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Leaders & Readers  
Special

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 25, 2020

# Japan helps small islands take oversize global roles

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Island countries, with their small populations, finite resources and reliance on trade, are the first to suffer the effects of climate change and global economic shifts.

The coronavirus pandemic has further highlighted the unique challenges facing island countries, said former Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida in an interview with The Japan Times on Nov. 4. He observed that the pandemic has deepened divisions between countries, resulting in increasingly stringent immigration regulations and other protectionist policies.

“Because of their limited populations and lack of resources, island countries can’t adopt such nationalist attitudes,” Kishida said. “This is why island countries need to collaborate diplomatically and take on leadership roles to address environmental issues and other global challenges.”

John Fritz, the ambassador to Japan of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) — whose four states of Yap, Chuuk, Pohnpei and Kosrae comprise thousands of islands in the western Pacific — joined Kishida to discuss the importance of diplomatic relations between the two countries, as well as their experiences working together and the challenges they foresee in the 21st century.

The relationship between Japan and Micronesia traces back to more than 100 years ago, when the Empire of Japan colonized most of Micronesia. During this period, many Japanese settled in Micronesia, marrying Micronesians and raising families. It is estimated that 104,000 people, which are 20 percent of the country’s population, have Japanese ancestry — Fritz included.

An important aspect of strengthening relations between Japan and FSM is reconnecting this segment of Micronesia’s population with their Japanese ancestry, Fritz said.

“Reconnecting these Micronesians with their Japanese ancestry is very difficult,” he said. “The younger generations are either uninterested or unaware. However, spreading awareness of this connection will be very important in enhancing relations between the people of Japan and Micronesia.”

Despite the colonial history between the two countries, the people of Micronesia look at Japan favorably, Fritz said, citing Japan’s influence on Micronesian economic and educational policy.

“While it’s true that Japan occupied Micronesia,” he said, “my country has imple-



Former Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida (left) with John Fritz, ambassador to Japan of the Federated States of Micronesia HIROMICHI MATONO

mented proactive policies in education and other areas to benefit the people of the islands. This approach emphasizing the importance of development is something we learned from the Japanese. Despite the history of war, the people of Micronesia have a very friendly stance towards Japan.”

Diplomatic relations between the two countries are anchored in a strong trade relationship centered on the fishing industry, and their governments have worked together diplomatically in various capacities. After World War II, the two governments worked together to recover the remains of Japanese soldiers who died abroad during the war, and representatives from both governments have frequently collaborated at international conferences.

Fritz has been ambassador to Japan since 2008. His twelve-year assignment is excep-

tionally long for an ambassador, a position that usually entails a change of post every three to four years. The length of his assignment was initially eight years but was extended for four years at the urging of former President Peter Christian.

It is no mystery why the FSM president insisted Fritz stay in Japan. Having first come to the country in 1980 as a student at Tokai University, Fritz has witnessed Japan undergo dramatic changes over the past 40 years. He is intimately familiar with the country and its culture.

“When I first came to Japan, the yen stood at around 300 against the dollar,” he recalled. “I’ve witnessed the country undergo various economic developments since then, and there was one point when I was here that the yen fell all the way to 79 against the dollar. Needless to say, I’ve become quite accus-

tomed to life here.”

Fritz has cultivated strong relationships with other ambassadors in Japan. Many years ago he formed a group with around 20 ambassadors who speak Japanese in order to facilitate direct communication with Japanese government officials. During the Abe administration, they met with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe once every three months to discuss the initiatives of each of their


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guntû – a little hotel floating on the Seto Inland Sea.



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