

**Speech by KAWAGUCHI Yasuhiro, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of
Japan to the Republic of Latvia
at the Conferment Ceremony of Certificate of Commendation**

15 September, 2021

Mr Kols, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee,
Former and current Chairpersons and Vice-chairperson of the Group for Promoting Cooperation with
the Parliament of Japan,

It is an honour to welcome all of you to the ceremony to confer the Certificate of Commendation. This commendation honours individuals or groups publicly in recognition of their outstanding contributions or benevolences made in cooperation with Japan and the missions of the Embassy of Japan.

Since its founding, the Group for Promoting cooperation with the Parliament of Japan has played a crucial role in the inter-parliamentary exchange between Japan and Latvia for about 25 years, under the leadership of nine chairpersons, and has played a role in strengthening bilateral relations, deepening friendship and promoting mutual understanding between Latvia and Japan.

This year, Japan and Latvia celebrate the centenary since Japan recognized Latvia de jure. Since 6 September, embassy of Japan have started posting photos on the embassy's Twitter account featuring the history of a 100-year friendship. In the milestone year, I decided to present my commendation to express our gratitude and appreciation for the group's long-standing activities. Therefore, I invited you, the successive chairs, here today.

I want to invite each of chair later to speak on the memorable experience when you served as chair of the group. Before that, I am going to describe briefly your contribution along with the history of bilateral relations.

Back in 1996, the history of the group began under the first chair, Mr Andris Saulitis. In the year 2000, when Mr Edvins Inkens was leading the group, the Japanese Embassy launched in Riga. In 2006, when Mr Solovjovs was a chair, Latvia opened its Embassy in Tokyo. In 2007, the then Their Majesties the Emperor and Empress visited Latvia and received a warm welcome from the Latvian people.

The parliamentary exchange became active in 2009, 2012 and 2019 when the Speaker of the Saeima visited Japan. Two of the President of the House of Councillors of Japan visited Latvia in 2009 and 2014.

Mr Nakasone, the Chairman of the Japan-Latvia Parliamentary Friendship Group of Japan visited Latvia three times in 2014, 2015 and 2018. In 2015, Mr Nakasone was awarded the Cross of Recognition by the Government of Latvia,

Ten years have passed since the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011. In March 2011, the Riga Dome Cathedral and the Latvian foreign ministry held an ecumenical memorial service for the people of Japan, with the participation of many citizens of Riga and the members of the parliamentary group. They gathered in response to the invitation by then-chairman of the Group, Mr Edvards Smiltens.

Many, including Dr Artis Pabriks, extended messages of support and condolences. We received generous donations and material aid for the people in the affected areas. Thanks to this solidarity, areas struck by the disaster have made steady progress in reconstruction and revitalization. Japan will never forget the wholehearted support and deepest sympathies from Latvia.

Japan is prone to natural disasters, such as heavy rain, typhoons, and earthquakes. One feels strongly encouraged by messages of support in difficult times. In 1996, a year after the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, which severely hit Kobe city and its surrounding regions, Riga Zoo offered to Kobe a baby elephant, Zuze, as a gift for children. This heart-warming support remains and echoes in the heart of many Japanese people even today.

In 2017, Ms Reizniece-Ozola, then Finance Minister, visited Japan and signed the Tax Convention for Elimination of Double Taxation and the Prevention of Tax Evasion and Avoidance. In 2018 Prime Minister Abe visited Latvia for the first time as Japanese Prime Minister.

In February 2019, two milestone documents: the Japan-EU Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) and the EU-Japan Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) took effect. Latvia was the first country to ratify the SPA among the EU member states. In Saeima, your friendship group is the most valuable leading promoter of diplomacy toward Japan.

Here allow me to discuss the recent topics I personally know in more detail.

Nearly three years have passed since I arrived in Riga. I am grateful that I could serve my term as Ambassador in the milestone year of Latvia's 100th anniversary of the international recognition *de jure*. In particular, it was a great honour for me to get invited to the flag-raising ceremony held in Raga Castle on 26 January 2021, as one of the countries of *Entente* that recognized sovereignty *de jure* of the newly independent Latvia. The picture displayed at the door of this room depicts well the moment we set out the relations.

It made me aware of the exceptional ties the two countries retain, with Japan being deeply involved in the very defining moment in the history of Latvia.

The victory of the small Far Eastern island nation, located in the Far East, over the Baltic Fleet left from Liepaja in 1905 marked the historic turning point in Japan.

The defeat upset the Russian Empire and led to the independence of Latvia, eventually.

Looking back on the period since I came to Latvia, on 1 May 2019, His Imperial Highness the Crown Prince Naruhito acceded to the Imperial throne. His Excellency President Levits and the First Lady attended the enthronement ceremony in the September. Her Excellency Madam Speaker Inara Murniece paid a visit to Japan as well in June of that year.

In July this year, Minister Motegi realized his visit to Latvia for the first time as Japanese Foreign Minister. He paid a courtesy call on His Excellency Prime Minister Karins and met with His Excellency Foreign Minister Rinkevics.

The two countries solidified the relations to maintain and strengthen the rule-based, free and open international order.

In addition, to commemorate the 100th anniversary of friendship, thanks to generous cooperation by Riga city, the two ministers and Mr Smiltens, acting Mayor took part in the tree-planting ceremony near the Freedom Monument.

The economic relations between the two countries have become stronger. Latvia received the large missions of JATA, the Japan Association of Travel Agents, and Keidanren, Japan Business Federation in 2019. In April of 2020, Japan's Marubeni backed fund acquired 29.06% stakes of Conexus Baltic Grid, thereby assuming an indispensable part as the shareholder second to the Latvian government. I desire that the economic relationship, including those through critical infrastructure projects such as Rail Baltica, will grow further substantially in the future.

The parliamentary friendship group has offered irreplaceable support to the embassy in our activities and cultural events.

In September last year, I had Ms Dana Reizniece-Ozola, on behalf of this group, at the opening of the Japanese pavilion featuring Japanese tea in Riga Food 2020. It was the first pavilion by Japan ever exhibited there.

Mr Bergmanis attended the conferment ceremony of *the Order of the Rising Sun and Gold Rays with Neck Ribbon* for Maestro Raimonds Pauls last month and made a congratulation speech.

This summer, Japan hosted the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games. To commemorate Tokyo 2020, thanks to a kind arrangement by Mr Bergmanis, I planted a Japanese cherry tree called Amanogawa, *the Milky Way*, in the Olympic Park in Rucava. It was an honour to become the first ambassador of the host country to start a new tradition of planting a tree of its own country.

The pandemic still divides the world. The Games took place during many difficulties amid the further spread of the Covid-19 infection. Japan hosted these challenging events believing that the Olympic and Paralympic Games could contribute to rebuilding the people's bonds and connections through the power of sports. Through the opportunity to send out Latvian athletes, greet them at the airport, and celebrate medalists, I also felt its significance.

As I reviewed, our bilateral relations have been making steady progress, in a wide range of fields, including politics, economy and culture, in a spectrum of society from the very high level to the grassroots level. The Group with Japan has as many as 25 members. It demonstrates the interest and expectations of Saeima for Japan.

Japan and Latvia share fundamental values and principles such as democracy, the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms. However, Japan and Latvia are geographically far apart. Japan is neither a member of NATO nor the EU. Even maintaining current relationships requires effort and attention. I believe we are required to cultivate the relationships continuously. Your support would be precious and indispensable to do that.

Lastly, I would like to conclude my speech by recalling the 100 years of friendship between Latvia and Japan and extending my sincere thanks to your friendship group for the 25 years of activities promoting the relations with Japan. With your valuable backing, I earnestly hope the relations between our two countries will evermore flourish.

Thank you for your attention.