

JAPAN'S FREE AND OPEN INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY WILL BENEFIT THE REGION - JAPANESE FOREIGN MINISTER TARO KONO

DIPLOMATIC PEACE-BUILDING



SRI LANKA'S POTENTIAL AS AN INTERNATIONAL HUB IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

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Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono arrived in Sri Lanka for a two-day official visit yesterday evening. This is the first time in 15 years that a Japanese Foreign Minister is visiting Sri Lanka. The Minister will meet the President, the Prime Minister and the Foreign Affairs Minister today. The following is the full text of Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono's written interview with the *Daily News* ahead of his visit.



THE LATE PRESIDENT J R JAYEWARDENE STILL REMEMBERED FOR HIS JAPAN-FRIENDLY SPEECH FOLLOWING WWII

BILATERAL TRADE EXCEEDS RS.170 BILLION

A 100-MEMBER JAPANESE BUSINESS DELEGATION DUE IN SRI LANKA

Q: What is the major purpose of your visit?

A: As Sri Lanka is located at a critical sea-lane point to connect Asia and Middle East/ Africa, it is a geopolitically and strategically important country. Moreover, in view of the stable public security and high economic growth in recent years, Sri Lanka is also a country with high potential for further development. Therefore I choose Sri Lanka as among my first destinations in 2018 in order to further enhance the bilateral relationship.

Japan regards the Indo-Pacific region, the centre of the vitality of the world, as free and open "international public good" which is based on the rule of law and promotes the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" in order to ensure peace and prosperity of the region. Sri Lanka is quite significant in this context as it is developing as the international hub in the Indian Ocean.

Both Japan and Sri Lanka, as maritime nations, can enjoy development and prosperity from the free and open Indo-Pacific and thus bear responsibilities in realising it. Japan is determined to further promote peace and prosperity in the region together with Sri Lanka by enhancing connectivity through quality infrastructure projects such as the port development as well as by strengthening cooperation for maritime safety.

During my visit, I will discuss how to strengthen cooperation in the fields of healthcare and environment

sectors and how to support the national reconciliation process, as well as regional and international situations including the North Korea issue.

I wish this visit would contribute to further enhancing mutual dignitaries' visits and also further deepening bilateral relations between Japan and Sri Lanka.

Q: Your thoughts on the bilateral relations between Japan and Sri Lanka?

A: The friendly relationship between Japan and Sri Lanka originated after the speech made by the then Finance Minister J R Jayewardene at the San Francisco Peace Conference in 1951 where he defended sovereign rights of Japan. The Japanese still remember that this speech supported Japan's return to the international society after the WWII.

Since that time, both countries have consistently walked the path of friendship and cooperation. Until today, Japan has contributed to the development of social and economic infrastructure and of human resources in Sri Lanka through providing the following assistance; more than 1 trillion (almost Rs. 1.35 trillion) Yen Loan, approximately 200 billion yen (almost Rs. 270 billion) Grants Aid, worth around than 80 billion yen (almost Rs. 108 billion) Technical Cooperation and more than 1,000 Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers. Moreover, Japan has

also actively supported the peace-building in Sri Lanka.

In recent years, the bilateral cooperation in the various fields such as trade and investment, maritime cooperation, people-to-people exchanges has been further enhanced under the "Comprehensive Partnership" between the two countries based on previous visits by Japanese and Sri Lankan leaders. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Sri Lanka in September 2014. It was the first time in 20 years for a Japanese Prime Minister to visit Sri Lanka. Then Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe visited Japan in May, 2016, and April, 2017, respectively.

The current bilateral relationship between Japan and Sri Lanka is supported by the long history of cooperation and through numerous mutual visits of the people, which is based on the common background as an island nation with Buddhist culture. I am determined to make efforts to further consolidate this bilateral relationship which has been inherited from the pioneers of both countries.

Q: Are Japanese firms keen on Sri Lanka's investment potential?

A: Economic relations between Japan and Sri Lanka have become closer since the end of the con-

flict over 30 years in Sri Lanka. And now Japan and Sri Lanka are important economic and trading partners with annual bilateral trade exceeding 100 billion Japanese Yen (approximately Rs.170 billion) and more than 130 Japanese companies have a presence in Sri Lanka.

Infrastructure development projects such as the port development in Sri Lanka are vital from the perspective of enhancing connectivity in the Indo-Pacific region.

Japan promotes quality infrastructure projects based on the international standards such as openness, transparency, economic efficiency and financial soundness of the recipient country.

Moreover, Sri Lanka is a fascinating country that attracts people from all over the world with attractive tourism destinations such as the rich nature and 8 World Heritage sites. I understand that the number of tourists who visit Sri Lanka has been on the rise especially after the end of the conflict in 2009. In recent years, the number of Japanese tourists has also increased to more than 40,000 per year, and I think the tourism sector in Sri Lanka is a promising field for investments.

A large-scale (nearly 100 members) business delegation from the Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry will visit Sri Lanka in this month. Through various exchanges including this business delegation, I expect further increase in the Japanese investment in Sri Lanka.

Q: What are your observations on the North Korea crisis?

A: Over the last two years, North Korea has not only conducted the nuclear test three times, the one in last September was far larger than its previous tests but also launched 40 ballistic missiles such as two of those flying over Japan and one of those with the range of an ICBM.

The nuclear and missile development by North Korea now poses unprecedentedly grave and imminent threats to the international community, not only to Japan or Sri Lanka.

Japan has been supporting peace and prosperity of the Asia Pacific region as a pacifist nation over 70 years since the end of the WWII. Japan is among nations who wish to solve the issue peacefully.

However, considering the fact that North Korea breached the 1994 Framework Agreement as well as the 2005 Six-Party Talk Joint Statement and continued its nuclear and missile development programmes, any dialogue with North Korea for the sake of dialogue is proven meaningless.

Therefore, in order to make North Korea change its policy, it is necessary to maximize pressure on North Korea by all means available, thereby creating a circumstance which forces North Korea to seek a dialogue.

For this purpose, Japan is determined to make its utmost efforts to increase international pressure on North Korea to the highest level through any conceivable means, including the full implementation of UN Security Council resolutions, in cooperation with the U.S. and South Korea as well as through close collaboration with relevant nations including Sri Lanka.