

More opportunities for Singapore, Japan to collaborate: Vivian Balakrishnan

In the next 50 years, Singapore's Foreign Affairs Minister wants to promote collaboration between the two countries on the challenges of an ageing population and low birth rates.

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TOKYO: Singapore and Japan have developed strong ties over the years and there are opportunities for greater collaboration between the two countries in the future, said the Republic's Foreign Affairs Minister Vivian Balakrishnan on Tuesday (Apr 26).

Dr Balakrishnan said this in his keynote speech at the 11th Japan-Singapore Symposium. He is on a four-day introductory visit to Japan, as the two countries celebrate the establishment of 50 years of diplomatic ties.

Dr Balakrishnan opened his speech by extending his condolences to the people of Kumamoto, hurt by the recent double earthquakes and aftershocks that still continue. He said he is familiar with Kumamoto Castle, which has been badly damaged.

"I always remember the sight of the Tohoku victims queuing up, not taking more relief goods than they need, making sure they look after one another," said Dr Balakrishnan. "I am sure this spirit prevails. On our part, as friends of Japan, we have made an offer to help in any way possible."

In the aftermath of the mega earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster that hit Japan in 2011, Singapore offered S\$35.7 million to the country to help it recover.

Dr Balakrishnan said it was the largest disaster relief donation Singapore has extended to a single country, an example of the close people-to-people ties between the two countries.

He shared how Singapore's founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew had approached Japan for its investment, leading to the industrialisation of Singapore.

Dr Balakrishnan said that today, the two countries share an excellent relationship of trust and mutual respect.

"In fact, we hope Japan's relations with other nations will be as strong as Japan and Singapore. If this can be achieved through the exercise of patience, Asia as a whole will be more peaceful," said the minister.

In an interview with Channel NewsAsia, Japan's State Minister for Foreign Affairs Seiji Kihara echoed Dr Balakrishnan's sentiments, saying: "We share a secure sea lane, so in that sense it is very important we cooperate in maritime issues. We care about our people. Through such a symposium, it's important to deepen intellectual exchange and people-to-people movements."

The symposium was launched in 1995 by then Prime Ministers Tomiichi Murayama and Goh Chok Tong and held biannually. Both sides agreed that going forward, it would be an annual event.

Dr Balakrishnan said he is keen to work with Japan to promote further technical assistance to other countries. Both sides have already helped in training government officials in the areas of trade promotion, climate change, intellectual property rights and disaster management.

In the next 50 years, he wants to promote collaboration on the challenges of the ageing population and low birth rates.

He said: "I've been watching Japan's robotics development. People have been laughing about Japan's robotic pets. Actually there's a more serious message behind it. The day will come when we will need robots with appropriate human characteristics to feed us, dress us, clean us and for companionship."

Dr Balakrishnan later met his Japanese counterpart Fumio Kishida, as well as the leader of Japan's biggest opposition party, Katsuya Okada of the Democratic Party.