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“Cooperation between the Czech Republic and Japan in the Asia-Pacific Region”

The richly diverse Asia-Pacific region has garnered the interest of countries around the world in recent years as the region seeing the most dynamic development. At the same time, though, it is also a region confronted with a variety of problems: Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Korean Peninsula, and the Taiwan Strait pose security issues and Myanmar and North Korea human rights issues. China and India have drawn the attention of the international community for their sustained economic development.

The Czech Republic has been among those endeavoring to strengthen its ties with the remarkably growing Asia-Pacific region, and it has undertaken to help resolve some of the problems facing this region. On the security front, for instance, the Czech Republic has focused on the challenges posed by Afghanistan and North Korea. We have dispatched troops and medical staff to Afghanistan to support national reconstruction, and we have taken advantage of our relations with North Korea dating back to the days of socialism to provide that country with a window to the outside world through personal exchange, education, and technical instruction. Our assistance programs for Afghanistan, Vietnam and Mongolia are good examples of our developmental aid efforts. Support for Mongolia has been accorded particular importance, and we are contributing substantially to Mongolia's development through both financing and human resources development. Let me also mention our human rights efforts in Myanmar. The Czech Republic is maintaining close contact with the leaders of the democratization movement even as it supports the democratization of Myanmar through other means, such as funding for independent media and humanitarian aid for refugees. In addressing such issues, collaboration with Japan and South Korea, major countries in the region, is essential, and the Czech Republic would like to strengthen its ties with Japan in future.

Our relations with Japan have become markedly closer in the economic, political and even cultural realms. The Czech Republic has been the recipient of significant direct investment from Japan and has become an important partner for Japan in Central Europe. Japan's unique culture, history and peace policies have attracted the interest of a broad swath of the Czech public. Japan has taken particular note of the potential of the Czech Republic and the other countries of the Central European Visegrád Group (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) and, prompted by the Japanese prime minister's August 2003 visit to the Czech Republic and Poland, has deepened cooperation in a number of areas: politics, economics, culture and tourism.

Establishing platforms for dialogue between countries is vital for regional stability. Such platforms are useful for overcoming historical frictions and disputes. Europe has a number of regional cooperation organizations, and I would like to briefly discuss one in which the Czech Republic is participating: the four-member Visegrád Group (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia).

The Visegrád Group is celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2011, and in July of this year the Czech Republic assumed the Group's rotating presidency. The Visegrád Group was founded to curb the disruptions arising from systemic transition and improve the status of Group countries within Europe, to eliminate historical frictions between the member states, and to jointly undertaken negotiations on EU and NATO membership for the four countries. Although Group activities did stagnate for a time in the latter half of the 1990s, the four members all attained EU and NATO membership and the Group has effectively functioned as a regional cooperation framework within the EU. In recent years the Group has collaborated with the EU on an assortment of issues ranging from military cooperation to academic exchange, and the scope of Group activities has grown increasingly wide. The dynamism of Group efforts has boosted the status of the four members within the EU and helped strengthen the EU itself. The Group is also firming up its ties with the Benelux and Baltic countries and with other regional cooperation frameworks. The experiences of this Visegrád Group should provide hints on integration and democratization for other regions around the world, above all the western Balkan countries neighboring the Czech Republic and the countries belonging to the EU's Eastern Partnership (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus).

In June 2011, the Visegrád Group launched the Visegrád 4 Eastern Partnership Program to

work closely with the EU's Eastern Partnership in supporting democratization and political/economic reform in the Partnership countries. Seeking to contribute to deeper integration in Eastern Europe and to enhance the stability and prosperity of the European continent as a whole, this approach is one of the Czech Republic's highest-priority foreign policy endeavors. The Czech Republic is actively engaged in promoting administrative reform in the Partnership countries (especially in Moldavia and Georgia) and in cultivating and educating their civil societies. The Visegrád Group framework serves as an effective means of implementing these EU policies.

Japan lies outside the EU zone but, as one of the "friends group," is enthusiastically involved with the Eastern Partnership, principally in financial and technological matters. Japan's participation has contributed greatly to expanding the areas enjoying freedom and prosperity in the eastern part of Europe. The Visegrád Group welcomes Japan as a key cooperation partner, and we hope in future to uncover new areas of cooperation within the Eastern Partnership and to implement specific projects as soon as possible.