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**The Ties That Bind: The Role of Exchanges in Strengthening
U.S.–Japan Relations**

By Paige Cottingham-Streater

Cemented by warm relations at the highest levels of government, the US-Japan relationship is demonstrably stronger today than it has been at any time during the post-war period. Without question, it is important that the leaders of the world's two largest economies share a bond of trust and confidence that help them face the formidable challenges of a post-September 11 world.

The bilateral relationship was established and strengthened by face-to-face interactions and bonds of trust between Americans and Japanese. Countless American and Japanese diplomats, students, government officials, businesspeople, scientists, artists, scholars and ordinary citizens have learned each others' language, and examined the similarities and differences of communication styles, decision-making and national interests through exchanges.

Just four years into a new century, a multitude of challenges and responsibilities confront Japan and the United States —continued bloodshed in Iraq and unrest throughout the Middle East, the reconstruction of Afghanistan, tensions in the Korean peninsula, exploration of space and technological research, research of alternative energy uses, global health crises, and the like.

The foundation of the bilateral friendship is based on mutual respect and understanding, along with strong personal relationships and informed decision making. These elements are the cornerstone not only of diplomatic and political stability, but also economic health and international cooperation. For example, Prime Minister Koizumi's friendship with President Bush led to his request that Japan's Diet take the unprecedented step of deploying its Self Defense Forces to Iraq as a gesture of support for Japan's closest ally. As Mike Mansfield famously observed, mutual understanding occurs when there is firsthand knowledge of another nation and its people.

For the past 150 years, grassroots, intellectual and professional exchanges have been an effective tool in building bridges of understanding and cooperation. In 1870, Rutgers University and Amherst College conferred degrees on Taro Kusakabe and Shimeta Niiijima, the first Japanese students to graduate from an American college and university. Niiijima went on to establish Doshisha University, one of Japan's prestigious universities. These early pioneers were followed by thousands of other Japanese students who attended US universities and professors who served as lecturers and educators.



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Since 1987, the Japanese government-sponsored Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET) has sent 17,000 Americans to cities and prefectures throughout Japan. JET participants teach English, organize international events, and are involved in their local communities on a daily basis. Japan's investment in this program to promote internationalization has yielded a new generation of Americans with personal knowledge about Japan. Many of the program's alumni pursue careers in the United States' public and private sectors as educators, civil servants, Japanese language professors, and businesspeople.

For its part, the US Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs supports a range of public diplomacy programs that allow Japanese nationals to learn about American values and culture. Indeed, more than 2,300 future leaders from Japan, including Nobel Laureate Kenzaburo Oe and former Prime Ministers Kaifu and Hosokawa, have participated in the program since 1953.

Some 6,500 Japanese students have studied in the United States under Fulbright scholarships while 2,000 American students have studied in Japan. Other exchange programs, such as those sponsored by local Japan-America Societies and sister-city relationships provide programs and similar benefits.

Ten years ago, the US Congress established the Mike Mansfield Fellowship Program – a two-year fellowship for US government officials (one year of full-time language and areas studies training followed by a second year working inside Japanese government agencies). During their stint, Fellows develop Japanese language proficiency, professional relationships and a firsthand knowledge about the Japanese government and how it works. To date, 63 participants have returned to federal service and are applying their Japan expertise.

To be sure, some private companies have established specialized programs to promote exchanges in science, education, and technology, but most exchanges are supported and administered by the public and non-governmental sectors and philanthropic organizations.

The conveniences of trans-Pacific transportation and technology have helped to narrow the gap of communication between the United States and Japan, but face-to-face interaction is irreplaceable. There are simply no substitutes for living abroad to experience daily life, sharing space in a laboratory to learn new techniques, or observing the numbers of individuals involved in the development of a business decision.

While a number of successful US-Japan exchanges are in place, there is room for more face-to-face interaction between professionals. According to a 2002 Association of Departments of Foreign Languages study, 52,238 students attending 782 institutions of higher learning are enrolled in Japanese language courses – logical candidates for continued exposure to Japan.



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In the business arena, employees of US-owned affiliates in Japan and Japanese affiliates in the US support their countries' economies as employees with not only business expertise, but contribute strong cross-cultural communication skills and an understanding of the business environment.

Increasing the numbers and types of professional and grassroots exchanges for business people, policymakers, journalists, elected officials, scientists, and artists would make a valuable contribution to the ever-evolving United States-Japan relationship. Each of these constituencies has a unique perspective on how Japan and the United States might address issues of mutual interest and benefit from sharing their various points of view with their counterparts.

In order to ensure their sustainability, stakeholders in the United States and Japan should consider the following recommendations:

- The private sector and philanthropic community should increase funding for Japan-related exchanges;
- Legislators should invest time in overseas travel focusing on issues in local communities and well as national concerns;
- Organizing institutions should reach out to diverse populations and explore a variety of issues;
- Participants of exchanges should share their experiences and observations with others in their community.
- The United States should reform its current visa process to encourage participation of international visitors in public policy and educational programs that include not only participants from the US and Japan, but from other parts of Asia.

In the post-September 11 world that involves uncertainty and unrest, there are numerous possibilities for cooperation between Japan and the United States. How both countries address the domestic and international challenges they face will depend upon the skill of the leadership and the will of the people.

Through broad-based and innovative exchanges, Japan and the United States can build well-informed societies and help educate effective decisionmakers who have developed strong, enduring bonds of mutual respect and understanding.

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