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BUILDING A STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP WITH THE MIDDLE EAST

Masayuki Yamauchi

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's recent trip to the Middle East, touted by the Japanese government as shaping a "new era of Japan - Middle East relations," may indeed be an epoch-making development in Japan's Middle East diplomacy. Visiting five countries in the region – Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Qatar, and Egypt – from April 28 to May 2, Mr. Abe sought to consolidate partnerships to extend the Japan-Middle East relationship beyond resource diplomacy.

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.

Mr. Abe was accompanied by an impressive delegation of some 180 business executives led by Fujio Mitarai, the chairman of Nippon Keidanren (Japan Business Federation), Japan's most powerful business lobby. They cultivated personal connections with Arab leaders and nurtured interest in non-oil investments, which was surely a positive move. Whether or not it was motivated by a desire to contain the aggressive oil diplomacy of China and India, this multi-faceted approach involving both the political and business sectors will help Japan flexibly develop multi-layered relations and eventually establish a strategic partnership with the Middle East, while along the way transforming the country from a "good-hearted" nation into a "responsible" one. In this regard, it was important that Mr. Abe agreed to hold a strategic dialogue on a regular basis with President Mubarak of Egypt, and to intensify high-level political dialogue with King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. Japan has been a major donor to Palestine, but is not a member of the international Quartet for Middle East peace, consisting of the United States, the United Nations, the European Union and Russia. Given this handicap, more active diplomacy is expected of Japan.

This new era for Japan and the Middle East will surely feature the following four characteristics: (1) multi-layered relations intended not only to secure a reliable supply of oil and natural gas but also to allow enhanced cooperation in education and occupational training, cultural exchange and intellectual dialogue; (2) partnerships for ensuring regional stability, for example, through the Middle East peace process and assistance toward the reconstruction of Iraq; (3) stable trade in crude oil, and the maintenance and expansion of Japan's oilfield development projects, and (4) expanded trade and investment.

The driving force behind this broadening Japan-Arab relationship is the Japan-Arab Dialogue Forum set up in May 2003. The Forum, involving political, business and academic figures from Japan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and the Palestinian Authority, has held four meetings so far and promoted mutual understanding between Japan and the Arab world over issues ranging from

occupational training to intellectual dialogues. The Forum has also dispatched three Japanese missions to the Middle East for the purpose of cultural exchange and dialogue.

Such efforts are now about to bear fruit in the founding of what might be termed an “Arab version of the Davos forum.” Prime Minister Abe and President Mubarak agreed to convene a conference (the Japan-Arab Conference) in Alexandria, Egypt in November 2007, with more than 200 prominent political, business and academic figures expected to participate. The conference will coincide with the fifth meeting of the Japan-Arab Dialogue Forum. Japan must turn the conference into a new platform to further its partnership with the Middle East.

Mr. Abe and Mr. Mubarak also decided to “expedite” a scheme to establish an Egypt and Japan University for Science and Technology (E-JUST). This project, designed to teach Arab youth about Japan’s most advanced technologies, was also a product of the meetings and cultural exchange missions of the Japan-Arab Dialogue Forum.

The Japanese government has proposed to create, in collaboration with the private sector, a Corridor for Peace and Prosperity in the land between Palestine and Israel. Put forward last year by former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, this peace initiative aims at enhancing the distribution of goods to Gulf countries via Jordan by building an agro-industrial park in the Jordan River rift valley. Representatives of Japan, Israel, the Palestinian Authority and Jordan met in Tokyo this March and agreed on a development plan for an agro-technical and distribution center. However, its success requires the understanding and cooperation of the Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia.

Securing a stable oil supply is crucial. Japan depends on the Persian Gulf region for 76 percent of its net oil imports (243 million kiloliters in 2006). Relations with the Gulf countries are thus vital to Japan’s national interest, but what is required in the 21st century is to turn energy-based relations into a multi-layered partnership through the conclusion of Free Economic Agreements and other

measures.

The Japan-Arab Dialogue Forum has taken up the problem of protectionist Arab legislation and regulations on services. Outside the petrochemical industry, few Japanese corporations have ever set up production bases in the region. Japan and Arab countries must make utmost efforts to remove psychological barriers and bridge the gaps in customary practices. In this regard, it is worth noting that Qatar and the UAE showed enthusiasm for Mr. Abe's proposal to bolster cooperation in education and human resource development as well as cultural exchange. Dispatching cultural missions to Arab Gulf countries other than Saudi Arabia, with which Japan already has channels for intellectual dialogue, will constitute a first step toward building a strong, multi-layered partnership with the Middle East. 

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