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## **WHY IS THE PACIFIC ISLANDS SUMMIT IMPORTANT?**

*Izumi Kobayashi*

This coming May, Prime Minister Taro Aso will host the fifth Japan-Pacific Islands Forum Summit Meeting in Tomamu, Hokkaido, inviting leaders from 16 Pacific island countries and territories, including Australia and New Zealand. The summit has been held every three years since 1997, the previous one held in Okinawa in 2006. Given that Japan has often been criticized for lacking initiative and a positive attitude towards making international contributions, this island summit is an extremely meaningful diplomatic event in that it is one of a few regional conferences held at the initiative of the Japanese government.

*The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.*


With the exception of Papua New Guinea, which has a larger land area than Japan, most of the island countries – such as Tonga, Samoa and Tuvalu – are small in size. For people in developed countries, the dominant image of islands in the South Pacific still remains one of “paradise” and “tourist spot.” However, such an understanding of the region is based on many misconceptions. Most well-known tourist islands, such as Hawaii, Guam and Tahiti, belong to the US or France, with only a few island countries, such as Fiji and Palau, having managed to gain their independence. In fact, the island region is fraught with problems that arise from the very nature of their small, emerging country status, such as environmental problems caused by industrialization and climate change, ethnic feuds, economic hardship and lack of talent. As a neighboring country sharing the same Pacific Ocean, it is all the more important for Japan to contribute to regional stability and development in cooperation with these island nations.

Japan has provided more than 10 billion yen in official development aid to this region annually. During the previous Okinawa summit in 2006, then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi pledged 45 billion yen over the next three years. The target has almost been met as well. Island countries that belong to the US or the British Commonwealth are highly amenable to Japanese assistance.

However, Japan’s motive for supporting those island countries has often been misunderstood in foreign commentaries and papers as a wish to secure fish resources such as bonito and tuna or to increase the number of countries that would support Japan’s whaling. These are serious misunderstandings. It is certainly true that bonito and tuna are important for Japan and that ceasing whaling is a weighty issue that cannot be easily accepted by Japan in terms of preserving Japanese food culture and tradition. However, securing bonito and tuna as food and maintaining Japan’s own fisheries are different matters. Furthermore, Japan is not so energetic about pursuing policy concerning culture and tradition that it would position the preservation of food culture and tradition as one of its main diplomatic policies. In short, the two points often raised in foreign commentaries are not major elements driving Japan to pursue relations with the island countries in either political or economic terms.

Why, then, should Japan strengthen relations with the island countries? The answer is to exert firm presence in the Asia-Pacific region and to secure a position as a responsible developed country that can contribute to the international community. This, in turn, would enhance Japan's national interests by bringing political stability to the region and securing its economic interests, including marine resources. In this regard, maintaining regional cooperation with the island countries through a forum for permanent dialogue is of crucial importance for Japan, the only country among the developed countries that has not formed a regional group. Herein lies the reason I mentioned that the island summit is such a meaningful diplomatic event.

However, such thinking was not necessarily regarded highly among Japanese diplomatic circles. This was because, as a defeated country in World War II that had to put lots of energy into dealing with pending issues and responding to foreign pressure, Japan did not have the luxury of considering ways to make positive international contributions. Nevertheless, Japanese diplomacy has been evolving in recent years. One proof is an increasing emphasis on policies to strengthen cooperation with the Pacific islands, which is of little practical advantage for the time being, and with African countries, which were distant for Japan not only geographically but economically as well.

The Japanese prime minister is expected to announce the idea of creating a "Pacific environmental community" at the coming fifth Island Summit in May. I think presentation of such a vision is of crucial importance because delivering a clear national message to the international community helps clear up misunderstandings and give a greater sense of security to concerned countries. 

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