**Interview with Ambassador Yasushi Sato**

**January 20, 2025**

**1. Could you start by telling me about yourself and your international experiences?**

**Ambassador Sato**: Regarding my career, I joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1984 and, after training in Tokyo, I worked in the Latin America 2nd Division. It was my first year, so I just helped everyone. Then, from 1985 to 1987, I went to Zaragoza, Spain for a language training course in Spanish, which was offered by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Then, from 1987 to 1990, I worked at the embassy in Uruguay, where I did a lot of different things. I worked in cultural affairs, political affairs, and I also worked as an interpreter for the ambassador. I returned to Japan in 1990 and was first in charge of Bolivia and Peru in the Latin America 1st division. Then from 1993 to 1995, I worked in the Loan Aid division in the department that handled international yen loans. At that time, I was in charge of Asian countries such as Myanmar and Malaysia, which was unusual for me.

After that, I worked at the embassy in Chile for three years from 1995 to 1998, ​​where I was in charge of the Political Affairs division. From 1998 to 2001, I was the director of the Information and Cultural Center at the embassy in Mexico. In 2001, I returned to Japan and was in charge of Peru in the Latin America division. Then, from 2003 to 2005, I was in charge of Latin America in the Grant Aid division of the Economic Cooperation Bureau. Then, from 2005 to 2009, I was the head of the political affairs division at the Embassy of Japan in Peru. From 2009 to around February 2013, I was the Deputy Consul General at the Consulate General in Miami.

In 2013, I returned to Japan and worked in the Minister’s Secretariat for about four years, the first two years in the Inspection division, and the last two years in the Overseas Establishments division. From 2017 to 2020, I returned to the International Cooperation Bureau, which focuses basically on economic cooperation, and I worked in the department that cooperates with Japanese NGOs, which was called the Private Aid Coordination division at the time, but is now called the NGO Cooperation division. From 2020, I served as Consul General in Barcelona for three years and seven months, and then last year, in February 2024, I returned to Japan and was appointed Ambassador to Venezuela in the same month. And that’s where I am at now.

**Hofmeyr**: Before starting your job, did you go abroad as an international student during your university days?

**Ambassador Sato:** No, I didn’t. I thought about going on a short-term study abroad program, but I’m a bit shy, and to be honest, I was a bit scared of going abroad by myself, so I couldn’t go.

**2. In broad terms, how much time have you spent working in Japan and abroad?**

**Ambassador Sato:** When I counted, I realized that I have been with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for approximately 40 years, 17 of which I spent in Japan and 23 of which I spent overseas.

**3. Throughout your career, you have worked both in Japan and abroad. Could you tell me about any similarities or differences you noticed in team dynamics?**

**Ambassador Sato:** This is a difficult question, and I’m not sure if this is an answer, but a common point overseas and in Japan is human relationships, both vertical and horizontal. Good vertical and horizontal human relationships are very important. The basis for motivating a team is to have a relationship of trust, whether in Japan or overseas, and when I say overseas, I mean the countries I have worked in, but I think that the basis for properly motivating a team is the same. I think this is a point in common. I think this is probably the same not only in the countries I have worked in, but wherever you go. And when we talk about international relations, there are relations between countries and between organizations, but ultimately, I think it is people who support them.

As for the differences, as I mentioned earlier, I have worked in many Spanish-speaking countries, so if I may speak only within that scope, I think that Spain and Latin America are heavily influenced by European culture, especially Spain, due to historical reasons. I think this has been said countless times, and it’s something that is often said, but I think Japanese people value harmony and are good at working as a whole group. On the other hand, in the countries where I’ve worked, each individual has more independence than in Japan. As a whole, that is, each individual has a strong sense of independence, so in order to make it function as a whole, as a team, I think the role of a leader to oversee is very important. In these countries, it is natural that oneself, one’s life, and one’s family are more important than work.

I’m not sure how it is in Japan as of now, but we generally refer to work as “public” and private life as “personal”. For some reason, we separate work and personal life, and I think there is still a nuance that sometimes what is “public” is a little more important. In the countries I’ve worked in, there are people who think like that, but there are also people who think completely differently, so I think it’s safe to say that it’s completely different from the general trend in Japan. Nowadays, work-life balance is a topic that is often talked about in Japan, but even so, I think that Japanese people still tend to say that “it can’t be helped because it’s work,” and I feel that this attitude remains to some extent. I think these are some similarities and differences.

**4. What strategies have you used for effective communication in international teams?**

**Ambassador Sato:** I don’t think we can necessarily call it a strategy, and I don’t think what I did could be called a strategy, but what I was conscious of, and made an effort to do, was to put what I wanted to say into words. In Japan, we have expressions like “telepathy” [*ishindenshin*] or “reading the room” [*kuuki wo yomu*] to express that you can understand meaning from the atmosphere, but this doesn’t work at all in foreign countries. I felt that I had to clearly express my opinions, what I thought, or what I wanted the other person to do, so I made an effort to put it into words. In larger regions that are more heavily influenced by Western civilization, the dignity of the individual is valued more than in Japan. This is a given. For example, if someone makes a mistake, you don’t suddenly get angry at them. Also, you don’t tell them to apologize right away, and you don’t expect an apology. Rather than making them apologize, I try to prioritize thinking about what they can do to avoid making the same mistake again in the future. I don’t think I would call it a strategy, but that’s the mindset I’ve had when dealing with people.

**5. Can you think of any examples of very successful communication experiences in an international or intercultural environment?**

**Ambassador Sato:** I will give this as an example, and it may have just happened to be that way, but I think it's important to listen to everything the other party has to say. And then, how you handle it, is also your response. I have come to think that it is important to start not from a negative stance, but from a positive stance.

I won’t mention the name of the country, but I will give you an example. We decided to hold a conference on cultural cooperation with the government of a certain country. When we held discussions regarding the agenda, the other party put forward a proposal, and when we looked at the proposal, it contained quite a few points that we thought were unacceptable. Even so, the other party took a very long time to explain their proposal carefully, and we carefully listened to everything they had to say. After listening to everything, that is, to the entire proposal prepared by the other party, I expressed my gratitude for their careful and thorough explanation. In addition, I explained that there were a few points that we could accept, and I very much appreciated that. Based on that, we presented our proposal in the form of only a few revisions. In fact, our proposal contained many points that needed to be amended, and their proposal contained many points that needed to be amended. But the other party, once they realized that their proposal had been accepted, showed a tolerant attitude towards our revised proposal. From that point onwards, we decided to create a proposal for the agenda based on our respective opinions. In this kind of atmosphere, by the time the discussions ended, both sides were satisfied, and the proposal from the Japanese side was largely accepted.

I think that in tough negotiations where the interests of both sides are truly at stake, it would be difficult to imagine that this approach would work. But at least in this negotiation, both parties listened carefully to what the other side had to say, and I felt that the negotiations went well by simply listening to and accepting what was said. So, rather than being an example of a negotiation technique, I believe this is an example of successful communication.

**6. Have you faced any challenges working with and leading diverse national and international teams?**

**Ambassador Sato:** The previous example was of a good situation, but this one of a difficult situation, correct? I think it is largely similar to what I have said so far, but as Japanese people, we still expect telepathy from foreigners. Also, as I said earlier, I think there is still a tendency among Japanese people to expect the other person to apologize immediately when they make a mistake. I think there are many Japanese people who are not like this, but I think this tendency still remains.

On the other hand, I think it is normal for foreigners to not understand unless you put it into words. Then, there are foreigners who cannot accept immediate apologies at all, and I think this is natural, but when a misunderstanding occurs between a Japanese person and a foreigner at work, and both parties become emotional, it becomes difficult to resolve. So, when you mediate, it’s a difficult situation, and you wonder what to do. It’s not that it always goes well, but the first thing to do is to listen carefully to what each side has to say.

Also, you need to phrase things in a way that each person can understand. When speaking to Japanese people, you need to phrase things in a way that is easy for Japanese people to understand. When speaking to foreigners, you need to phrase things in a different way, so that the foreigner will understand. And then we have to settle the matter. There have been a few cases like this – although I haven’t given any specific examples – and I have felt that it is indeed difficult.

**7. Have you faced any challenges returning to Japan after spending significant time abroad?**

**Ambassador Sato:** First, although this is a bit of a joke, when you get used to foreign currency and go back to Japan, it becomes very difficult to give change in Japanese currency – 100 yen, 500 yen, 10 yen, 5 yen, 1 yen. When you go back to Japan, it becomes very difficult to get coins out from a wallet.

From a cultural point of view, I’m Japanese, so I guess the answer is that I don’t have many problems when I come back to Japan. But for example, when you buy something in Japan, you often have to line up, and there are lines marking the queues, and it’s carefully written, “Please line up like this.” And if you’re even a little bit off by 30 centimetres, you’re told not to step out of line, and at times like that, I do feel that Japan is a little cramped.

Also, when I take public transportation such as trains, the announcements at the station and on the train are very polite, but there is too much information. There are times when I don’t understand anything when I listen to it because there is so much information that I don’t need being given at the same time, so I can’t process it, and I end up not understanding. Sometimes I wonder if it is okay for me to take that train. When you go abroad, there are signs such as “Don't go in” or “What kind of people should come in here?” For example, in the case of toilets, I think most of them say “male” or “female” these days, but they are very simple signs, easy to understand. They often have very simple signs like that, with the minimum amount of information to explain that this is the kind of place that it is. But in Japan, they are very polite and provide a lot of information. When you come back, you get used to it right away, but it can be a bit surprising for the first few days after you come back.

**8. What kind of competencies do you think are necessary for students who are considering living and working across cultures in the future?**

**Ambassador Sato:** I think that by experiencing living in a place where Japanese common sense is not shared, you develop flexibility in your thinking. Of course, it depends on the person, but by spending time with people who have completely different ways of thinking, such as the order of thought, and the order of priorities, you get used to it. I think that through that process, the number of things you can accept expands significantly. In short, I think it’s all about the flexibility that I just mentioned. The world is changing much faster now than it did when I was a student. And it is said that we live in an age where it’s hard to predict what’s going to happen, so I think that flexible thinking and being able to accept change more readily, or how should I put it, having a broader range, is important.

**9. Can you think of any strategies that you have acquired through your experiences that can help prepare students in Japan for future diplomatic careers?**

**Ambassador Sato:** I have been working at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for a long time, and I have only just realized this now, so I would like to encourage students to do what I probably would not have been able to do when I was younger, but I hope students will listen to what I have to say. First of all, I think students should be proud of being Japanese. Japan is a beautiful country with four beautiful seasons, safe and rich in culture, and each region has its own culture. I feel really lucky to have been born and raised in such a wonderful country. Moreover, I feel glad to be alive in this present era. As I said before, the truth is that I was only able to think this way after living abroad and looking at Japan from the outside. If I can think like that, then I think it is easier for me to do my job as a diplomat, to look at Japan from the outside, and to promote Japan to the outside world. It’s a bit of a vague way of expressing it, but that is how I feel.

When I went to Spain in 1985, 40 years ago, when I was young, I couldn’t speak Spanish at all, but the people I met in Spain asked me a lot of questions about Japan. To be honest, although they asked me a lot of questions, I couldn’t answer them. Of course, I couldn’t speak the language, and it was very frustrating. But I realized that I didn’t know much about Japan. So, I recommend that students do something to get to know Japan better, anything is fine. Of course, it’s good to travel around Japan, see various places, or cook. It’s also good to make the best miso soup you can. Or students could become more familiar with anime and manga, which are very popular all over the world, or study Japanese history again, or martial arts like karate, judo, kendo, or something like that. I think it would be good to have something like your own Japan in yourself. If I had been able to do this when I went to Spain, I think that even if people from Spain asked me all sorts of questions, I would have been able to talk more about my own experiences in Japan. So, I would like to recommend this to everyone. I would like to recommend that people get to know more about Japan.

**10. Is there anything I didn’t ask you about that you would like to mention?**

**Ambassador Sato**: I think I was a really average student. As I said earlier, when you asked me, “Did you study abroad?”, I answered “No, I didn’t.” Even though I liked English, and even though I wanted to improve my English, I was scared and afraid to go abroad alone. I somehow ended up joining the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and going to various foreign countries, but I think that going to foreign countries was a great learning experience for me, and I think that I gained a lot from it. I know it may sound strange to say this about myself, but I think that I would not have gained this flexibility if I had stayed in Japan.

There may be things that I could not have gained if I had stayed in Japan. I think there is a lot I would not have gained if I had stayed in Japan and not gone abroad. In Spain, I made friends who have never forgotten me over the decades, and there are people who think completely differently from Japan. Also, the world is different from Japan where everything is convenient. There are many countries like that in the world, and when you live in such a country, how should I put it? For example, when you work in Japan, in Tokyo, once you get used to the convenience of Tokyo, there are many inconveniences in foreign countries, no matter where you go. Given the inconvenience, it was also inconvenient for us. But we get used to it. When you get used to it, you start to think that there are things in Japan that you don’t really need, and you start to think that maybe this or that is better abroad, that it would be better to simplify things like this. As I’ve mentioned a little bit before, there are times when you can see things this way.

In my case, I believe that it enriched my life, so I would definitely recommend that all students also go abroad. When I was a student, going abroad felt like a very high hurdle, but now the world is much closer, so I don’t think that going abroad is so hard. I definitely recommend that first of all, even if it’s just for a short while, you just go and see the world.