

Humanitarian Solidarity as a Bridge for Polish-Japanese Relations

by Mami Shimamoto

Beginning

On April 15, 2026, Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi held a summit meeting in Tokyo with Prime Minister Donald Tusk of Poland, followed by the signing of a social security agreement, a joint press conference, and a working lunch. These engagements highlighted not only the strengthening of bilateral ties but also the growing depth of cooperation between the two countries. During the meeting, Prime Minister Takaichi noted Poland's steady economic growth and the presence of around 400 Japanese companies contributing to job creation. She welcomed the social security agreement as a step toward further facilitating economic exchange. Both leaders also agreed to deepen cooperation in areas such as infrastructure development and advanced technologies, including artificial intelligence. Prime Minister Takaichi expressed her hope that the upcoming 70th anniversary of the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between Japan and Poland would provide an important opportunity to promote cultural exchange and reaffirm bilateral ties. The two leaders also discussed regional issues. Prime Minister Takaichi emphasized Poland's role in supporting Ukraine and reaffirmed the importance of achieving a just and lasting peace, while opposing any unilateral changes to the status quo by force. They further exchanged views on the Indo-Pacific, including China and North Korea, as well as the Middle East, and confirmed their commitment to a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP). Despite these recent developments, the foundations of Japan-Poland relations extend far deeper. Since the launch of the Strategic Partnership in 2015, cooperation has steadily expanded across various fields. Both leaders agreed to elevate the relationship to a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," marking a new stage of closer cooperation. As relations continue to deepen, an important question emerges: what has enabled such strong cooperation between two geographically distant countries? This article addresses this question by tracing the history of Japan-Poland relations, beginning with the rescue of the Siberian orphans and highlighting how humanitarian solidarity has connected the two nations.

The Siberian Orphans Rescue

"I would like to express that the Polish nation holds the deepest respect, the deepest gratitude, and the warmest friendship and affection toward Japan. We will never forget Japan's kindness." These were the words of Józef Jakubkiewicz, Vice Chairman of the Polish Rescue Committee. Approximately 116 years ago, on July 22, 1920, the first group of 56 Polish children arrived at the

port of Tsuruga in Fukui Prefecture aboard a Japanese military transport ship from Siberia. This marked the beginning of a profound and enduring relationship between Poland and Japan.

In the aftermath of World War I, a total of 765 Polish orphans who had been exiled to Siberia were brought to Japan, where they received care and assistance from the Japanese government and the Japanese Red Cross Society. Poland, having lost its independence at the end of the 18th century following its partition by Russia, Prussia, and Austria in 1795, had long struggled for sovereignty. Many Polish political prisoners had been deported to Siberia by the Russian authorities, and by the time of the Russian Revolution in 1917, tens of thousands of Poles were living there under extremely harsh conditions, suffering from hunger and disease. Although Poland regained independence in 1919, many of its people remained stranded in Siberia, unable to return home and facing increasingly dire circumstances. In response, the Polish Rescue Committee was established in September 1919. While it appealed to Western countries for assistance—particularly to save the children—these requests were repeatedly rejected. As a last resort, the committee turned to Japan. The Japanese government responded swiftly. With the cooperation of Japanese troops stationed in Siberia and the Japanese Red Cross, a rescue operation was organized within just 17 days. Between 1920 and 1922, multiple missions brought hundreds of children to Japan, where they were given medical care, shelter, and education before eventually being repatriated to Poland. This humanitarian effort did not end there. In 1929, the Far Eastern Youth Association was established by former Siberian orphans, led by Jerzy Strzałkowski, to maintain ties with Japan. The organization grew significantly, reaching over 600 members at its peak and establishing branches in several cities. It also published a newspaper titled *Echo of the Far East* and actively promoted Japanese culture through events and language classes, often with the support of the Japanese Embassy in Poland. The legacy of this rescue continues to resonate today. For instance, a special education institution near Warsaw, named after Jerzy Strzałkowski—a former Siberian orphan—became one of the first facilities to accept refugees from Ukraine following Russia’s invasion. The school took in around 120 women and children. Its principal remarked, “It was now our turn to show the humanitarian spirit that Japan once showed to us.”

The Kobe Earthquake

Some 75 years after the rescue of the Siberian orphans, the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake struck Japan in 1995. In July of that year, 30 Japanese children affected by the disaster were invited to Poland, despite the great distance between the two countries. The following year, another group of 30 children was invited. All travel and accommodation expenses were covered by Polish individuals, companies, and local governments. During their three-week stay, the children were warmly welcomed across the country and given an opportunity to recover from the trauma of the disaster. This initiative was widely seen as a gesture of gratitude—a return of kindness for Japan’s rescue of Polish orphans 75 years earlier.

The Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011

This was not the only way in which Poland expressed its support for Japan. In March 2011, the Great East Japan Earthquake struck Japan. In its aftermath, 30 junior high and high school students from the affected prefectures of Iwate and Miyagi were invited to Poland from July 24 to August 10. The program was organized by the Polish Traditional Karate Association with support from the Polish government. During their stay, the students were hosted at the Dojo Stara Wieś, where they participated in sports activities, recreational programs, cultural workshops, and Polish language

classes, while also interacting with local children. They also took part in excursions by foot, bicycle, and kayak, and visited cities such as Kraków, Wieliczka, Niepołomice, and Warsaw.

In addition to these exchanges, Japan has also been actively engaged in humanitarian efforts in Poland. The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), for instance, has implemented extracurricular programs aimed at improving basic education for Ukrainian refugee children residing in Poland, in cooperation with the Polish NGO Polish Women Can Do Everything Foundation. Furthermore, in collaboration with the Polish Japanese Academy of Information Technology (PJAIT), programs have been launched to support refugees in acquiring IT skills and accessing employment opportunities. These initiatives demonstrate how the historical legacy of humanitarian assistance between Japan and Poland continues to shape present-day cooperation. What began as acts of compassion has evolved into joint efforts to support those in need, including Ukrainian refugees today.

Conclusion

These examples clearly demonstrate that the relationship between Japan and Poland has been shaped not only by political or economic interests, but also by a long history of humanitarian support. More importantly, this relationship has not been one-sided but rather built through mutual acts of assistance and solidarity. From the rescue of the Siberian orphans to contemporary efforts in supporting victims of disasters and conflicts, humanitarian cooperation has served as a foundation of trust between the two countries. This unique relationship continues to the present day, suggesting that the strength of Japan-Poland ties lie not merely in strategic interests, but in a deeply rooted sense of shared human experience. This, in many ways, represents an ideal form of international diplomacy, one that is grounded in compassion and stands as the foundation of the strong partnership between Japan and Poland.

※All figures and events referenced in this article are based on information from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, the Embassy of Japan in Poland, the Japanese Red Cross Society, and official sources of the Polish government.

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