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## Speech of Verhofstadt - dinner - Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan

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Mr. Prime Minister, Madame, Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, It is for us a great pleasure and a privilege to welcome you here in Brussels, Mr. Prime Minister, together with your charming wife, on the occasion of your first official visit to Europe. We highly appreciate the fact that you have chosen Europe and indeed Belgium as the first destinations outside Asia in your new capacity. This gesture symbolizes the growing partnership between the European Union and Japan, the enhanced cooperation with NATO and the very friendly relationship between our two countries. Mr. Prime Minister, Bilateral relations between Japan and Belgium are excellent at all levels, starting at the highest level. The very close ties between the Japanese imperial family and the Belgian royal family are well known and cherished by both sides. Also at governmental level we are enjoying strong relations, as illustrated by the significant increase in the number of Ministerial contacts over the last few years. May I recall, in this respect, the productive meeting I had in Tokyo in November 2005 with your predecessor Prime Minister Koizumi, as well as the talks I had with Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr. Taro Aso subsequent to his visit to NATO last year. As Belgium will, for the coming two years, be a member of the UN Security Council, we agreed to even intensify our political dialogue and cooperation on international issues of common concern, such as Africa, North-Korea, the reform of the UN and many other. But perhaps the strongest basis of the good relationship between Belgium and Japan is constituted by the people, the private citizens of our two nations. The intense trade and cultural exchanges between us are indeed the fruit of their initiatives, their activities and their efforts. I am therefore grateful that some of the most prominent actors and promoters of our fine relations – business ceo's, academics, representatives of the cultural sector- have accepted to be present here today. They personify the diversity and dynamism of our relations. Mr. Prime Minister, The Japanese community in Belgium, which numbers more than 6,000 men and women, and which is very actively represented and supported by the "Nihonjinkai" and the Belgium-Japan Business Association, contributes substantially to the economic, social and cultural life in our country. Dear Japanese expatriates, you provide great added value to our country and we are grateful for that! Japan is the second foreign direct investor in Belgium with almost 5 billion Euro. More than 240 Japanese firms have settled here and about 50 of them established their European headquarters in or around Brussels. I tend to believe that these figures convincingly demonstrate that your fellow countrymen feel at home in our country and that they appreciate our business environment. But we can always do better. We are working hard to make bilateral trade and investment easier and even more profitable. I am proud to mention some of the new measures that were recently introduced to that effect. The fiscally very advantageous notional interest deduction, the creation of a fiscal ruling office, the lowering of the withholding taxes for researchers, the reduction of taxes levied on night and shift work in industry, the abolition of withholding taxes on the dividend payouts by Belgian subsidiaries to their parent companies, the exemption (as of April 2007) of work permit for foreign "knowledge workers", and administrative reforms making it possible to set up a company in three days. More specifically with respect to the large Japanese community in Belgium, I am glad to refer to the Agreement on Social Security, which quietly entered into force while we were all celebrating the New Year, on January 1st 2007. As a result, Japanese expats in Belgium do not have to pay any social security contributions in our country for five years. It is my wish and my goal to complement this agreement with a joint effort to modernize the forty years old and thus outdated treaty on the avoidance of double taxation. Also, I am convinced that the re-establishment of a direct air link between our two countries, both for

passenger and for cargo flights, could add another dimension to our economic and human relations. We must continue to work together to that end. Ladies and gentlemen, The current times are also very exciting in the field of our cultural, scientific and human relations. As you know Belgium took part in the wonderful and very successful World Expo in Aichi. Masterpieces from our Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium are currently on display in Nagasaki. Here in Brussels, a museum of Japanese Arts was opened in March 2006. These initiatives no doubt contribute to the better knowledge and appreciation by the Belgian and Japanese public of the splendor and the richness of our respective cultural heritages. And as a matter of fact, our cooperation even stretches to the icy landscapes of Antarctica. Indeed, we are developing Belgo-Japanese scientific cooperation in the context of the Belgian polar research basis, the first "zero emissions" station on Antarctica, that is about to be built in the proximity of an existing permanent Japanese basis. Mr. Prime Minister, I must confess that I am very fond of sushi, as most Belgians are. And as I have heard, many Japanese adore Belgian chocolates. Wouldn't you agree with me that this culinary complicity is a very nice basis for continued sweet relations between our countries? Let us further develop this successful partnership! Let me conclude by wishing you, Mr. Prime Minister and Madame and your distinguished delegation full success during your appreciated visit to our country. May I invite you, Ladies and Gentlemen, to raise our glasses to the Belgian-Japanese friendship. Kampai shimashoo Thank you.