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1

Senator McCain Speaks with Japanese Students on Looking to the Future

Senator John McCain (R-AZ) to participants in the 65th Japan-America Student Conference

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SENATOR MCCAIN: Thank you very much, and thank you for not mentioning that I ran for president and lost. I appreciate that very much. I often say that after I lost running for president, I slept like a baby – sleep two hours, wake up and cry, sleep two hours, wake up and cry.

I want to thank the Tokyo American Center for hosting this special event. And I want to thank all of you - young leaders from the Japan American

Student Conference - for being here.

It is a pleasure to be back in Japan. It's my first stop on a week-long trip to Northeast Asia. I have just come from excellent meetings with the Prime Minister and his team. But before I depart tomorrow, I just wanted to speak with you - the future leaders of our two countries and the future stewards of our historic alliance - which is an alliance not only between our governments, but also between our peoples.

Looking out on this young audience is a painful reminder that I have been in the Senate longer than most of you have been alive. But one of the few benefits of old age is the perspective it can provide.

I have been a close friend of Japan and intimately involved with our alliance for nearly my entire life. My father and grandfather were both Navy admirals who served in the Pacific for many years. I myself spent time here in Japan as a young Navy officer, when our alliance was itself young and untested. I have made frequent visits here as a member of Congress. And there is even a ship named after my father and grandfather that is home-ported in Yokosuka.

Over these many decades, I have seen the vital features of our alliance that have never changed, and never will.

The U.S.-Japan alliance continues to be indispensable to the security and economic success of both our nations, to the maintenance of a favorable balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region, and to the unprecedented peace and spectacular growth that has made possible.

The United States has always remained - and must always remain - fully committed to the security of Japan. That means, in the case of the Senkaku islands, that the U.S. will oppose any unilateral actions to change the status quo by force. This is a matter of principle that the U.S. Congress addressed very clearly in last year's defense legislation.

What also endures about our alliance are a shared set of values that binds our two countries together. These are the values of freedom and democracy, innovation and economic openness - as well as our support for these values in the region and the world. This is the deeper source of our friendship, and it is why we are always there for each other, especially when times are most trying - just as Japan was there for America after the attacks of September 11th, and just as America was there for Japan after the tragedy of March 11th.

There is something else that our two countries have in common, and that is how it has been fashionable at times to count us out. Certainly for the last few years, there have been many people, including some here in this country, who fell into the habit of writing off Japan and doubting its capacity for renewal.

So let me speak directly to the Japanese people, especially the young Japanese here today: Your friends in America not only refuse to count you out. We are absolutely counting on you.

We are counting on you to realize the full promise of what the Prime Minister calls the "three arrows" of his economic agenda, to increase the competitiveness and openness of Japan's economy, and to work with us to make the Trans-Pacific Partnership into a source of economic dynamism and renewal for both of our countries, as well as for our friends across this region.

We are counting on you to achieve your own goals of modernizing Japan's Self-Defense Forces and national security institutions - to expand our defense cooperation - and to work with us to ensure a sustainable and effective U.S. force posture in Japan and the region.

We are counting on you to continue strengthening Japan's relationships with other Pacific powers that share our mutual strategic interests, especially those that also share our democratic values, such as the Republic of Korea.

And we are counting on you to make the tough political choices and compromises to achieve all of these goals, and more.

In short, we are counting on Japan to look forward and to move forward - because a strong, confident, future-oriented, and economically revitalizing Japan, with growing comprehensive national power, is fundamentally good in itself for the United States and for the future of this region. Your friends in America are confident that Japan's future can continue to be a rising path, and we trust that this is the right path for a mature democracy such as Japan.

While Japan's friends in America are counting on you, we realize that some of our friends in Japan and the region are questioning whether they can still count on America. And I understand why.

America these days has its share of challenges - from an unsustainable fiscal situation and weak economic growth, to the negative impact that sequestration is having on our military, to political gridlock that makes all of our hard problems even harder to solve. Indeed, a recent poll found that only 11 percent of Americans have a favorable opinion of

Congress, and I still haven't met anyone in that 11 percent. We are down to paid staff and blood relatives. That same poll found that Americans like Congress even less than head lice and a colonoscopy. If you're too young to know what this means, trust me, it's bad.

I don't want to downplay America's challenges, but here too, old age offers some perspective. America has faced far more profound problems in my lifetime than anything we confront today, and we not only made it through these earlier challenges; we came out stronger and better off. We have consistently arisen to new and brighter mornings in America. In short, no one has ever made money betting against the United States, and I don't think now is a good time to start.

I am an optimist about America's future, just as I am about Japan's. I am confident in America because our economy remains the most dynamic driver of global growth, and its capacity for reinvention and innovation is virtually limitless.

I am confident in America because new technologies are unlocking vast sources of energy in our country, and in just a matter of years, the United States will become a net exporter of oil and gas.

I am confident in America because our institutions of higher education are the envy of the world, because our society continues to reward risk-taking and an entrepreneurial spirit, and because we continue to attract the best and the brightest talent from across the globe and integrate it into our diverse society.

I am confident in America because the U.S. military remains the most effective and combat-proven force in the world.

And though we Americans will always have plenty of spirited debates, I am confident in America because our political system still has the capacity to do big important things that are vital to America's future, such as the Senate's overwhelming passage in June of comprehensive immigration reform. Similarly, on perhaps the most important priority for U.S. foreign policy - the re-balance of our efforts toward the Asia-Pacific region - there is broad consensus and support. Our political debates are not about whether to place greater emphasis on the Asia-Pacific region, but rather how best to do so.

For all of these reasons and more, I believe Japan and the rest of the region can have confidence in America and our ability to sustain our historic role as a Pacific power long into the future. You have good reason to count on us, just as we have good reason to count on you.

It is true that democracies such as ours have a tendency to be self-critical and to dwell on our own challenges and weaknesses. But this should not cause either of us to lose sight of our many opportunities and strengths. Nor should it cause us to forget that most countries in the world, including many here in Asia, face far more daunting problems that they would happily trade for the challenges we face in Japan and the United States. Furthermore, it is precisely because Japan and the United States are mature democracies that we are best positioned for success. It is democracy that gives us the flexibility and responsiveness to embrace a future of reform, renewal, and revitalization.

All that remains is for us to choose this future. And that's where young leaders like you come in. You are the future of our countries. You are the future of our alliance. And you will inherit the supreme honor of leading two of the greatest democracies on earth and one of the greatest alliances in history. But with that honor comes an awesome responsibility - the responsibility to ensure that the best days for Japan and the United States, and for our alliance, will remain in front of us, not behind us.

That is my charge to you: Look forward. Take us forward. Have confidence in yourselves and in your countries. Have confidence in our alliance. Have confidence in our future. Always know that there is nothing Japan and the United States cannot do when we work together. And always, always remember that nothing is more fulfilling in life than serving a just cause that is greater than your own self-interest.

Thank you very much.