



Motoatsu Sakurai

**EDITORS' NOTE** Motoatsu Sakurai assumed his current post as President of Japan Society in April of 2009. Sakurai served as Ambassador and Consul General of Japan in New York from March 2006 through March 2009, after a successful 40-year career in the private sector, and was the first business executive to serve as Ambassador and Consul General. After graduating from Tokyo University Faculty of Law in 1968, Sakurai entered Mitsubishi Corporation (MC). During the course of his early work at MC, he received an M.B.A. from INSEAD, Fontainebleau, France in May 1976. In 1978, Sakurai served as a loan officer with the World Bank and as an investment officer at the International Finance Corporation in Washington D.C. In the mid- to late-1980s, Sakurai served in several senior managerial capacities for Mitsubishi International Corporation (MIC) in New York and Washington, D.C. In 1995, after returning to Tokyo, he was named General Manager of Corporate Planning and in 1998, General Manager for Regional Strategy and Coordination. By 2000, he rose to Executive Vice President. In April, 2003, he was named President and CEO of MIC and also named President, Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry in New York.

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** Founded in 1907, Japan Society ([japansociety.org](http://japansociety.org)) is an American nonprofit, nonpolitical organization that cultivates a constructive, resonant, and dynamic relationship between the people of the U.S. and Japan. At the Society, more than 100 events held each year feature sophisticated, topically relevant presentations of Japanese art and culture and open, critical dialogue on issues of vital importance to the U.S., Japan, and East Asia.

#### How has Japan Society evolved over the years?

The Society's initial activities were to introduce Japanese culture to the U.S., as well as to create a forum for Japanese leaders to engage with their American counterparts abroad. This continued even as politics began to sour U.S.-Japan relations in the 1920s and '30s. The Society ceased activities during World War II, but resumed almost immediately following the war under the stewardship of John D. Rockefeller 3rd, who served as President from 1952 to 1978.

# Promoting Understanding

## An Interview with Motoatsu Sakurai, President, Japan Society

Rockefeller showed us that the history of the U.S.-Japan relationship is a framework for how countries can connect, survive conflict, and become stronger allies. Today, the Society serves a critical need for cultural understanding and exchange. We present the broadest, most in-depth, and multidimensional perspectives on issues of vital importance to the U.S.-Japan relationship in a global context.

Most of our activities take place at our landmark building in Midtown Manhattan, which was built in 1971 on land donated by Rockefeller.

We have dedicated the entire second floor of our building to gallery spaces, where we present two major world-class exhibitions each year.

Our Performing Arts Program presents over 30 performances and four productions in the U.S. once or twice a year.

We have a long-standing Corporate Program consisting of talks and panels dissecting hot button issues in politics, security, economy, and business in the U.S. and Japan, as well as in East Asia. Many international businesspeople come not only to broaden their knowledge of Japan and global business but also to network.

Lectures and demonstrations include many food-related events. Japanese architecture and product design are also popular, as well as manga (comic books) and anime-related events for the younger generation.

Our Film Program screens dozens of films each year from retrospectives of internationally revered directors, to rare independent and art-house films, to a 10-day summer festival presenting the newest and best contemporary Japanese cinema.

The Education Program covers a wide range of educational projects, including the About Japan teachers' online resource and the newly formed Tomodachi Japan Society Junior Fellows Student Exchange Program. We produce several family events that celebrate Japan's lively annual holidays and festivals.

Our Language Center is considered the best school to learn Japanese in the U.S. It offers 400 to 500 students each semester 13 levels of Japanese. We offer complimentary sample lessons on our popular YouTube page.

Finally, we have our U.S.-Japan Innovators Network. This multidisciplinary network connects people around the world to find solutions to global issues, such as large scale natural disasters, global warming, and sustainability. The program was created 10 years ago in anticipation of our 100th Anniversary and came into play in an unexpected way after Japan's March 11, 2011 earthquake and

tsunami. The day following that tragic event, we created the Japan Earthquake Relief Fund. Thanks to the American people's generosity, we received more than \$1 million by the end of March. Our challenge was in how to deploy the funds in the most effective and efficient way to reach the neediest victims. Through the Innovators Network, we knew many reliable NGOs and other public and private institutions, several of which were already on the ground working on relief efforts. To this day, \$13.63 million from people all around the world has been earmarked for 43 organizations in support of 64 projects. We've ensured that 100 percent of those funds go to help the people in northeastern Japan rebuild their lives.

#### Have U.S.-Japan relations progressed as you hoped they would?

Up to mid-1980, Japan's export surge to the U.S. was questionable to Americans partly because, in my view, Japanese were not well-known to American people. Since then, the Japanese became more efficient with product creation in America, as well as invested and created jobs here. Many Japanese made America their home and enjoyed the experience. Concurrently, as the Japanese economy expanded, many Americans moved to Japan to take advantage of what was then the second largest market in the world. They came to realize that Japan is a beautiful and culturally rich country, and though the Japanese people tend to work too hard, they are a kind and gracious people.

This process of building better mutual understanding took several decades but ultimately created a much more trusting relationship. Through the various programs Japan Society has presented in New York, we have felt increasingly more interest in Japan among young Americans. As important as maintaining the connections built in recent decades, we are identifying and serving the next generation of businesspeople, leaders, entrepreneurs, artists, performers, teachers, etc.

#### Is there still strong growth opportunities for foreign companies in Japan?

Sweeping changes in Japan's monetary policy, from tight control of liquidity to liberal supply of money and from deflationary policy to more expansive economic policy, has seen deflation give way to inflationary tendencies, and corporate profit is improving. This has triggered changes in the mindset and spending patterns of Japanese consumers. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is also implementing an economic growth strategy, which includes a "Special Economic Zone" intended to promote foreign investment in Japan. ●