

Opening Remarks by Mr. Masafumi SHUKURI
for the Japan-U.S. International Exchange Symposium

Good afternoon, everyone.

I am Masafumi SHUKURI, Chairman of Japan Transport and Tourism Research Institute or JTTRI and Japan International Transport and Tourism Institute, USA, or JITTI USA.

First, I would like to express my utmost appreciation to all of you who are attending this symposium in person and to everyone who is joining us online, as well.

Second, I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to

His Excellency Mr. Shigeo YAMADA,
Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Japan
to the United States of America,

for joining us today despite his tight schedule playing a crucial role in Japan-U.S. relations.

Next, I would like to express my special thanks to the keynote speakers:

✓ His Excellency Mr. Kenichiro SASAE,
President of the Japan Institute of International Affairs; and
former Ambassador of Japan to the United States; and

✓ Mr. Kurt Tong,
Managing Partner at the Asia Group; and
former Deputy Chief of Mission and Chargé d’Affaires
of the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo.

Next, Panel Discussion 1 involves four experts from various establishments and entities which have long devoted themselves in the promotion and development of people-to-people exchanges between Japan and the United States:

Ms. Ricki Garrett,
President and CEO of Sister Cities International;

Mr. Frank Jannuzi,
President and CEO of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation;

Ms. Kazuyo KATO,
Executive Director of the Japan Center for International Exchange, USA;
and

Ms. Jessyca Livingston,
Executive Director of the US JET Program Alumni Association.

Next, Panel Discussion 2 involves agencies and organizations which endorse and drive international exchange between the two countries from the public sector;

Mr. Peter Dodge,
Director of Public Affairs at Brand USA;

Mr. Shigeki MURATA,
Commissioner of the Japan Tourism Agency
at the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism;

Mr. Masatsugu ODAIRA,
Minister of Public Affairs at the Embassy of Japan in the USA; and

Ms. Jennifer Aguinaga,

National Travel and Tourism Office, U.S. Department of Commerce.

I am most grateful to all the panelists from the public and private sectors for joining us here from Japan and the United States.

The panel discussions will be moderated by Ms. Aiko DODEN, a famous Japanese journalist who is popular nationwide, and currently working as a Distinguished Senior Fellow at the Reischauer Center for East Asian Studies at Johns Hopkins University. Thank you very much.

In March 2023, JITTI USA held the Japan-U.S. International Exchange and Tourism Symposium here in Washington D.C. We invited experts from Japan and the U.S., who were well-versed in Japan-U.S. relations and international exchange, including tourism. We then tried to rebuild and strengthen exchange and tourism between the two countries in a multi-layered way, recognizing once again the significance of the Japan-U.S. relationship, in a post-pandemic era.

Next came the U.S.-Japan Tourism Year from January 2024 to March 2025. It is noted that, during the Japan-U.S. Summit Meeting by Prime Minister TAKAICHI and President Trump last month, the two leaders affirmed their intention to jointly celebrate 250 years of American independence next year and to further develop the friendship and people-to-people exchanges between Japan and the United States.

55 years ago, the Expo 1970 was held in Osaka. The greatest hit song in Japan then was the Expo's theme song "Ko-n-ni-chi-wa!", meaning "Hello!", whose short lyrics includes "Ko-n-ni-chi-wa!" up to 35 times.

I remember that most of the local Japanese people in those days did not directly come face-to-face with foreigners in their everyday life. This theme song simply and truly tells us such a fact. And now in 2025 when the Expo was held again in Osaka and the Kansai region, the inbound tourists went literally from coast to coast across Japan, not limited to the Expo site. The number of foreigners visiting Japan was only 850,000 in 1970. Now it has risen up to the level of 40,000,000 -- almost 50 times up. Regardless of sectors or class, the opportunities for the ordinary Japanese to experience foreign history and culture have increased steadily and dramatically, beyond the language barrier, or even beyond the deep divide of war or conflict. People naturally take international exchange for granted. The theme song for the Expo 2025, by the way, included the magical word “Ko-ni-chi-wa!” only eight (8) times.

As you may all know, the United States will host large-scale events one after another from now, including many games of the FIFA World Cup 2026 and the Los Angeles Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2028. Such mega events will undoubtedly expand the people-to-people exchanges not only from Japan but from all over the world to the U.S.

Meanwhile, war, conflict and terrorism can always be seen somewhere on earth, and geopolitical tensions have never been higher. We live dreadfully close to any number of crises which may threaten our peaceful physical and emotional exchanges or even risk severing them eventually. It is in such a situation, I believe, that the expanded multi-layered people-to-people exchanges become more and more important as a critical element to creating a stable international society through fostering mutual understanding and trust, even beyond the development of the Japan-U.S. relationship.

I would be grateful if the panelists from the private and public sectors here with us today could earnestly discuss, based on their own

background and insight, the significance, issues and outlook of the multi-layered international exchange between Japan and the United States, as well as current and future policies of tourism and culture, which entirely endorse the international exchange.

In closing, I sincerely hope that this symposium will contribute to further promoting Japan-U.S. international exchange in the future, and serve as a cornerstone for realizing the vision of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” through cooperation with like-minded countries, based on shared values and principles.

Thank you very much.