in a context of growing uncertainties. Would you say that this concept could be adapted to the Japanese situation and be part of a necessary trilateral dialogue between Japan, the EU and the United States?

In Northeast Asia, Japan is confronting North Korea, which is pursuing its development of nuclear and missile programs and is repeatedly testing the launch of ballistic missiles. Moreover, China is trying to unilaterally change by force the *status quo* in the South China Sea, and is increasing and expanding its military activities. In the East China Sea, around the Senkaku Islands, which are an inherent part of the national territory of Japan, Chinese government-owned vessels continue to intrude into Japan's territorial waters and Chinese naval ships continuously operate in waters around the islands.

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Under such a severe security environment, the Japan-U.S. Alliance is the cornerstone for peace in the region. The stability in East Asia cannot be maintained without the presence of the United States. This

alliance contributes also to America's national interest in the Asia-Pacific region.

Comparing with Japan's geopolitical surrounding, France is surrounded by partner countries that share the same values. In this sense, it is true that France benefits from a strategic depth that is more advantageous than that of Japan, and France's geopolitical environment may allow its strategic independence compared to Japan. However, many French policy makers I met since my appointment as Ambassador of Japan to France confirmed the importance to maintain America's presence in Europe.

I believe that Japan and France must always interact and cooperate with the United States and that the U.S. involvement is essential in Asia, in Europe and in the world as well. In order to maintain and strengthen the rules-based international order, I think it is essential that the triple-pole – Japan, the United States and Europe – continues to cooperate in a strategic manner.

Question 3: China's emergence is one of the most important factors of the past decade. In that context, could Japan and France contribute to the resolution of global challenges partly induced by the emergence of the Chinese power?

China is one of Japan's main neighboring countries and we should welcome the opportunity offered by its rise. At the same time, China must respect the international order and rules, comply with international law and assume its obligations as a member of the international community in a manner that is congruent with its status.

As I mentioned earlier the Chinese actions in the East and South China Seas, China

sometimes takes actions based on its own assertions that are incompatible with the existing international order. Japan and France must not keep quiet where the rules that have to be respected are challenged. In fact, both Japan and France have always pointed out the importance of emphasizing the rule of law and using peaceful means, rather than the force or the intimidation, in pursuing the resolution of maritime disputes.

On the other hand, it would be counter-productive and it would not be realistic to exclude China. It is vital that the international community works together to make China participate in the multilateral frameworks and fulfill its responsibilities within the framework of the current international order. How to engage with a rising China is one of the main topics of the Japan-France Strategic Dialogue.

Question 4: Concerning economic relations, Japan remains the first Asian investor in France. Will Japan maintain its position? For France, trade deficit is also a major issue. What can you say about the evolution of trade between Japan and France?

Currently, some 510 Japanese companies are based in France, creating altogether about 82,000 jobs. Japan is the biggest Asian investor in France.

Under the leadership of President Macron, France is concentrating energy on further improving its investment environment. France is proactive towards the innovation policies and startups funding as well. In this context, Japanese companies are still focusing on France.

In November 2019, "Choose France", an event that honors investors in France,

awarded two of its five prizes to Japanese companies, Toyota and Fujitsu.

On January 20th, the third "Prix Choose France" was hosted by President Macron at the Palace of Versailles. Many Japanese companies attended the event and they announced many large investments in France, including an additional investment of EUR 100 million in Toyota's plant in Valenciennes.

The Japan-EU EPA created one of the largest open economic zones in the world (30 % of global GDP and 40 % of global trade). Although protectionist tendencies become stronger, Japan and the EU show the model in promoting trade liberalization.

French exports to Japan are growing. According to the Annual Report on French Foreign Trade released on February 10th by the Accountant General's Office of the French Ministry of Economy and Finance, exports to Japan increased by 16.7 % between 2018 and 2019.

In the context of trade liberalization, the expansion of economic exchanges between Japan and France is a benefit for each of us. As the Ambassador of Japan to France, I will do my best to build a mutually beneficial relationship.

Question 5: The world is currently experiencing a major health crisis. What cooperation could be developed between France and Japan, two liberal democracies, to manage this type of strategic surprises and their consequences?

In Japan, we have taken border control measures against the COVID-19 outbreak, firstly by strengthening the quarantine system. At a national level, we have been working to better know the infection

situation and focusing on outbreak prevention settings, since the infections were locally reported. Calling for event cancellations or temporary closure of public schools nationwide is also part of those efforts.

The COVID-19 outbreak constitutes multifaceted issues such as saving lives, preserving social unity, maintaining international solidarity and continuing economic activities. We are asked to make difficult political decisions that reflect both the need to take bold measures and the demand for assuring people's rights and livelihoods.

In response to this global health issue, the International Olympic Committee has decided to reschedule the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games to a date beyond 2020, but no later than summer 2021. Prime Minister ABE Shinzo wants to hold the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games in a complete form, as proof that human-kind has defeated the novel coronavirus (COVID-19).

Japan and France have exchanged their views in the framework of the WHO or within the G7 Health Ministers meetings. France and Japan are tackling together issues like the increasing number of infected people in their own countries. What is important is to learn lessons from this crisis and use them for the future, including the unprecedented experience of the infectious outbreaks aboard the cruise ship.

I wish to share the experiences that our two democracies, Japan and France, gained in protecting their own peoples and responding the occurrence of the COVID-19 outbreak in their own countries.

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