

Minister West MP,
Lord Coaker,
My Lords, My Ladies, and
Excellencies,

It is a great pleasure for my wife Eiko and myself to welcome so many dear friends of Japan, comprised of esteemed representatives of British society, Japanese community, and Diplomatic Corps, to celebrate the birthday of His Majesty the Emperor of Japan.

Emperor Naruhito turned 65 years old on the 23rd of February. In the interview on his birthday, His Majesty fondly recalled the State Visit to the UK with Empress Masako in June last year.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to all the people involved at the Palace, the FCDO, and others who made the State Visit such an enormous success.

At the end of their stay, Their Majesties visited Oxford University, where they were warmly welcomed by then-Chancellor Lord Patten.

His Majesty, as the young Crown Prince, studied at Merton College from 1983 to '85, focusing on the subject of water transportation on the River Thames. Her Majesty also studied at Balliol College three years later.

I am going to Oxford University tomorrow and am very much looking forward to visiting Merton and Balliol. In addition, I am planning to enjoy some ale at the Turf Tavern, which the young Crown Prince visited on several occasions.

One of the differences I noticed from the time I was here 12 years ago is they now serve chilled ale at pubs. I am going to find out if they still serve warm ale at the Turf Tavern!

Japan-UK relations are in excellent state, as symbolised by the enormous success of the State Visit. As the new Japanese Ambassador, my mission is to further strengthen this wonderful partnership in all areas including politics, economy, and culture.

In the three months since I arrived in London, progress has already been made in numerous areas.

In November last year, Prime Ministers Ishiba and Starmer took the opportunity at the Rio G20 Summit

to meet in person to establish a personal relationship.

In December, the Working Holiday Visa Scheme was significantly expanded, and the period during which British young people can stay in Japan under Working Holiday doubled from one year to two years.

Also, in December, the UK entered the CPTPP. Japan has consistently extended its support as the Chair of the UK Accession Working Group.

The CPTPP's GDP amounts to approximately 15% of World GDP, coming close to the EU's share of 16.6%. The CPTPP's population is 580 million people, surpassing the EU's 450 million. It is a dynamic grouping, and Japan will work closely with the UK on the expansion strategy of CPTPP.

Esteemed guests,

This year promises to be an exciting year for Japan-UK relations. Let me share with you some key developments.

Firstly, in the diplomatic and security arena, Defence Minister Nakatani visited London in mid-January. Thank you, Lord Coaker, for hosting a fantastic dinner for him in the House of Lords Peers' Dining Room.

The next day, Minister Nakatani had a productive meeting with Secretary Healey, and the two leaders confirmed an iron-clad commitment to advance the Global Combat Air Programme, or GCAP.

The GCAP is arguably the only ongoing programme in the world to develop a 6th generation fighter jet. Can you imagine this fighter jet will be so much more powerful than the F35?

The headquarters are already established in Reading, and Mr Masami Oka, former Japanese Vice-Defence Minister, has taken office as its first CEO.

Top engineers from Japan, the UK and Italy are working closely together to enable the programme's first fighter jet to take to the skies in 2035 in order to protect the free world from adversaries.

At sea, the Carrier Strike Group led by HMS Prince of Wales will be dispatched to the Indo-Pacific. This will provide a fantastic opportunity to demonstrate the UK's unwavering commitment to the Indo-Pacific.

When they make a port call in Japan, we are coordinating arrangements to have joint exercises with the Japan Self-Defense Forces to showcase our determination to safeguard a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Furthermore, Japan is moving forward with its cooperation regarding AUKUS Pillar 2. We will first start our cooperation regarding the interoperability of Maritime Autonomous vehicles. And we will continue our discussion with AUKUS to explore possible opportunities for future cooperation including AI.

In the economic arena, we are working closely on plans to hold the Economic '2+2' in the coming weeks. This will be the first Economic 2+2 for the UK, and for Japan its second only after the one with the US.

This will provide a critical opportunity for Secretary Lammy and Secretary Reynolds to interact with their Japanese counterparts on important issues such as trade and economic security. I hope they will have a candid exchange of views from strategic and geopolitical perspectives.

Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai will be inaugurated on 13th April. I am excited about the many high-level delegations travelling to Japan. I hope many British people will get a chance to visit Japan and see the Expo.

I would like to thank the Government of Wales, represented this evening by Ms Rebecca Evans MS, Welsh Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Energy and Planning, for designating this year as 'Wales and Japan 2025'.

At its inaugural event in Cardiff, my wife and I were surprised, together with Japan's Honorary Consul, Mr Keith Dunn, to listen to First Minister Eluned Morgan sing the Japanese anthem, 'Kimigayo' in Japanese, so beautifully.

My wife immediately told me, "Oh Hiroshi, you have to practice your Welsh National Anthem much harder!"

More than half a century ago, Osaka hosted another Expo in 1970. Prince Charles attended it and met with Akio Morita, asking him to bring a Sony factory to Wales. Later, SONY built a plant in Cardiff, and it celebrated its Golden Jubilee in 2024.

Tonight, I am glad to be joined by Ms Sharon Hodgson MP, Special Envoy on Trade for Japan.

According to the Office of National Statistics, total trade between Japan and the UK stands approximately at 27 billion pounds.

There are many delegations going to the Expo this year, not just from the British Government, but also from Wales, Scotland, the City of London, and Greater Manchester. I hope the visit by these delegations will also lead to an increase in trade and investment in the future.

Incidentally, the stock-based total investments from Japan to the UK are ten times larger than those of the UK to Japan. Therefore, I would enthusiastically welcome new British investments into Japan.

Culture is another pillar of the Japan-UK partnership.

In this regard, in March the Royal Shakespeare Company will return with its popular stage performance of *My Neighbour Totoro*.

In May, the British Museum will inaugurate its Hiroshige Exhibition.

And in June, the UK Ekiden will be held for the second time. The Lord Mayor of Westminster, Sir Robert Rigby, will participate in the team comprising officials from the Japanese Embassy, the Royal Household and the FCDO to run 100km along the Thames.

In July, the National Ballet of Japan led by Ms Miyako Yoshida will have its first UK performances at the Royal Opera House.

In August and September, Japan's women's national team, the Sakura Fifteen, will participate in the Women's Rugby World Cup.

In October, Japan's national sport, Sumo will return to London after 34 years. In 1991, the Yokozuna or Grand Champion Hokutoumi won the London tournament. He was under heavy pressure to win as a Yokozuna, but he told me that he felt under even greater pressure to answer the winner's interview in English!

In Autumn, the annual Japan Matsuri will be held. Please take this opportunity to enjoy Japan's diverse charms and delicacies without even having to leave London.

Then there is the Sakura Cherry Tree Planting Project, which symbolises the everlasting friendship between Japan and the UK.

Our initial target was 1,000 trees, but we have already planted nearly 8,000. Our new target is to plant 10,000 sakura cherry trees across the UK. Thank you, Mr Sandy Sano and Lady Borwick, for your great leadership.

I haven't been successful in planting a sakura cherry tree in this room, so we have asked the UK Bonsai Association to provide us with a beautiful bonsai tree.

Moreover, we have asked Ikebana International to coordinate the Japanese Ikebana flower arrangements. This year, the Ikenobo School and the Ohara School kindly arranged beautiful Ikebana in this ballroom and on the ground floor.

In order to match the Rinpa School Ikebana arranged by the Ohara School, my wife's kimono features weeping cherry trees drawn by Hoitsu Sakai of the Rinpa School.

For this evening's reception, I thank Zenno for kindly bringing Japanese wagyu beef from Japan. We have also brought scallops and other fresh Japanese seafood from Japan.

Moreover, I thank the Japan Sake and Shochu Makers Association and Sake Samurai for providing many different kinds of delicious Japanese sake.

We have also prepared sparkling sake called Awa sake, as well as Koshu wine, yuzu wine, plum wine and other Japanese wines.

Japan House London recently concluded a hugely successful exhibition on food samples entitled "Looks Delicious!"

This evening, we have borrowed some of their food replicas and asked Master Chef Murakami and Ms Endo from my residence as well as Chef Sawada from my DCM's residence to make look-alike real food.

The samples are displayed in the room adjacent to the next one with the logo "Which is real?" Please make sure you eat the real food because the samples are all hand-crafted and they could be expensive to replace!

In the next room, there are a variety of booths provided by Japan's regions and Japanese companies to give you a taste of the diverse charms and delicacies Japan has to offer.

My dear friends,

We all find ourselves living in a dramatically changing world. Uncertainties are increasing, and divisions are looming on the horizon. How to navigate troubled waters is a great challenge for all of us.

In the old days, seafaring people used the stars to navigate uncharted waters. Likewise, we may wish to rely on fundamental principles, in particular, the rule of law, as our guide in crossing stormy waters.

In a world where basic notion of sovereignty and territorial integrity are increasingly placed in jeopardy, we should not stand on the sidelines and let the course of human history backslide into an age of the law of the jungle.

Japan and the UK are among the countries which champion the fundamental values of freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

As Japan and the UK strive to further strengthen our strategic and global partnership in a world with daunting challenges, I would like to ask for your continued support.

In closing, I would like to express my best wishes for the continued good health of His Majesty the Emperor, the steady recovery of His Majesty the King, and enduring friendship between the Japanese and British people.

Thank you very much.