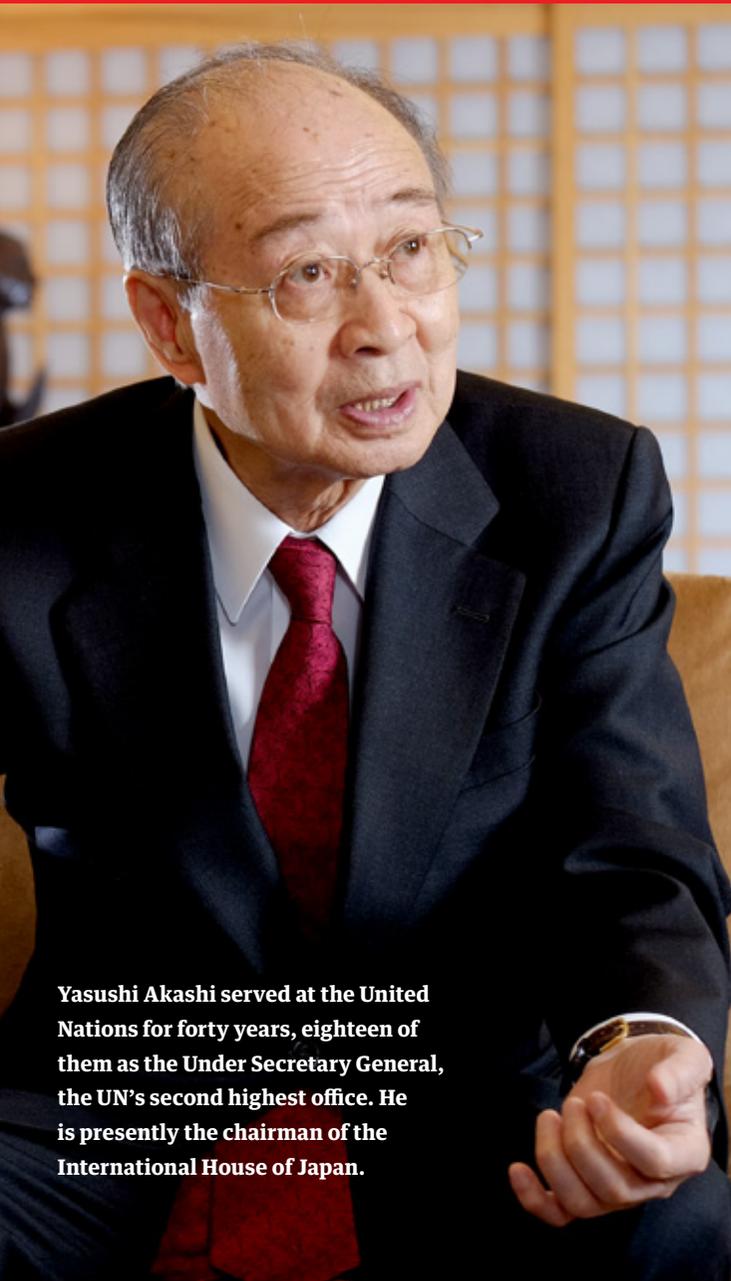


# Sixty Years of Commitment: Japan and the UN



**Yasushi Akashi served at the United Nations for forty years, eighteen of them as the Under Secretary General, the UN's second highest office. He is presently the chairman of the International House of Japan.**

**A**N interview with Yasushi Akashi, former Under Secretary General of the United Nations

**You were in the public gallery sixty years ago when Japan acceded to the United Nations.**

Yes, I witnessed the very memorable scene of Japan's admission to the United Nations. It was on December 18 in 1956. I was a foreign student in the United States at the time. I was deeply impressed by Mr. Shigemitsu's speech [Shigemitsu Mamoru, the then-foreign minister of Japan]. He expressed great happiness about Japan returning to the international community after twenty-three years of absence since withdrawing from the League of Nations in 1933 and emphasized Japan's resolve to fulfill its responsibilities.

**How important for Japan was this moment?**

Initially Japan perhaps glorified the role of the UN in the international community, though this was inevitable because Japan was admitted only after several years of great efforts [following WWII]. There was a period of Japan endeavoring to balance its ideals of the UN and the realities, but Japan from the outset was very active and soon became a non-permanent member of the Security Council. Japan has now been elected as a non-permanent member eleven times, more than any other UN member state. Japan has been a very hardworking member of the UN and has tried to make a positive impact, not only in the Security Council but also in the General Assembly and other bodies.

Photo: Tadashi Aizawa

In the 1990s Japan was No. 1 for nine of the ten years in the amount of ODA it gave, so I think Japan's efforts have been recognized by a large number of states. Japan has tried to reconcile its different interests and strong alliance with the United States and other developed countries with its aspirations as a non-nuclear power.

**Tell us about your experience with peacekeeping operations in Cambodia [1992-1993].**

The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union ended in or around 1989 and we entered the post-Cold War period in which Japan and many other countries wanted the United Nations to be central for peace and development. One of the first challenges was peacekeeping in Cambodia. It was my honor to be the head of that gigantic, very complex multi-dimensional UN effort in peacekeeping in a part of the world in which Japan finds itself, East Asia. Japan incurred sacrifices of human life, but stayed with the UN operation in Cambodia. Gradually Japan got used to serving UN efforts not only in Asia but also in Africa, the Middle East and the Caribbean. The 1990s saw many inter-religious and *intra*-state conflicts, rather than inter-state conflicts, and the United Nations had to struggle in a new, totally unanticipated world community. UN peacekeeping faced many new challenges in Somalia, Rwanda and in Yugoslavia, where I was sent after Cambodia. We had to revise our method of work so that the UN would have more military instruments, for instance. This confronts countries like Japan with unanticipated new situations. Japan is still adjusting to these situations as you can see from the recent intensive debates in the Japanese Diet. I think in time these problems will be resolved so that Japan can still be a very active, important part of UN efforts in peacekeeping as well as in development and many other areas such as human rights and the environment.

**Has Japan's reputation within the United Nations changed over the last sixty years?**

Japan finds itself somewhere in the middle between the major powers and smaller UN member states. Japan tries to be at the center as an honest broker, as a provider of aid and assistance to developing countries, and as a seasoned player of international politics. Japan wants to be a harmonizer and a reconciler in the world. In the area of preventive diplomacy, before conflict arises, what Japan can do as an honest broker should be recognized, and after the conflict is over also, Japan's efforts as a peace builder should be on display, as Japan's chairmanship of the UN peace-building commission has shown. But when a conflict is in progress, Japan is hesitant to play a larger role for reasons of divided public opinion and ongoing debate regarding constitutionality.

**What is your opinion on Japan becoming a permanent member of the Security Council?**

We have to continue our patient efforts to find a consensus or large majority – a two-thirds majority – in the UN. It is only after a great deal of extraordinary efforts that Japan has been elected to non-permanent membership in the Security Council. It would be much better if Japan could be in the Security Council at all times, but to achieve that will continue to be difficult because for the Security Council to be effective it has to be fairly compact. I am optimistic about the future for Japan as a member of the UN, but at the same time it will require a great deal of effort on the part of Japan and the Japanese people to make more contributions for a stronger, more relevant United Nations. This means manpower, financial resources, ideas and initiatives. But for such contributions to be fruitful they have to be made without seeking the limelight. Much of our effort has to be anonymous. ■

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Inverview by OSAMU SAWAJI

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