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## *What's behind Japan's diplomacy?*

By Taro Aso, Member of the House of Representative, former Minister for Foreign Affairs

**T**hank you very much for having me today here.  
Seven months ago, on the 15th of August, 2007, I was in Jericho, the old town whose history dates back to, amazingly, 9000 B.C. It is a city that is in the West Bank. Israeli Foreign Minister, the lady Foreign Minister, Tzipi Livni, was apparently nervous. By contrast, the camera crew, a whole bunch of them, were extremely excited. Because it was the first time in so many years, that the top diplomats from Israel, Jordan, and the Palestine were all together, sharing the same room.

With nervous smiles and reluctant handshakes, they sat down. Thus began the talk that I chaired. Ladies, and gentlemen, I don't think that I can ever forget for the rest of my life what I heard from them. Tzipi Livni said only Japan can do this. Abdel Ilah Al Khatib, the Jordanian Foreign Minister followed saying exactly the same. Then, Saeb Erekat, the Palestinian Chief Negotiator, stood up and said the Japanese are here to show us our future.

They have come all the way to say just one thing---, with peace, there will be a future. The Japanese are telling us, the Israelis, and the Palestinians, you are living in this same, tiny land. If you can live together, this land can prosper. This land can be rich in agriculture. This land will be covered by vegetables. No one else has come to show us such a vision, the Japanese are visionaries, he concluded.

Yes, ladies and gentlemen, I am talking about one of Japan's initiatives, to create the Corridor for Peace and Prosperity, that starts from the West Bank, and ends in Saudi Arabia.

You know that in Israel, they make oranges. Oranges in Jaffa, are world famous. Their agriculture is well advanced. They have developed a technology called drip irrigation. There's even a company in Israel called NETAFIM. That's the world's best company in the drip irrigation technology. Everyone in Israel knows that the technology has worked in their own land. And that the same technology should work equally in the West Bank. But no one in Israel has ever come out and offered the technology to the young men and women in the Palestinian Region. It took someone else to bridge the two. And that someone else is Japan.

**J**apan has no historical baggage nor religious to carry around in that part of the world. That's why Foreign Minister Livni is right. Only Japan can bridge the gulf, be a catalyst, to break the ice.

In the future, young men and women in Palestine, would grow cherry tomatoes, or coloured paprika, using the Israeli technology. The fresh vegetables should then be able to pass the Israeli gates as fast as possible while they are really fresh. The vegetables would be shipped from there to Saudi Arabia, the richest consumer market in the region. The road in between is under construction using

Japan's economic assistance. It is of course to give job opportunities to those unemployed in Palestine. The unemployment rate in the West Bank is still over 18%. But more important, it plants two seeds, really.

One seed for building self-esteem, and that's for the Palestinian young. The other for fostering trust between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

And that's crucial. Because for the vegetables to be shipped quickly, the Israeli gates must be wide open for them. For it to happen, there must be trust. So fostering trust is crucial in this project.

I do wish if I am lucky enough, I can see myself that the West Bank area is covered with green vegetables and with greater confidence and self-esteem the Palestinians will have gained.

About these, I have once told an American who was in a leading position of the Bush administration. His response was, "Are you sure? Are you really really sure?" I said, "Yes, of course, we are not talking of a dream, we are serious". He then said, "Boy, that is beyond my imagination".

Now, upon hearing this I had to think about it again. Then I came to realize one thing. To bring about peace in the Middle East, the US, UK, France and other major western powers all called for politics and sometimes even military means, indeed. But I wonder whether or not politics can cure such a chronic illness that will turn young men and women into terrorists.

Terrorism grows in places where people have no hope but only despair. No prospect but poverty. Hardly politics, not to mention military actions, can solve the root cause of terrorism.

I know what Japan is doing there is not an easy task. I know the Middle East is not an

easy place to build trust. I remember George Shultz, former US Secretary of State, cited an anecdote in his memoir, a book called *Turmoil and Triumph*, that goes like this. A frog and a scorpion are on the bank of the Jordan River, and the scorpion, who can't swim, wants to get across. He asks the frog, "Will you put me on your back and take me to the other side?" "But", the frog replies, "you might sting me and then I'd drown" "Why should I do that?" says the scorpion, "I'd drown too" So out they set. In the middle of the stream, the scorpion stings the frog. As they are both going down, the frog asks, "Why did you do that? Now we'll both drown" The scorpion replies, "This is the Middle East".

Looking at the hostilities exchanged daily for some time between the Israelis and the Palestinians, you may want to say that's the Middle East as usual, the harsh reality of it. Still, I shall keep on urging them never to lose vision for a possible future where the Israelis and the Palestinians exchange no bullets but knowledge such as drip irrigation.

Japan's initiative, once again, the Corridor for Peace and Prosperity, is about planting hope, is it not? It is also about building trust, and these two, hope and trust, are the commodities that are in the shortest supply in the Middle East, are they not?

Where other countries may resort to military force, or political means, the Japanese do it instead with economic means. However, be that as it may, it is not simply about making bread. That is much more than that. It is about believing in yourself. To believe that tomorrow can be better than today. It is also about to believe that if you work hard you can do it.

Let's call it a can-do-spirit. That's the positive belief that's run among the Japanese throughout their modern development since the days of Meiji all the way up to the present. And that, I would argue, has saved Japan

twice, first from Western colonization when everyone else in Asia fell under its sway, and second from war-time devastations, when Tokyo, Hiroshima, Nagasaki and in fact most other cities in Japan were made just plain flat.

And in the rest of Asia I should say, that's the kind of spirit that did not come into being until very very recently. Under Confucian tradition, only women and the lower class worked. Men, especially the book-reading class, were supposed to be free from any sort of sweaty labour. To sweat was what you shouldn't have done in the first place if you were literate. The more they learned, the more did they become to look down upon the working class people.

**P**ark Chung-hee, the late President of the ROK, I think, may have been a dictator of a sort. But he was the leader, the most courageous one, indeed, who tried to break that age-old tradition by tirelessly telling his fellow South Koreans the same solid belief that if you work hard, you can make it.

South Korea and Taiwan were among the earliest that took off in the 1970s from the stagnation and backwardness that Hegel and Marx both called "Asiatic". And at the risk of sounding politically incorrect, I should still maintain that it was not by chance, that you should see no secret behind it. Because these two, South Korea and Taiwan, earlier than any other in Asia, received Japanese investment, the Japanese way of doing businesses, like commitment into human capital, putting the workers first, paying respect to consumers. Sometimes it was a minor thing, like not throwing change away to the customer. But almost always, to those young women at the department stores in Seoul, or in Taipei, it was the Japanese manager who told that there were manners and etiquettes that a sales assistant should comply with.

Gradually but steadily, the belief, the can-do-spirit, the core philosophy of the Japanese, started to spread in the rest of Asia,

as Japan's investment spread in the region. Malaysia, with its Look East policy, soon followed suit. So did Thailand, Indonesia, and the list would go on. So much so, that by the time China started to catch up finally in the early 1990s, it was no longer, purely, a Japanese way. It had become pretty much an Asian way, a seasoned model that was handy and available for the late comer to pick up.

And now, if you look at India, their turn seems to have come. The project to build Delhi Metro is a good case in point. The metro project was made possible by Japan's ODA. But the money was almost secondary. It was the work ethics that the Japanese construction workers brought forth to the Indian capital that counted most to the Indians. I am telling you my own account here, what they told me in Delhi when I made a visit there.

The Japanese workers said many many times that they had to fulfil the construction due date, or *nohki*, in Japanese. As they said it so many times, Indians now say *nohki*, themselves. They also told me when it says the daily work begins at 8:00 o'clock, Indian workers would gather at 8:00, starting to put on uniforms, and come to the construction site, say, at 8:20. But, the Japanese would come at 20 to 8, and at 8:00 o'clock, already, they would have lined up at the site, ready to start working, and that, impressed Indian workers as well.

So the Japanese brought to them the Japanese way of doing businesses, the work ethics, and the personal dedication to the tasks ahead. That was what impressed the Indians most.

**Y**ou love your job. You identify yourself with what you do. You do it to make you who you are. To love your job, is to love your colleagues, and to care about your future, the future for you and your family, and for your own community, and your own country.

That is at the core of what I call Japanese way of living, if not to say Japanese philosophy. And that starts from loving what you do.

Let me say this to you, ladies and gentlemen, I was born a Catholic, and still am I. But since childhood, I have been keen on reading Kojiki and other old Japanese tales. Kojiki is an account, published in 712, a collection of stories about Gods in Japan. According to Kojiki, the Sun-Goddess, the god of all gods, Amaterasu was a hard worker. She would always weave clothes. And she was no exception, actually. Because all her fellow gods also worked hard. In Japanese mythology, gods are workers, and they love what they do. What a difference, really, between the Japanese mythology and some of the cultures where the single almighty God punishes humans by forcing them to work. To work in those monotheist cultures is as if to endure punishment. Here, that's the opposite. To work is a path to gain happiness. And that, is at the heart of my own philosophy as well as at the core of Japan's diplomacy.

A good example is in Japan's African diplomacy. The Japanese have long maintained ODA should not be made as charity. It must give the receivers an incentive for them to start working themselves.

Let's think about it. Where they can expect fish as part of economic aid, what can they expect to get from the Japanese? I am not talking about refugees, and such people as would be in most urgent need of food. But if it was for the people in normal situations, would it be fish? Absolutely not. That's fishing rods and the know-how to use them. Where they can expect bread, the same thing. Japan is giving them no bread, but wheat, and the agricultural knowledge, necessary to grow wheat. Because someday, sometime, you must do it yourself. If you do it, you can be a master of your own fate and of your own life.

And only when lots of people have come to understand that to work is actually not bad,

but fun, their own nation should also stand up, and take off, just like Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and many others in Asia. The Japanese government called it to foster ownership. Ownership of what? You may ask. That's ownership of their own development, of their own lives, and most importantly, of their own nation-building.

Looking back, you may recall, when the Japanese started to say ownership was important back in the early 1990s, it was a minority view. Afro pessimism was so rampant that Western donors were also pessimistic, thinking that Africa could never follow the path travelled by the Asians. Most Europeans were sceptical at best, if the Africans could obtain such a thing as the sense of ownership. The Japanese did not buy that argument. They believed that it might take long, but the can-do-spirit could take root also in Africa, if the donors stop behaving like sugar-daddies, and start giving incentives, economic incentives, to the Africans.

And now, if you look around, it is the Africans themselves who are saying exactly the same thing as the Japanese have continued to say, that ownership is most important, that is what counts most.

Here, I think, I shouldn't be humble. It's a success story for Japan's aid policy. Surely, in that regard, Japan's diplomacy has paid off. And the obtained sense of ownership, I think, is an everlasting foundation for African development.

Now, the Chinese may be rushing to Africa for most everything Africa can offer, like natural resources, consumer markets for labour intensive goods, as well as job markets for the Chinese migrant workers. People say, their assistance is much more visible than the Japanese, because the Chinese build trophy projects, Presidential palaces, football stadiums, TV broadcasting stations and so on and so forth.

But look, and think hard about it. Who will maintain the stadium in 15 years time when its wall gets a lot of cracks, its ceiling, leaks, which surely they will? If you don't have skilled labour force, who can mend the wall, the one time shiny stadium will be left standing in decay, with little care given to it.

**A**s an OECD member, Japan cannot, should not give anything like presidential palace as part of its ODA. But I think Japan's assistance is most visible nowhere else but in the shining light of the eyes of African people who have gained self-esteem, a sense, that to work is no pain but fun, and a path to happiness. Because in Africa, Japan's diplomacy has always focused on fostering their sense of ownership, empowering people and their communities. Because that's been an exercise to invest into people's hearts and minds.

I see here the classic can-do-spirit is alive and powerful among our JICA volunteers. They are the men and women, who enjoy working together with, learning together with, having fun together with, and growing up together with, people in Africa, children in Africa, and patients in Africa. And I have no doubt that is the foundation for Japan's diplomacy.

Many people have asked me. Why is it, Mr. Aso? Why is Japan like this?

It's obviously the most developed country in the non-Western world. Its modernization dates back to 150 years ago. In fact, you may remember that exactly 150 years ago in 1858 Japan entered into official relations with America, Holland, Russia, Britain and France by way of force imposed by the Western powers as every one of you knows.

A lot have happened since. And yet, more or less, the Japanese are the same as they were a century and a half ago. Why is this continuity despite all the changes during the course still powerful? That's the question you might also

want to ask. To that, my own answer is that the Japanese love to work, they like others who also love to work. I have said Amaterasu was a hard worker. I can tell you for sure, Their majesties the Emperor and Empress of Japan are the busiest, the most hard-working royal couple that you have ever had in history. So that's what Japan is all about.

There has always been a strong persistent undercurrent that's been the backbone of Japanese development. And that, you already know, is the dedication to what you do, and the belief, that if you work hard today there will be a better tomorrow.

When I was Foreign Minister, my colleagues, like the retired Vice Minister Shotaro Yachi, and I were in a mind-searching mode. What are the assets, the most valuable assets, that Japan has in order for us to pursue our diplomatic goals? What distinguishes Japan from China or India to which, naturally, people in the world pay more and more attention?

Yachi flew to many places, and so did I, with those questions in mind. And I can tell you this. Each and every trip I made gave me a sense that Japan was being viewed as a partner they can trust and much more so than I had imagined before. As this was always the case, I was in high spirits, not tired at all in coming back home. BBC World Service gave us an assurance by its poll ranking Japan the top as a country whose contribution is mostly positive.

With that renewed confidence, we started to scan the world. There emerged many nations, young countries, that are eager to talk to us and keen to learn what the Japanese might be able to tell them.

**S**o it dawned on us. Look at the Baltic 3, Visegrad 4, GUAM, that is Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova, Central Asian countries, Turkey, the SAARC, the CLV, that's Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam,

plus Myanmar, and Mongolia. Most of them are in great transition from the old regime to a new, all aspiring to become democracy, and market economy, very much friendly to Japan, eager to hear what Japan would have to say. Hence came, by connecting the dots, our initiative to create the AFP, or Arc of Freedom and Prosperity. It took time for us to see that there is a huge demand in those places for what Japan could offer. But finally, we pushed the AFP as a demand-driven initiative.

A footnote may be in order here. So long as demand is there we're not going anywhere. Mr. Masahiko Koumura, the current Foreign Minister, has been a good friend of mine for many years. But you know, he is much more gracious than me. He has his big idea in his mind but unlike someone you are now looking at he doesn't show it, I mean as undiplomatically as I do. So, you may say the Arc idea is gone. The truth of the matter is that is not. Its building blocks are being added. To assure you I should urge you to take a look at which countries Japan's assistance is going to. That will give you powerful evidence.

One other thing before conclusion. There was one more reason why we were able to launch the AFP. That is the foundation for Japan's diplomacy has never been more solid and stable than it is now. In addition to the alliance we have with the USA you now see that the NATO has appeared bigger still on Japan's radar screen. That's because Japan and the NATO have done, in fact more than anytime before in the sea and on the ground. Japan and NATO share the same set of values, and almost identical interests, in maintaining good order in the world. So it makes perfect sense that Japan and NATO work together for the betterment of East and Central Europe and beyond. Also with NATO, you can make your tie with the US stronger still from an Atlantic angle.

In the Asia Pacific region, Japan and Australia

have entered a strategic partnership. The key here is that you see Japan is expanding its diplomatic horizon by getting closer still to the democratic peers, which range from the US, Australia, India, the NATO to lots of others in the world. The same can be made about Japan-ROK relationship, which, with the start of Lee Myung-bak administration, looks promising. And with China, Japan's relationship is very much stable now, good enough for both nations to profit from one another.

So all told, ladies and gentlemen, Japan's diplomatic infrastructure is stronger than ever before. With its economy, still as big as China, India, and Russia combined, and its culture, from traditional art to modern, from manga, anime, cos-play to pop music, and to sushi and other Japanese cuisine, all in tremendous vogue from San Paolo to Moscow, and from Hong Kong to Warsaw, I see the road ahead for Japan's diplomacy can hardly be bumpy.

So it's people like me who bear responsibilities as Japan's political leaders to take advantage of such a range of assets as above to steer the course for Japan to continue to prosper and to gain even more influence throughout the world. Of course you must do a lot, like making it possible for Japan to get engaged in collective defence, and in the end, changing the Constitution for it to adapt to the 21st century.

Still, you can be an optimist. I will tell you the reason why. That's because the LDP's political capital has hit the deepest bottom. If you have hit the bottom where can you go? You can go only to one direction, and that's north, I mean, upwards.

Thank you very much, and I am now happy to take a few questions.

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