

Promoting collaborative relationship between Japan and Mongolia as IRREPLACEABLE PARTNERS

H.E. Mr. Takenori Shimizu, Ambassador of Japan to Mongolia granted the following exclusive interview to The Mongolian Observer.



Allow me, Your Excellency Mr. Ambassador, to start by commenting that Japan-Mongolia relations have reached such a high level as never before today especially during your tenure in office as Ambassador to Mongolia.

I am delighted and honored with your comment. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is the first Prime Minister who visited Mongolia twice during his tenure. I would like to point out that this is a strong evidence that the Japanese Government emphasizes on Mongolia.

This is my 4th assignment in Mongolia. I have witnessed the socialist era, the drastic shift to the democracy, and the exponential development of Mongolia based on the market economy. As a diplomat specializing in Mongolian affairs, it is a great honor and sheer luck that our bilateral relationship has developed at such a high level during my ambassadorship.

I will make every endeavor to ensure that Japan and Mongolia further strengthen “Strategic Partnership” and promote collaborative relationship as irreplaceable partners.

In 2013, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Mongolia, during which he coined a phrase called the “Three Spirits”. Can you please elaborate on what these “Three Spirits” are and what do they mean for bilateral relations?

The “Three Spirits” were first mentioned by Prime Minister Abe when he visited Mongolia in 2013.

Firstly, the “Spirit of Freedom and Democracy” is the platform, which our favorable relations, coupled with the sense of affinity between our peoples, rest upon. Japan transformed its political system and incorporated the values of freedom

and democracy as a result of the Meiji Restoration at the end of the 19th century, and has undertaken a series of “trial and error” efforts. Since the very beginning of the democratization process in 1990, in light of its own experiences, Japan has led the international community in support of democratic changes in Mongolia, with which we share common values.

The “Spirit of Peace” is the spirit shared by Japan and Mongolia that forms the basis of the development and prosperity of today’s global society, and discloses that all issues facing the international community should be resolved not by “coercion or intimidation”, but by peaceful means.

Based on the “Spirit of Mutual Benefits”, Japan, as the largest ODA provider, has consistently offered material and

mental support to Mongolia's democratization efforts, while the Mongolian Government and people extended warm support to Japan in the wake of natural disasters, including the Great Hanshin Earthquake in 1995 and the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011.

The Mongolian people might have realized and agreed that these "Three Spirits" are embedded in the basis of our favorable bilateral relationship.

The Japanese Prime Minister recently paid a working visit to Mongolia. What significance does this visit have for furthering the strategic partnership between Japan and Mongolia?

Prior to Prime Minister Abe's visit, in the first half of this year, top three Mongolian VIPs, namely the President, Speaker of the State Great Khural and

the Prime Minister, have visited Japan respectively and had meetings with Prime Minister Abe.

Last September, Prime Minister Abe held a meeting with President Elbegdorj in New York, during which the President invited Prime Minister Abe to visit Mongolia once again. Accepting this, the Prime Minister decided to make an impromptu visit to Mongolia. For the first time, mutual visits by Mongolia's top three VIPs and the Prime Minister of Japan took place in one year.

Frequent top-level visits are indisputably important to promote our bilateral relationship. I believe that Prime Minister Abe's recent visit was meaningful as it secured our bilateral ties and promoted the "Strategic Partnership".

Can we say that one of the most important milestones in our relations was the signing in February this year of the Japan-Mongolia Economic Partnership Agreement? What does this agreement mean for Japan and as Ambassador to Mongolia - for Mongolia?

Mongolia has experienced a rapid development during the last 25 years since its democratization and shift to the market economy in 1990. Although Mongolia's market is currently



Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Mongolian President Tsakhia Elbegdorj with their spouses at the residence of the Mongolian President, Ulaanbaatar, 22 October 2015

experiencing some deterioration, medium and long-term high-rate growth is still expected.

Signing the EPA with Mongolia, which is the 15th for Japan and first for Mongolia, has already attracted increasing attention of the Japanese business community. This year's visit to Mongolia by the business community delegation headed by the President of the Japan Business Federation (KEIDANREN) clearly demonstrated this growing interest.

Although the EPA has not entered into force yet, it is expected that it will contribute to promoting further development of trade and investments. In this connection, I look forward to prompt reform of related laws and regulations of Mongolia needed for the EPA to come into force.

I think we have to admit that Japanese direct investment and bilateral trade between the two countries are lower than what the two countries desire. Why is that so and what's the remedy?

In order to promote trade and investments, it is important to improve transparency, consistency and predictability of the policies, systems and regulations in Mongolia, and to establish a liberalized and stable business environment.



Signing of the memorandum of cooperation between the Governments of Japan and Mongolia during Prime Minister Sh. Abe's visit in October 2015

“Strategic Partnership”, and I believe that EPA will serve as an effective tool for reaching that goal.

Japan, from the very first days after the democratic revolution in Mongolia, has been invariably supporting the education sector and creating a safe environment for the rural population of Mongolia. In this respect, since 1989 Japan has been implementing the “Grassroots” (Өвчний үндэс) gratis aid program and beneficiaries are numerous. What exactly is the “Grassroots” program and how long will it continue?

The aim of the Grant Assistance for Grassroots Projects (GAGP) Program is to support small-scale projects that directly benefit the population at the grassroots level and contribute to the socio-economic development of devel-

oping countries.

It is not limited to the relations with Japan that the volume of Mongolia’s trade and investments is reducing. It might have happened due to imperfections in Mongolia’s business environment that hinder inviting foreign investments.

As for the bilateral economic relationship between Japan and Mongolia, the signed EPA is a comprehensive agreement which includes not only elements of a free trade agreement, but also elements of investments, government procurement, bilateral cooperation, and so on.

Once EPA enters into force as an international agreement, business environments will be streamlined allowing private companies of both countries do their businesses with higher competitiveness and confidence compared to third countries. So I urge the Mongolian side to exert maximum efforts toward EPA’s early entry into force as it should serve as a significant leverage for enhancement of trade and investments for both sides.

Can we say that EPA is a logical continuation of the effort by the two countries to further strengthen the “strategic partnership” between the two countries?

The favorable relations between Japan and Mongolia have been developing in a variety of areas. On the other hand, some aspects of the economic relationship might have been left behind as you pointed out earlier.

Establishment of a mutually beneficial and mutually complementary economic relationship is a huge goal under the

oping countries.

Recipients of GAGP are non-profit organizations including international and local NGOs (of any nationality), hospitals, primary schools, and research institutions. Although the grant amount per project does not generally exceed JPY10,000,000, the procedure from application to approval is simplified.

The Embassy of Japan has taken advantage of this feature, and has supported 482 projects that include renovation of kindergartens and schools in Ulaanbaatar city and 203 soums in 21 aimags since GAGP was introduced to Mongolia in 1990. (Figures as of the end of October 2015).

The Government of Japan will continue to support projects, particularly in such fields as education and healthcare that are most beneficial to the grassroots level. As a general principle, developing countries with a per capita gross national income (GNI) of US\$7,115 or less are eligible to receive GAGP, and in light of this principle, implementation of GAGP will be continued in Mongolia for some time.

Japan has offered the Project for Human Resource Development Scholarship. Are you happy with the outcome of these and other programs?

We are proud of the graduates of the Japanese government scholarship program, who are actively and successfully working in the Mongolian society. Added to that, the “Japanese Grant Aid for Human Resource Development Scholarship”

was introduced in Mongolia in 2001, under which 262 young Mongolians have studied in Japan, and many of them are proactive in a variety of areas and institutions such as Government of Mongolia, universities, Central Bank etc.

It is most important for those who study abroad to master expert knowledge and to establish academic and human networks. However, students are also expected to diffuse their own culture to contribute to mutual understanding between both countries and further enhancement of friendly relations. From this point of view, I believe the scholarship has achieved remarkable result.

People-to-people exchange is an important component of diplomacy. This promotes better understanding and bridges differences, if any. Our two peoples have always nurtured a feeling of friendship and closeness with each other. An important move has been the easing of visa restrictions especially for Mongolian citizens. How have the Mongolian people reacted and have there been cases of Mongolian citizens 'taking advantage' of this fact?

Japan launched a simplified procedure on issuing visas for Mongolian citizens in May 2012, when Japan and Mongolia marked the 40th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations. Since then the number of Mongolian visitors to Japan has been increasing, and in 2014, we recorded a 1.8 fold increase compared with that of 2011. I would like to note that significance in promoting mutual understanding lies in visits and direct contacts with Japan by this increasing number of Mongolian citizens. I expect that the number of Japanese visitors to Mongolia will increase as well.

Your Excellency Mr. Ambassador, you also signed a memorandum of cooperation. What does this memorandum mean for economic cooperation and relations between Japan and Mongolia?

The purpose of the memorandum of cooperation, which was signed during Prime Minister Abe's recent visit, is to promote the close economic relationship.

Although it is not a legally binding document as it is with

other memorandums, it reaffirms the cooperative relationship between the two sides by referring to affirmation of the strategic importance of natural resources and development of infrastructures, and to exchange of opinions. I think the key for concrete advancement of the contents of this memorandum should be actual participation of Japanese private companies in projects.

Finally, Mr. Ambassador, you are not only active at the political and economic levels of our bilateral relations, but also very active in the cultural sphere. Japan takes enormous pride in Manga comics. Your hard work in promoting manga art in Mongolia is evidenced by the recently held manga painting contest. Does manga art really have a future in Mongolia and how do you think this could help bring our peoples closer together?

I value artistic character of the Mongolian people, and have recommended Mongolian painters to apply for the International Manga Award hosted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. Last February, the 8th International MANGA Award gathered 317 entries from 46 countries and regions. A Mongolian Manga artist, Mr. N. Erdenebayar, applied for the award as a first-ever Mongolian, and he eventually won the gold award. As I assumed that it was the starting point of the Manga culture in Mongolia, I came up with the concept of organizing a four-frame manga contest, and hosted the event together with Mr. Erdenebayar.

Our Embassy has hosted the Pop-culture Festival since 2013, and a total of 4500 people visited the event held this summer. I realized that through these events we are achieving expansion of the Japanese manga culture and deepening of the exchange of younger generations between our countries. I am sure that young Mongolian artists will deepen further the mutual understanding between the two countries through learning a lot from Japanese manga artists. Furthermore, I strongly expect that Mongolian artists present their own manga publications to the entire world, and that Mongolian manga develops to the extent of an industry, which would contribute to the Mongolian economy in the near future. ■

Japanese Ambassador to Mongolia Takenori Shimizu: In 1991, he was awarded the honorary icon of a Leading Cultural Worker of Mongolia, and in 2005 – of a Leading Worker of Economy. During his tenure as the counselor of the Embassy of Japan in Mongolia, he made great efforts to promote the Grant Assistance for Grassroots Projects of the Government of Japan, particularly for providing much needed assistance to Mongolian rural educational facilities. In 2005 he was awarded for his distinguished service in the field of education from the Education, Science and Culture Ministry in Mongolia. Recently, on October 30, 2015, Ambassador Takenori Shimizu was awarded the order of the Red Banner of Labor Valor. He has held his current position since September 1, 2011.