

Reflections on the State Visit by Their Majesties the Emperor and Empress of Japan

Written by

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The Thames and I: A Memoir of Two Years at Oxford, originally written by His Majesty The Emperor in 1993, was re-published last year (2023) in Japanese. In the newly added Afterword, His Majesty wrote, “I hope that in the not-too-distant future I will be able to visit the UK again with Masako, who also studied at the University of Oxford (Japanese edition: p. 217, English edition in 2024: p. 148).”

Indeed, this wish was recently fulfilled when Their Majesties The Emperor and Empress of Japan visited the United Kingdom as guests of honour from 22nd to 28th June, with the official programme taking place from 25th to 27th June. This marked the third State Visit in the history of Anglo-Japanese relations, following those by Their Majesties Emperor Showa and Empress Kojun in 1971 and Their Majesties The Emperor Emeritus and Empress Emerita in 1998, adding another historic visit to the long line of exchanges between Japan and the UK up to the present day.

The unbreakable friendship and trust between Japan and the UK

Despite many hurdles, the State Visit by Their Majesties The Emperor and Empress still came to fruition, reflecting the unbreakable friendship and trust between our two countries. The first invitation for a State Visit came from Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in 2019, soon after His Majesty The Emperor's enthronement. At the time I was not yet in my current position as Ambassador of Japan to the United Kingdom and was working as a senior official in the Cabinet Secretariat in Tokyo. I remember having numerous discussions with officials about heightening cooperation in the economic and security fields to further deepen the Japan-UK relationship prior to the visit. However, due to the subsequent Covid-19 pandemic, the visit was postponed and the schedule revised.

When I was appointed Ambassador of Japan to the United Kingdom in December 2020, the country was still in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the start of the following year, the UK was among the first to begin rolling out vaccinations, but I was strongly aware it would be a great challenge for a State Visit to take place under such circumstances. That same year, the UK chaired the G7 summit face-to-face in Cornwall

and the international community showed signs of recovery from the pandemic. A window of opportunity for a State Visit seemed to be opening up again. However, in September of the following year Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II passed away, and Their Majesties The Emperor and Empress thus visited the UK for a different purpose: to attend Her Majesty's State Funeral.

His Majesty King Charles III duly succeeded to the throne, with his Coronation in 2023 attended by Their Imperial Highnesses Crown Prince and Princess Akishino. Just before the Coronation, the new edition of His Majesty's *The Thames and I: A Memoir of Two Years at Oxford* was re-published with the sentence which I quoted. Subsequently, in February of this year, His Majesty The King announced that he was suffering from cancer. However, as a result of careful coordination between Japan and the UK and in light of His Majesty's smooth recovery, on 27th April (JST) the Imperial Household and the Royal Household announced that they would proceed with preparations in order to realise Their Majesties' visit to the UK in late June this year.

Preparations for the visit were indeed proceeding swiftly between both countries and, just as it seemed the State Visit would finally come to fruition, on 22nd May (BST) Prime Minister Sunak suddenly announced a general election would be held on 4th July. The UK side required an initial period of consideration about whether to proceed but, taking into account the purpose of exchanges between the Imperial and Royal Families, it decided that Their Majesties' State Visit would continue as scheduled. I myself continued to remind British Government senior officials and key figures that, from Japan's point of view, a general election did not detract from the significance of the State Visit. Thus, although Japan and the UK faced many difficulties in the process of organising the visit, I am convinced that it came about on the strength of the unbreakable ties of friendship and trust between our two countries.

Dramatic developments in the Anglo-Japanese partnership

The partnership between Japan and the UK, forged on a foundation of friendship and trust, developed dramatically over the years preceding the State Visit. The signing and implementation of the *Japan-UK Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement* (EPA) and the *Japan-UK Reciprocal Access Agreement* (RAA), the negotiation and practical conclusion of the UK's accession to the *Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement on Trans-Pacific Partnership* (CPTPP), the announcement of a port call to Japan by the UK Carrier Strike Group in 2025, and the launch of the *Global Combat Air*

Programme (GCAP) by Japan, the UK and Italy are all major developments that have taken place since 2020.

If we reflect on the modern history of our partnership, it is notable that such collaboration has not always been evident: under the Cameron Administration from 2010 to 2016, there was much discussion of a "golden age" between the UK and China, and differences between our countries' positions on several diplomatic issues became apparent at times. However, changes within the UK due to Brexit triggered the development of the Japan-UK partnership we enjoy today, and the two countries have since worked together increasingly closely on important diplomatic issues as true, international strategic partners who share fundamental values and strategic interests at multiple levels. *The Hiroshima Accord*, issued by Prime Minister Kishida and Prime Minister Sunak in May 2023, is the most conspicuous recent achievement, which epitomises this dramatic development in the Anglo-Japanese partnership.

The State Visit and the Japan-UK Partnership

Their Majesties' State Visit was also an opportunity to demonstrate to the international community that the depth of the Japan-UK partnership extends beyond simple diplomatic goodwill. During this visit, I was touched by the depth of friendship and trust that exists between His Majesty The Emperor and His Majesty King Charles III. Looking back, His Majesty the Emperor studied at Oxford University for just over two years from 1983 to 1985, and since then he has visited the UK a total of four times, including his visit for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II's State Funeral the year before last. Meanwhile, His Majesty King Charles III has visited Japan five times, beginning with his trip to the 1970 World Exposition in Osaka and culminating in his attendance at the Enthronement Ceremony of His Majesty The Emperor in 2019. On each occasion they have built on their very broad and deep friendship. Meanwhile, the relationship between Her Majesty The Empress and Her Majesty Queen Camilla is similarly cordial. On various occasions during the State Visit, I saw the four of them talking very animatedly as well as bidding each other an affectionate farewell at the end, and as a witness I couldn't help but feel as if they were akin to a true family.

Further reflecting upon Their Majesties' visit, I would like to share a few of the most memorable episodes. Firstly, there was the carriage procession from the Horse Guards Parade to Buckingham Palace on 25th June as part of the ceremonial welcome. The Mall leading to Buckingham Palace was bedecked with Japanese and British flags, and many people of both nationalities as well as tourists from elsewhere waved Japanese flags in

warm welcome. It was extremely moving watching the Union Jacks and the Japanese flags, symbolising the sun, fluttering in the breeze along the Mall as Their Majesties made their way towards Buckingham palace, cheered on by Japanese, British and other people from around the world. I saw Their Majesties' faces from a distance as they arrived at the Palace, and they looked very relaxed and pleased with their visit. I also subsequently had the opportunity to ride in the fourth carriage following Their Majesties The King and The Emperor, Their Majesties The Queen and The Empress, and His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, and was touched at the ever-growing scale of the Anglo-Japanese partnership.

The second episode was His Majesty The King's speech at the dinner hosted by Their Majesties The King and Queen at Buckingham Palace on the same day. His Majesty referred three times to the partnership between the UK and Japan and declared that it was deep-rooted, centered on a close friendship, and would continue to grow in the future. In reply, His Majesty The Emperor noted that the Anglo-Japanese relationship was developing faster than ever on the foundation of multi-layered, robust collaboration and exchange. The tone of Their Majesties' speeches was remarkably consistent, even though there had been no prior coordination, making this visit a symbolic opportunity to demonstrate that the two countries shared a vision of partnership that went beyond simple diplomatic goodwill.

Another episode of note was the conferment of an honorary degree on Her Majesty The Empress on 28th June at the University of Oxford. During the ceremony, Her Majesty, together with His Majesty The Emperor, appeared in a red gown, just like when His Majesty had received his honorary degree in 1991. There is a Japanese custom known as '*kanreki*,' in which we wear a red vest upon reaching the age of 60, and I felt that this seemed symbolic of the Empress having become 60 last December. **Kanreki is viewed as rebirth in that, having gone through the Chinese zodiac cycle a total of five times, one is now back at the original zodiac sign.*

Finally, although most of the preparations had been finalised, my wife and I were concerned about the weather for the State Visit. It was about three hours before the government plane arrived at London Stansted Airport that we were blessed with beautiful clear blue skies. In the end, there was not a single day of rain during Their Majesties' stay and, although the temperature varied slightly, I like to think that the weather was very lovely and typical of late June in England and thus very supportive of Their Majesties' visit.

Looking onwards after the State Visit

The amazing friendship forged between Japan and the United Kingdom was not built overnight. It is the result of a deep trust that has steadily accumulated over a long period of time. During the State Visit, in addition to the programmes at Buckingham Palace etc., numerous locations were visited: Japan House London, the Thames Barrier, the Francis Crick Institute (which houses the world's most advanced science and technology), the Royal College of Music, the young V&A, the Royal Botanic Gardens of Kew, as well as the magnificent Guildhall in the City of London and the illustrious academic hub of Oxford. Also, His Majesty The Emperor attended a Reception with the Japanese Community & Friends of Japan organised by The Japan Society in the UK, Nippon Club, the Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry in the UK, Japan Association in the UK, and The Japanese Women's Association in Great Britain. Each of these programmes provided an opportunity to witness this Anglo-Japanese partnership maturing in a wide variety of fields, and the sites selected were those where notable cooperation and collaboration between Japan and the UK is under way in areas such as disaster prevention, cutting-edge science and technology, business and investment, the arts, cultural activities that inspire children, biodiversity initiatives, and academic and educational exchange.

Most recently, the general election on 4th July resulted in the formation of the first Labour government in 14 years, headed by Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer. Japan will continue to develop the ever-growing Anglo-Japanese partnership with this new government, founded upon the unwavering friendship and trust our two countries have built up over the years.