

## An Interview With The Ambassador

- Thank you very much for taking the time out of your busy schedule today. To start with, could you tell us a bit about your career so far?

I have been serving as the Ambassador of the Kingdom of Belgium to Japan since 2023. Previously, I worked for 3 years in Brussels as Chief of Staff to the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Prior to that position, I served as the Belgian Ambassador to Mexico. Earlier in my career, I worked as a junior diplomat at Belgium's Permanent Mission to the United Nations in New York. I have also been posted to Iran, Morocco and India over the course of my diplomatic career.

- You have certainly gained diplomatic experience in many different regions. Is this your first time living in Japan?

I have actually had connections with Japan for quite some time. In 2015, I visited Japan on the occasion of the official visit of the Prime Minister of Belgium and accompanied him to a meeting with former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. I was then Diplomatic advisor to our Prime Minister. However, that was actually my second visit to Japan. My very first visit was during my posting in India, when I had the opportunity to spend about two weeks in Japan on a private trip.

- I see! You are now in your third year in Japan. Could you tell us what you especially like about living in Japan, as well as what you find challenging?

If I am asked what I like most in Japan, I would say Tokyo. I enjoy living in cities, and I find this city extremely attractive. Although Tokyo is a huge metropolis, it has a very calm and quiet atmosphere. It is also a highly modern city, yet there are many parks and green spaces, giving a strong sense of harmony with nature. Compared with New York, Tokyo feels more orderly, less noisy, and overall a very comfortable city to live in.

The biggest challenge is definitely the Japanese language. Japanese is very different from French, Dutch and English, and I find it to be an extremely complex language. I have been trying hard to learn it, but I feel frustrated that I still, and will never, speak it fluently.

- Japanese really is completely different from European languages. Beyond those cultural differences, how do you view the 160th anniversary of diplomatic and commercial relations between Japan and Belgium? Could you also tell us about some of the commemorative events that have been held or are planned in the future?

To celebrate the 160th anniversary of relations between our two countries, we are organizing many events throughout the year, not only in Tokyo but across Japan. One example is an exhibition at the Kokugakuin University Museum, which will run for about one month starting on 23 May. The exhibition features collections from the Royal Museums of Art and History of Belgium, but also from the archives of the Royal Palace, and from our Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Among the items on display are a spectacular vase and a writing box presented by Emperor Meiji to the King of Belgium in the early 20th century, as well as the original 1866 Treaty of Amity, Commerce and Navigation signed between Japan and Belgium. These are historically very valuable materials.

As for upcoming events, contemporary dance performances are scheduled from June in Saitama, Nagoya, and Kyoto. In October, the Belgian National Orchestra will also go on tour in Oita, Kurashiki, Nagoya, Tsu, and Tokyo.

In addition, in July, the Belgian Villa located by Lake Chuzenji in Nikko will be opened to the public. The anniversary celebrations will conclude with the Belgian Beer Weekend festival in Shinjuku begin of December.

We also hope to encourage more Japanese students to study in Belgium. Starting with Hokkaido University, we plan to hold lectures and exchange events at Waseda University, Kanazawa University, Kobe University, Osaka University, universities in Sendai, and several universities in Tokyo.

For European students, studying abroad — whether for one semester or for a longer period — is considered very valuable when looking for a job later in life. It shows the ability to adapt to different environments and to keep an open mind. With this in mind, we hope more Japanese students will become interested in studying abroad as well. Although the weak yen presents some challenges, I still believe it is very meaningful to expand opportunities for international learning.

Finally, and certainly most importantly, Their Majesties the Emperor and Empress of Japan are scheduled to make a State Visit to Belgium in June. I believe this will be an extremely symbolic and important moment in the relations between our two countries.

- By the way, what inspired you to become a diplomat?

I do enjoy living in Belgium, but I have always been attracted by living abroad. This profession gives me the opportunity to change country every four years and live and work in different environments, constantly discovering new cultures and experiences, still working for my country.

In that sense, being a diplomat is truly an ideal job for me — I would even say it is the perfect job.

- It sounds as though you were born to become an ambassador! Changing the subject a little, one of your previous postings was in Mexico. Did you ever visit the famous Big Blue Hole?

As ambassador, I was responsible for both Mexico and Belize. Although I never visited the famous Big Blue Hole in Belize, I did visit San Pedro, which is a popular destination for honeymooners and tourists.

- Returning to relations between the two countries, after celebrating this 160th anniversary, what kind of future development would you like to see toward the 200th anniversary forty years from now? Could you share your vision and message for the future?

Both Belgium and Japan are excellent trading nations and investors. Since around 1960, approximately 300 Japanese companies have established operations in Belgium, and our economic relationship has steadily developed.

Looking ahead, I believe it is important not only for companies, but also for research institutions and universities, to cooperate more closely. Ideally, Japan and Belgium should work together to create new value jointly.

Taking economic security into consideration, we must continue developing cutting-edge technologies and build a strong industrial foundation together so that we can compete with other major powers and maintain our economic security and prosperity.

A good example is the cooperation between Belgium's semiconductor research institute IMEC and Japan's industrial and technological strengths, which has already created significant synergy.

I also believe there are many opportunities for further cooperation in areas such as offshore wind power, seabed-related technologies, hydrogen or life sciences, where both countries can create new innovations together.

- That sounds wonderful. I truly hope we can achieve such a future together. By the way, it is sometimes said that there are differences in the speed of policymaking and decision-making between European countries and Japan. What is your personal impression of this?

Europeans and Japanese are not taking decisions the same way. The process is very different. But at the end of the day, I sometimes feel that the total amount of time required to reach a

decision and to implement that decision may not actually be so different. It is a question of process.

- I see. Then, regarding business practices and negotiation styles, what kinds of cultural or practical differences do you think exist between Japan and European countries?

In Japan, there is a tendency to avoid confrontation and to move forward carefully while building consensus step by step. In contrast, European countries generally prefer more direct and clear communication.

However, there are also many shared mentalities at the core, and many shared values. If both sides can make the most of each other's strengths, I believe we will see even more major "blockbuster" projects, as well as innovative startups and scale-up companies emerging in the future. As we move toward the 200th anniversary of our relations, it will be important for us to build together an environment suited to a new era.

- It really sounds like a new style of partnership. I think that is wonderful. Finally, when you have faced difficulties in your life or career, what kind of mindset or attitude has helped you overcome them?

Nothing very special, really. However, whenever I face difficulties, I try not to focus only on the immediate problem, but instead to look at things from a broader perspective. Even when a situation seems negative at the time, looking back later, it often turns out that it became an opportunity that led to something positive in the end.

By viewing situations from a long-term perspective, I find it easier to face temporary difficulties calmly and to see more clearly the path forward.

- I see — so in the end, it all comes down to perspective. Your broad outlook and ability to see the bigger picture are truly inspiring and very helpful to learn from. Thank you very much for sharing your valuable thoughts with us today.

Finally, I would like to sincerely wish you continued success during the remainder of your term in Japan. I hope that, with your flexible mindset and warm personality, you will continue to thrive in your important role.