

Partnership to be proud of Partnership among Pacific Islanders - Towards a Prosperous, Free and Open Pacific

It was more than 20 years ago in 1997 when the leaders of Japan and the Pacific island countries first gathered in Tokyo to launch the first Japan-Pacific Island Leaders Meeting (PALM, then known as the Japan-South Pacific Forum Summit Meeting). Japan was among the first countries to establish a summit-level framework dedicated to forging stronger ties with Pacific island countries.

Our achievements since then have surpassed what many had expected. The amount of trade between Japan and Pacific island countries has almost tripled from approximately US\$1.4 billion to US\$4 billion while the number of Japanese embassies in the region has more than quadrupled. Moreover, we are engaged in ever wider and deeper cooperation in the international arena in order to ensure a sustainable and prosperous region for all. Along the way, PALM has developed into a mature framework with multiple strata of dialogues and cooperation.

As proud as I am of the great strides we have made over the past two decades, I am also fully aware of the vast potential that still needs to be tapped to address the region's evolving challenges effectively. While the Pacific region faces various challenges such as climate change, natural disasters and environmental degradation, we are also becoming increasingly aware of the need to tackle emerging issues such as illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing as well as transnational crimes. North Korean issues continue to be among the most urgent challenges for the region.

In light of such mounting challenges, it is vital for us to make strenuous efforts to update our cherished partnership through the PALM process. The upcoming PALM8 in Japan on the 18th and 19th of May will be a critical occasion to define the direction for the next 20 years of our partnership. From this perspective, I would like to welcome at PALM8 the participation of New Caledonia and French Polynesia. Both are important members of this region, which is characterized by having both the strong will and the invaluable capacity to tackle these pressing issues facing the region.

This PALM8 will be held again in Iwaki, Fukushima, which was severely struck by the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011. It will be an ideal opportunity for the leaders of the Pacific to witness

the steady progress of its reconstruction, which demonstrates our resilience in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenge.

There is no shortage of challenges to be addressed at the upcoming summit. A rich, tranquil, free and open Pacific Ocean has always been the very foundation of the peace, stability and prosperity of the entire region. This has been made possible by the rule of law, a hard-won wisdom that ensures a free and open order for all. No country has benefited more from this vast ocean than Japan and the Pacific island countries. Yet, we are living in a world where we cannot take such a maritime order for granted. Hence, it is only natural that one of the major focal points of PALM 8 will be the ocean.

I am also looking forward to having in-depth discussions to make tangible progress in building the resilience of Pacific island countries against the pressing challenges of climate change, disaster risk and protection of the environment. We are proud of the achievements made in such fields as the mainstreaming of renewable energy in the Pacific island countries through “Hybrid Island Programme”, and improvement of the capacity of waste management through “J-PRISM” (Japanese Technical Cooperation Project for Promotion of Regional Initiative on Solid Waste Management in Pacific Island Countries). Japan is determined to redouble its effort to extend our hand to better address issues that affect everyday lives of the people in the Pacific. Japan is also committed to supporting the economic prosperity of the people in the region through a combination of trade and investment.

We will also be having extensive discussions on areas such as people-to-people exchanges and cooperation in the international arena. In particular, I look forward to a shared determination with the other leaders in taking necessary actions towards our common goal of never accepting a nuclear-armed North Korea.

Japan and the Pacific island countries are not only bound by the Pacific Ocean but our peoples also share a common identity as “Pacific islanders.” Pacific island countries are integral parts of the vast ocean stretching across the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. This explains why Japan is fully committed to deepening our engagement in the region under its “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy,” which aims to bring further stability and prosperity to the region, and why Japan will mobilize every policy tool at its disposal to work with its partners in the Pacific. And in doing so, Japan will not fail to heed the voices and the needs of each and every PALM member.

We are natural partners whose futures are closely interwoven, and we have every reason to work shoulder to shoulder to shape a prosperous, free and open future of the Pacific together. I look forward to welcoming the leaders of the Pacific island countries and regions to Iwaki to mark an important step towards realizing this shared vision.

Shinzo Abe

Prime Minister of Japan