

Marking another diplomatic first

BY MAKOTO YAMANAKA
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TOMORROW, for the first time in our bilateral history, the President of Singapore will visit Japan as its state guest - a long-awaited event. President S R Nathan and his wife will visit Tokyo, Kyoto and Hiroshima.

The Emperor and Empress of Japan visited Singapore in 2006 to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Japan-Singapore diplomatic ties. Now, three years later, their majesties will receive President and Mrs Nathan in Japan and host a state banquet in their honour at the Imperial Palace. This visit will provide an ideal opportunity to further strengthen the friendly relations between our two countries.

The Japan-Singapore relationship is one with many "firsts". Singapore was the first country with which Japan concluded an Economic Partnership Agree-

ment. This agreement, which came into force in 2002, has boosted what was already a vibrant economic partnership between the two countries. Our bilateral trade has increased from \$42.1 billion in 2002 to \$60.1 billion last year.

More than 1,000 Japanese companies are based in the Republic, most of which have regional head offices here. The Japanese community is larger than any other community from a Group of Eight country here. In Japan, Singapore is ranked first among Asian investors.

The Republic was also Japan's first partner in providing developing countries with technical assistance. Under the Japan-Singapore Partnership Programme for the 21st Century (JSPP21), the two have jointly offered training courses for about 4,000 participants from 47 countries in areas such as governance, banking and finance, and environmental management. The JSPP21, which has been running for the past 15 years, is Singapore's largest and most successful joint training

programme to date.

But the partnership goes beyond this. In a world confronted with challenges such as climate change, terrorism and infectious diseases, the two countries have worked together closely. Cooperation on anti-piracy is the most recent example. Japan and Singapore were among the first countries to have contributed to the international missions off Somalia. On April 4, a Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Force destroyer, Sazanami, rescued a Singapore-registered tanker, Ocean Amber, without using any weapons. This incident turned out to be Japan's first action against suspected pirates there.

Piracy in this region also needs to be tackled. The Regional Cooperation Agreement known as ReCAAP, proposed by then-Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, established the Information Sharing Centre in Singapore in 2006. ReCAAP is the first government-to-government agreement to address the problem of piracy and armed robbery in Asia. Four-

teen countries have entered this agreement to date.

When it comes to regional groupings such as Asean, Asean Plus Three, the East Asian Summit, the Asean Regional Forum and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec), our two countries share a vision. Japan is one of the staunchest supporters of Asean and its integration.

On the cultural front, the fact that the television programme Japan Hour has run for 16 years here shows the depth of interest Singaporeans have in Japanese culture. Their appreciation of the traditions, food, fashion, anime, manga and pop music of Japan makes the Republic a natural hub for popularising Japanese culture in the region. Thus the Japan Creative Centre (JCC) will be officially launched at the end of this year in cooperation with the Singapore Government.

An idea that originated with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in 2007, the JCC aims to promote Japan's "soft power" in Singapore and the rest of South-

east Asia, by encouraging cultural and business development, as well as international exchanges. The JCC is the first of its kind to be set up outside Japan.

President Nathan will visit Keio University, where he will receive an honorary doctorate, and meet students. Keio University recently launched a joint research programme with the National University of Singapore in interactive media by establishing the Keio-NUS CUTE (Connective Ubiquitous Technology for Embodiments) Centre. The President will also visit the Panasonic Centre on the Tokyo waterfront, a facility which has state-of-the-art eco technology and energy-saving life systems.

These visits suggest that our two countries will increase our cooperation in the fields of student and intellectual exchange and in interactive media and the environment.

On a personal level, I am certain that Mr Nathan's unassuming manner will win more friends for Singapore in Japan.

A state visit is the highest form of diplomatic contact between countries. Not only will the President's visit be another "first" in our bilateral history, it will also usher in a new era in the first-rate partnership between Japan and Singapore.

The writer is Japan's Ambassador to Singapore.