

Japan will support PH nation-building through trade, maritime security – PM Abe

BY ROY JABASA
Japanese Prime Minister (PM) Shinzo Abe promised to be the Philippines' strategic partner in nation-building through the expansion of trade and investment links between

the two countries and by providing sustainable development efforts in infrastructure, public safety and counter-terrorism, and anti-illegal drugs measure.

In an exclusive interview with the Manila Bulletin, Prime ▶ **15**

Japan will support PH... ◀1

Minister Abe said Japan attaches great importance to its relationship with the Philippines and "will strive to continue strengthening cooperation with it in every aspect."

"I am delighted to visit the Philippines - in response to the invitation of President Duterte - for my first over-seas trip in 2017," he said.

In his bid to further expand trade and investment ties between their two countries, Prime Minister Abe is accompanied by a delegation of Japanese businessmen who look forward to exchanging opinions with their counterparts in Manila and Mindanao, and relevant Philippine government agencies.

Maritime security

Prime Minister Abe said Japan will continue to focus on promoting capacity-building in the field of maritime security.

The Japanese leader disclosed that the Japanese government will move forward with the provision of high speed boats to support the Philippines' anti-terrorism measures coming at the heels of patrol vessels recently provided to the Philippine Coast Guard.

Abe said based on the agreement concerning the transfer of defense equipment and technology, Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force's (JMSDF) TC-90 training aircraft will also be transferred to the Philippines. "We will continue to enhance security and defense cooperation with the friendly nation of the Philippines," he emphasized.

Moreover, Abe said the Japanese government shall continue to support sustainable development efforts essential for the Philippines' nation-building.

"In particular, we will expand assistance in the areas prioritized by the Duterte administration such as infrastructure development; public safety and counter-terrorism; and anti-illegal drugs measure," he pointed out.

According to Abe, he will be traveling to Davao, the hometown of President Duterte.

"It is a great pleasure for me to have an opportunity to visit Davao, which has historically close ties with Japan; in particular, it was home to about 20,000 early Japanese immigrants in the Philippines," he noted.

"I hope to expand ties between Japan and the Philippines through a fruitful talk with President Duterte in this visit," he said.

Free and open seas

Prime Minister Abe also wants to take on an active role in ensuring adherence to the rule of law and to maintain "peaceful, stable, free, and open seas" particularly in disputed areas in the South China Sea, by closely working with regional country leaders, including President Rodrigo Duterte who is chairman of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) this year.

"The Philippines and Japan are both island countries and maritime nations. Thus, our countries' safety and prosperity depend exactly on 'peaceful, stable, free, and open seas,'" he emphasized.

"It is for this reason that Japan has consistently been advocating for respecting the rule of law at sea," Abe stressed.

According to the Japanese leader, the conflict over the sovereignty of a large portion of the South China Sea has become a common concern to members of the international community, including Japan; as such matters are directly linked to regional peace and stability.

"The South China Sea holds sea lanes that are crucial not only to the regions around it, but also to the growth of global economy," Abe pointed out.

At the same time, he said Japan is very much appreciative of the efforts being undertaken by the Philippine government to improve its relations with China based on the final award rendered by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in July the previous year as to the disputes of the two countries over the South China Sea.

"It is important to settle maritime disputes peacefully in accordance with international legal instruments, such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), without resorting to threats or use of force," Prime Minister Abe said.

"Importance of rule of law, the peaceful settlement of maritime disputes, and non-militarization were also reaffirmed at ASEAN related meetings held in 2016," he added.

"In order to ensure adherence to the rule of law and to maintain and develop open and stable seas, I would like to closely work with regional country leaders, including President Duterte as chairman of ASEAN for 2017," Prime Minister Abe said.

PH backs Japan

During his visit to Japan last October, President Duterte said the Philip-

pinas backs Japan's territorial rights in the South China Sea.

The Philippine leader said his country would "not abandon Japan in our partnership and security matters, given the common belief that our conflicts and problems with other nations must be resolved peacefully, in accordance with international law."

In their joint statement following their meeting in Tokyo, Duterte and Abe shared the recognition that the security environment in the region is faced with many challenges, and decided to further collaborate to maintain peace, stability, and prosperity in the region.

The two leaders also emphasized the need to ensure maritime safety and security which are vital elements for the peace, stability and continued prosperity of both countries in the region.

Maintaining open and stable seas is essential in the region. The two leaders shared the view that the South China Sea holds sea lanes vital for global economic activity and viability. In this regard, the two leaders stressed the importance of freedom of navigation and over flight, as well as anti-piracy efforts and cooperation.

With regard to the South China Sea Arbitral Award, the two leaders acknowledged the importance of a rules-based approach to the peaceful settlement of maritime disputes without resorting to the threat or use of force, in accordance with the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the UN Charter and other relevant international conventions. They further emphasized the importance of self-restraint and non-militarization, and the 2002 ASEAN-China Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea (DOC).

Abe's brand of diplomacy

Prime Minister Abe's assurances of support that Japan is willing to extend to the Philippines are part of Prime Minister Abe's signature of "subtle, nimble and imaginative diplomacy," said Prof. Richard Heydarian of the De La Salle University in Manila Political Science department.

"Abe is definitely the most proactive global leader in the region-recalibrating Japanese foreign policy like never before since the end of World War II while rapidly reaching out to United States President-elect Donald Trump and President Duterte as the latter diversifies Philippine strategic entanglements by reaching out to China and Russia," Heydarian noted.