

Girt by sea and in the same boat: 50 years of Japan-Australia relations and beyond –

Address to the National Press Club of Australia by

His Excellency Mr Suzuki Kazuhiro, Ambassador of Japan to Australia

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1. Introduction

Thank you for that introduction, Tom.

It's a great privilege to be here at the prestigious National Press Club.

Before I begin my remarks, I'd also like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet, and pay my respects to their Elders — past, present, and emerging.

Let me also thank Maurice Reilly, Tom, Andrew, Misha and Steve and all the members of the National Press Club for this opportunity to speak to you today both to the audience here — which includes many of my fellow heads of missions — and to the viewers at home.

And particularly, I would like to thank Paul Erickson for being here today.

I'd like to start with a little personal story.

In August, I participated in a traditional Buddhist ceremony to commemorate the many Japanese pearl divers who perished in the waters around Thursday and Friday Islands in the Torres Strait.

The Japanese cemetery there is surrounded by white sandy beaches and turquoise-blue seas.

During the ceremony, I reflected on similar graves and circumstances of my visit to Broome in Western Australia.

In two of the most beautiful parts of the world lie my fellow countrymen and women — over 6,000 kilometres from their birth nation.

The Japanese pearl divers ventured into the unknown, helping to establish Australia's pearling industry long before the Commonwealth Government even existed.

The important relationship and friendship between Japan and Australia extends further into the past than many realise.

And as island nations, our connection is deeply tied by the seas and oceans.

Time and again, we are reminded that no one can survive alone for long in the vast, undulating, and unforgiving ocean environment.

Thursday Island faces the Coral and Arafura Seas — where the Pacific and Indian Oceans converge.

It is a place where strong currents meet and mix, often fiercely, in defiance of the region's beauty.

The Japanese divers of the Torres Strait lived side by side with First Nations and migrant communities.

They knew their new lives and livelihoods depended on deep bonds of companionship and trust.

Steering a ship safely through storms requires crew members to trust each other and to work as one.

It has been proven time and again that Australia and Japan have found companions and trusted crew mates in each other.

Our prosperity has been built together.

We would not be as successful or stable without generations of Aussies and Japanese working together to overcome the storms that too often arrive on our financial and diplomatic shores.

Our island nations may be at opposite ends of the compass, but they are united by the trade that flows from shore to shore.

Secure and open sea lanes are a lifeline for both of us.

That is why we have worked together to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific.

The term “Indo-Pacific” as a geopolitical concept began in 2007, when the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe addressed the Indian Parliament in his famous speech, “The Confluence of the Two Seas.”

He declared that “the Pacific and Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and prosperity.”

Years later, I had the honour of accompanying him to Kenya as Japan's Permanent Representative to the African Union, where he unveiled the free and open Indo-Pacific vision at TICAD VI, a summit meeting co-organised by Japan with African leaders and development partners.

So, when I gazed upon the waters of Thursday Island three months ago, I knew that if Prime Minister Abe were alive and casting his gaze across the ocean, he would surely have felt moved to say:

“This is the very confluence of the two seas.”

And at the centre of that confluence — of the free and open Indo-Pacific — stands none other than Australia.

2. The regional situation and the importance of the Japan–Australia relationships

Ladies and gentlemen, we live in a time of turbulence.

Geopolitical tensions are higher than ever.

The situation around Taiwan, unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the East and South China Seas, North Korea’s nuclear and missile programmes, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and instability in the Middle East — all speak for themselves.

We also see an accelerating arms race and intensifying competition for influence, particularly in developing countries.

At the same time, global challenges such as climate change, rapid technological innovation in AI, and the growing use of cyberspace demand even greater attention.

Challenges are emerging one after another and are more complex than ever.

The scale, complexity, and speed of these challenges are nothing short of a storm.

And no country can sail through it alone.

More than simply recognising the problems, what is needed are partners with shared values, and with the will and capacity to confront these “challenging seas” together.

That is why our bilateral relationship is defined as a Special Strategic Partnership, and why Japan regards cooperation with Australia as the central pillar of coordination among like-minded countries.

Australia’s National Defence Strategy describes Japan as an indispensable partner.

It is also why our relationship is often described as being “allies in all but name.”

In today’s unsettled international environment, the importance of our partnership has never been greater.

3. 50 years of the Japan–Australia relationship

In 2026, we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Basic Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between Japan and Australia, also known as the NARA Treaty, that established a comprehensive framework for relations and became the foundation of today’s our friendship and partnership.

50 years ago, in 1976, there remained, however, a certain degree of wariness towards

Japan, but the courage and foresight of Prime Ministers Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser allowed them to look beyond the horizon of post-war concerns and steer Australia toward a stronger relationship with my country.

The Treaty sent two powerful messages to the world:

First, Australia was ready to engage directly with Asia in all aspects of its relations with the region; and second, Japan was ready to begin building a new and close relationship with a country whose interests so closely resembled our own.

It marked the start of a new era — a transformation in our bilateral ties.

But a treaty alone does not create strong ties.

Various groups and individuals have worked together to create the strong and enduring Japan–Australia relationship we see today.

Here in Canberra, for example, just three weeks ago the Canberra–Nara Candle Festival was held again with great success.

The sister-city relationship between Canberra and Nara owes its origin to the dedication of Father Tony Glynn, a Catholic priest who devoted his life to promoting reconciliation and friendship between Japan and Australia.

At his funeral in Nara thirty years ago, many Buddhist monks who had become his close friends chanted sutras in his memory — a powerful testament to the deep respect and affection he earned in Japan.

The Candle Festival itself began as a tribute to this friendship.

After Canberra suffered a devastating bushfire in 2003, the people of Nara brought one thousand Tokae-style candles to offer their prayers for Canberra's recovery.

That spirit of compassion continues to shine through every year.

In relation to security, more than forty joint activities and exercises have now taken place under the Reciprocal Access Agreement, with our defence forces working side by side around the world.

This year's Exercise Talisman Sabre saw 1,500 members of our self-defense forces take part — the largest number ever.

One of the high points of my ambassadorship came just three months after my arrival, in August 2023, when we welcomed Japan's Air Self-Defense Force F-35s to the Northern Territory, including Darwin, for their first training in Australia.

And last year, Darwin hosted the Japan–Australia–U.S. Defence Ministers' Meeting.

As you may know, Darwin suffered the greatest losses from Japanese attacks during the

war.

When the city was bombed by the Imperial Japanese Army in 1942, it lost 11 ships and 235 lives.

Japan's Air Force being welcomed in Darwin could not have been imagined just a few short decades ago.

This means a great deal to me personally as well, as I am the son of a pilot who was prepared to die as a kamikaze squadron leader off the coast of Okinawa during the Pacific War.

However, a training accident left my father lying in a hospital bed, severely burned and in a coma, when Japan surrendered.

It took a long time for him to overcome the guilt of surviving while his friends died, but he came to live his life with pride in his service to his country, and with a profound understanding of the value of peace.

So, as I stood on the tarmac that day with the F-35s, I felt certain my late father had guided me there — as Japan's new ambassador to Australia — to help strengthen the reconciliation and peace he had longed for.

The sight of Australian and Japanese F-35s side by side was more than an illustration of mutual defence interests.

It was a powerful symbol of reconciliation and a silver lining amid today's harsh global realities — a clear reminder that former enemies who fought fierce battles in the Pacific eighty years ago can reconcile and become true mates.

but this mateship we treasure today could not have grown without the sincere efforts of countless ordinary Australians and Japanese who worked toward reconciliation over so many years.

Selfless individuals in Darwin, in Cowra, in the RSL, and in groups like the Australia–Japan Society in the Northern Territory have worked for decades to heal the wounds of war.

On the Japanese side as well, along with many citizens from Nara, there have been numerous acts of dedication, like the Nagakura Foundation in Cowra, and in Darwin, Mr Ryugo Fujita and his company, who salvaged the sunken Australian ships from the war, determined to make amends for the harm caused by their own country.

To all those Australians and Japanese who demonstrated such compassion, patience, and respect for each other, I offer my profoundest gratitude and highest appreciation.

Reconciliation between Japan and Australia has advanced hand in hand with the strengthening of our economic and people-to-people ties.

Since the 1960s, our two countries have built a mutually beneficial economic partnership — Japan's investment in Australia's resources, energy, and agriculture helped create jobs and industries here, while Australia's energy and materials fuelled Japan's rise as an industrial power.

Today, Japanese business activities in Australia continue to expand into new frontiers such as retail, infrastructure, real estate, and financial services.

Just last month, the Australia–Japan Joint Business Conference in Perth drew a record 706 participants.

Japan remains the only country whose FDI in Australia has increased consistently over the past eleven years.

Reflecting the broadening of these business ties, Australia has now become home to the second-largest community of Japanese expatriates in the world — surpassing China and just behind the United States.

In relation to people-to-people ties:

According to the Lowy Institute Poll, for the past five years in a row, Japan has been ranked No. 1, as Australia's most trusted global partner, and this year that support figure reached a record 90 percent.

Australia now has the highest number of Japanese language learners per capita in the world.

This year, over one million Australians are expected to visit Japan for the first time.

And at Osaka Expo 2025, the Australian pavilion welcomed three million visitors.

Few could have imagined that our partnership would rise to such heights when the Treaty was signed fifty years ago.

Most important, both of our nations now have a strong respect for each other as fellow democracies, and our peoples have never stopped striving — through mutual respect — to reconcile, to understand, and to learn from one another.

So now, the questions before us are:

how can we build on this strong foundation for the next fifty years?

How can Japan and Australia work together — for our mutual benefit, and for the benefit of the region?

And what should we be doing now to prepare for the next fifty years?

Allow me to share my own thoughts.

4. The next 50 years of the Japan–Australia relationship

For eighty years after the war, peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific have been underpinned by the United States and its robust hub-and-spokes alliance system.

Within that framework, it has been Japan and Australia that have added resilience to regional stability — through multilateral initiatives such as APEC, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, and the TPP CPTPP.

In the twenty-first century, as democracies face mounting external pressures, it is vital that we strengthen cooperation to reinforce those traditional alliance structures.

The first priority is to transform the Japan–Australia–U.S. triangle — where the Japan–Australia side remains the shortest — into a more equilateral triangle, by deepening Japan–Australia security cooperation.

Equally, we must continue to advance multilayered cooperation among democracies — through frameworks such as the Quad, Japan–Australia–U.S., Japan–Australia–U.S.–Philippines, and Japan–Australia–ROK–New Zealand arrangements, referred to as the Asia-Pacific Four.

These are not mutually exclusive, but mutually reinforcing initiatives, each of which energises the other.

Within this network, the Quad — which includes India, a maritime democracy serving as the other centre of the “confluence of the two seas” and the world’s most populous country — has particular significance. Strengthening it will be essential.

To make our Japan–Australia link stronger — and to make that triangle more equilateral — means broadening and deepening our cooperation.

Specifically, this means using the Japan–Australia 2+2 framework to share strategic assessments, consider potential contingencies, and identify joint responses, thereby strengthening our joint deterrence.

Cooperation beyond the traditional defence area is also increasingly vital.

The environment surrounding economic security and cyberspace has drastically changed and become increasingly severe.

The scope of technological competition among major powers is expanding across the entire range of industrial and technological foundations.

In cybersecurity, Japan enacted its Cyber Response Capacity Enhancement Act in May, introducing security clearances that allow government and private sectors to share classified information and cooperate in active defence.

Australia is also making concentrated efforts to bolster its cyber security capability, with

a view to becoming a global leader in cyber security by 2030.

I look forward to seeing even more cooperation between our two countries in this area as well.

Second, we must advance defence industrial cooperation.

The war in Ukraine has revealed the importance of resilient security supply chains.

If Japan and Australia standardise their equipment and develop systems for mutual logistical support, we will greatly enhance our collective resilience.

Australia is more distant from the hotspots of the region and is strategically located in the middle of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. A stronger Japanese presence in Australia not only enhances Australia's deterrence, but also reinforces Japan's strategic resilience, thereby strengthening our joint deterrence.

For Japan, Australia has the "merit of distance" rather than the "tyranny of distance."

In that regard, the Australian Navy's selection of Japan's Mogami-class frigate for its SEA 3000 project is a landmark decision.

Let me now turn to the economy.

Australia's opportunities—afforded by a vast land, self-sufficiency in food and energy, a population of 27 million projected to exceed 40 million in four decades, and a GDP per capita ranked among the highest in the world, are truly impressive.

To fully unlock this potential, certain challenges must be addressed.

I believe Japan can be part of the solution.

A sufficient supply of quality housing is essential.

Japanese high-end, modular housing technology offers an answer.

Four of Australia's top ten home builders have already partnered with Japanese firms, laying the foundation for broader adoption.

I recently toured a factory of a Japanese housing company on the outskirts of Sydney.

I was amazed by components manufactured with such precision that homes could be assembled like IKEA furniture, with construction time reduced by one-third — a key to increasing productivity in the housing sector.

And thanks to Japanese innovation — superior insulation, seamless walls, and meticulous craftsmanship — these homes maintain a comfortable temperature with remarkably low maintenance.

Japan and Australia's cooperation on mineral mining, including critical minerals, is not

new.

We have been working together in rare-earth development for over a decade through the Lynas project in Western Australia.

Our joint efforts to stabilise critical mineral supply chains are essential to economic security.

New initiatives — such as gallium extraction — are now underway.

As you may know, gallium is an essential input for defence and semiconductor manufacturing.

The Alcoa–Sojitz Gallium Recovery Project in Western Australia — a symbolic trilateral project with Japan, Australia, and the U.S. — is recognised as one of the priority projects that complement the historic critical minerals framework signed by Prime Minister Albanese and President Trump last month.

Japanese capital and off-take increase the project's economic viability and feasibility.

Hence, we believe Japan can contribute significantly to unlocking Australia's potential.

On renewables, first, I commend Australia's initiatives to expand renewable capacity, towards net-zero target.

While accelerating renewable installation, the electricity grid requires battery storage and gas peakers to stabilise supply.

On this front, we have seen many Japanese investments in Australia in renewable energy generation and battery production.

Let me introduce one such project related to grid-scale batteries.

Idemitsu, a major Japanese energy company, has invested in the Australian mining company Vecco in Queensland.

Their aim is to mine vanadium, refine it, turn it into battery electrolytes, and then supply it to battery manufacturers.

On gas power generation, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries — one of the world's three major builders of gas turbine generators — can provide high-efficiency turbines that reduce natural gas consumption.

In addition, hydrogen can be an option for future fuel, which could help reduce CO₂ emissions once green hydrogen becomes abundant and ready for use in Australia.

What Japan is proposing are practical solutions — by working together with Australia.

Last but not least, Japanese investment also extends to carbon-neutral factory operations in Queensland.

In July, I attended the opening of Suntory's beverage factory in Swanbank, Queensland.

It produces 90,000 cans every hour — 25 cans every second!

Before we can even say “kanpai”, or “cheers”, another can is ready — another example of improving Australia's manufacturing productivity.

Even better, the facility runs on renewable electricity — 14 kilometres of solar panels and a biomass boiler — all aimed at achieving true net-zero.

Very sustainable for the planet — but maybe not for my waistline!

Now, let me also look at global carbon emissions, especially from Asia.

ASEAN economies' energy demands will continue to grow as their economies expand.

Each country has a different energy mix, meaning there must be “various pathways” to reach net-zero for each of them.

Japan and Australia can cooperate to help reduce carbon emissions across the region, since many countries lack natural environments that support solar or wind power as abundantly as Australia.

With this in mind, Japan — in partnership with Australia and ASEAN — has advanced the Asia Zero Emission Community, or AZEC initiative, for which we held the leaders' meeting on 26 October, attended by Prime Minister Albanese.

We look forward to even deeper collaboration between Japan and Australia on global decarbonisation.

To enhance collaboration between our two countries in these and other areas, it is vital to maintain a predictable and stable business and investment environment.

We place high value on Minister Madeleine King's consistent support for the mining and gas industries through the government's Critical Minerals Policies and the Future Gas Strategy.

Also, the recent decision by Minister Murray Watt to extend the operation of the North West Shelf Project has reassured many investors.

These plans and actions send strong positive signals to foreign investors when making their future investment decisions.

I believe that both Australia and Japan share the view that gas will remain an important energy source in the coming decades of transition — keeping the electricity on, keeping houses warm, and keeping industry running — all while reducing emissions as we move toward net-zero.

In addition, we are keenly watching the outcome of the revision of the environmental

approval legislation — the EPBC Reform — introduced to Parliament on 30 October.

We hope it will bring more transparent and predictable processes for industry, while maintaining Australia's strong environmental standards.

In that sense, I would like to briefly touch on the potential for CCS — Carbon Capture and Storage — to deliver a net-zero society by 2050.

In the early 2000s, many experts predicted that Australia's population could not exceed 25 million because of water scarcity.

Yet today, projections suggest more than 40 million by 2060.

Why? Because science and technology evolve.

As you may be aware, this year three scientists from Australia, Japan, and the United States won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry for pioneering metal-organic frameworks — a concept that could revolutionise carbon capture.

This shows how innovation drives progress.

It would be wrong to assume that today's efficiency levels in CCS or other technologies will remain static until 2050.

With continued R&D investment, technology will advance, costs will fall, and efficiency will rise.

Governments should provide incentives for long-term CCS policy and for other new technologies.

Japan is doing so, and Australia — blessed with depleted gas fields ideal for storage — has even greater potential to do so.

I hope to see more ambitious policies, including incentives for long-term projects to promote CCS as an important part of the path to net-zero, which will also support Australia's domestic industries in the future.

I believe that by increasing the predictability of the investment environment, we can further tap into Australia's vast potential.

And I would urge all Australians to give this close consideration.

5. People-to-people exchanges

Finally, let me touch on intellectual exchanges, for they are an important source of innovation.

This year, Australia had nine universities ranked among the world's TOP 100, according

to QS — a leading global university-ranking organisation.

Frankly, I wonder how many Australians realise what a remarkable achievement this is.

Let me put it into perspective.

The United States has 26 universities in the Top 100, and the United Kingdom has 17.

They are Number 1 and Number 2.

Yet Australia is Number 3.

Your population is just over 27 million, and the U.K. has 69 million.

If Australia had that many people, you would already have about 23 universities in the Top 100 — easily beating the poms, just like you will in this summer's cricket!

And if you had the population size of the U.S., you would definitely be Number 1 in the world!

You have one of the most privileged academic environments in the world — and the largest number of top universities per capita.

But perhaps, like the Japanese, Australians are too modest to say such things.

That's why many Japanese students majoring in natural science or engineering still don't realise how much Australia can offer — a truly fertile ground for new inspiration.

Inspiration alone, however, does not create innovation or social transformation.

That requires the know-how to turn ideas into industries — and that is where Japan can complement Australia.

To produce many more innovative collaborations — like those among Australian, Japanese, and U.S. scientists who won this year's Nobel Prize in chemistry — we must promote joint projects involving industry and academia, as well as intellectual exchanges, especially among the younger generation.

According to the OECD's PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), Japan ranks first in science, first in mathematics, and second in reading among 15-year-olds in member countries.

There have been 27 Japanese Nobel laureates in natural science, and most of them studied or researched in the United States.

There is no reason to believe that we cannot soon have a Japanese Nobel laureate in natural science who studied or researched at an Australian university.

Since 1958, hundreds of talented young Australians have studied in Japan on a MEXT Scholarship offered by our Ministry of Education and Science.

I believe that if there were a similar competitive and prestigious scholarship programme here in Australia, many more bright young Japanese students would be attracted to study here.

As we approach the 50th anniversary of the NARA Treaty, I hope our bilateral intellectual exchanges will expand even further.

6. The 50th anniversary of the NARA Treaty

With everything that Japan and Australia have achieved together over the past fifty years, it is only fitting that we do something special to celebrate it.

Next year will be our opportunity to do so when we gather at various ceremonies to mark the anniversary of the signing of the Treaty.

We have a lot planned, and — in the best traditions of Japan — we would be honoured if all of you here today, and everyone watching at home, could join us and participate.

We will soon begin accepting applications for recognition of events as official 50th anniversary projects.

So, if you are planning any Japan–Australia-related events for next year, the Embassy would be delighted to receive your application.

When all is said and done, our relationship has endured because — just as “no man is an island” — no nation can remain alone and adrift on the tides of change.

And in today’s more serious and complex environment, our cooperation will become even more indispensable to maintaining the peace and prosperity of the region and realising a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Bound by trust, we must continue to steer together.

So, allow me to finish by saying, in Japanese:

「ご清聴、どうも有難うございました。」

Thank you.