

# Close friends work in open diplomacy for stronger region

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Two years have passed since I set foot on this wide brown land of Australia. I am often asked by my Aussie friends: “What do you wish to accomplish during your tenure?”

My answer is quite simple: “To raise the profile of Japan in Australia and help raise the profile of Australia in Japan.” Yet these are hard to achieve.

For the latter, I certainly need the co-operation of and co-ordination with Australia’s ambassador-designate to Japan and my friend, Justin Hayhurst. That is why I told him before his departure to Tokyo that I regard him as a close colleague, looking in the same direction and working for our shared objectives. This is how diplomacy is conducted between special strategic partners like Australia and Japan.

In fact, for many decades, the Japan-Australia relationship has been taken for granted.

Japan was Australia’s number one trading partner for an astonishing four decades until the mid-2000s, and has since retained the number two position. For a number of years, Japan has been one of the largest sources of foreign direct investment, becoming the largest investor for the year 2020. In short, Australia and Japan have grown and prospered together by complementing each other.

A cursory look at some statistics that continue to strike me.

Among Japan’s imports, 70 per cent of coal, 60 per cent of iron ore, 40 per cent of gas, 90 per cent of sugar, 40 per cent of beef and 20 per cent of wheat come from this Great Southern Land.

The mutual trust between Australia and Japan was nurtured over many decades through our extremely strong trade and investment ties. Under the strong leadership of prime ministers Fumio Kishida and Anthony Albanese, our two countries are now embarking on upgraded defence and security co-operation in light of the deteriorating security environment in our region.

Indeed, Japan was one of the first countries that was shocked by and suffered from economic coercion by a trading partner. Thus, Japan is in a good position to understand fully and sympathise with Australia’s intention to solve its disputes according to the WTO rules and its need to diversify markets for a number of Aussie exports.

What needs to be emphasised here is this: it is not about any particular country or economy.

Looking at the broader picture, Australia and Japan are joining hands with like-minded countries such as the US and India to realise a free and open Indo-Pacific region based upon international laws and norms. In other words, we are striving together, not to antagonise any power in the region, but to uphold the rules-based order, which is in the interest of every nation spanning this vast region.

In this regard, I have been so fortunate to converse and exchange candid views with Aussie colleagues from all corners of Australia and across the political divide. On a lighter note, it was such a refreshing surprise to my wife, our chef and myself that the winning formula to conducting robust discussions was showcasing sushi and tempura made with Australian seafood as well as Aussie beef and Cowra lamb while pairing them with an exquisite sake, a Margaret River chardonnay or a Barossa shiraz. To me, this is another aspect of complementarity between our two great culinary powers.

Living in democracies such as Australia and Japan, whose diplomacy must be conducted with strong public support, the importance of engaging in public diplomacy cannot be emphasised more strongly. Here enters the role of ambassadors as top representatives of nations.

This is entirely different from exerting undue influence on politicians through shady back channels.

Ambassadors ought not to shy away from requests for media interviews or public speeches in order to share their countries’ perspectives on important issues of mutual interest. This could also include the conveying of industry voices given Japan’s long-running close economic bonds with Australia.

All of such endeavours are undertaken, however, with the solid understanding that ultimate decisions will be made by the government and people of Australia through its domestic political processes.

For example, I have never hesitated to communicate the concerns of Japanese companies regarding certain measures in the energy and resources sector and their possible negative impacts on future investment from Japan.

Why? Because this is something Australians ought to take into consideration when deciding on how their economy should operate.

At the same time, I have also made it clear that what measures are taken by Australia or how Australian taxpayers' money is spent is entirely up to the Australian government and its people.

I hope what is written above will eradicate any misunderstandings about the diplomatic activities of ambassadors.

Australia and Japan are close and, at a time of rising uncertainty, becoming closer. As ambassador I am honoured to be contributing Japan's case to public policy discussion in Australia and believe the growing common interests between our two countries are for the benefit of our people and our wider region.

When I arrived in Canberra two years ago, an old Aussie mate warmly welcomed me over a cold beer and asked me in a somewhat mischievous manner: "Shingo, there are only two kinds of ambassadors in this town: ambassadors who are working hard and ambassadors who are hardly working.

Which one will you be?"

My answer then and now remains the same. "Of course, the former. I will work hard for the Australia-Japan relationship for the benefit of our two countries and for the peace and prosperity of our region."

Shingo Yamagami is Japan's ambassador to Australia.