

Meditating on the Special Bond of Friendship with the Philippines

By Fumio Kishida, Foreign Minister of Japan

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To all the Filipino people, greetings for the New Year. I am Fumio Kishida, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan. Firstly, I offer my deepest condolences on the tremendous suffering caused by Typhoon Pablo that hit the island of Mindanao in December 2012.

Japan attaches importance to strengthening its relations with the Philippines, a country with which we celebrate a long history of friendly relations and a special bond of friendship. On my first visit abroad as the Minister for Foreign Affairs, I chose the Philippines. I am happy to be back in Manila for the first time in four and a half years since my visit here in July 2008 as the Minister for Science and Technology Policy. This year is a milestone celebrating the 40th Year of ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation. It is my great joy to set foot in the Philippines again on my first visit abroad as Japan's Foreign Minister, attaching importance to enhancing relations with the ASEAN.

Currently, the strategic environment of the Asia Pacific region continues to change significantly. Japan, as a responsible democracy, will play a proactive role in the stability and prosperity of the Asia Pacific region. I believe that it is important to strengthen the Japan-U.S. Alliance and deepen collaboration with neighboring countries which are developing under freedom, democracy and market economy. In particular, together with the Philippines as our strategic partner, it is important to cooperate for a stable and prosperous Asia-Pacific region. Our strategic partnership is in great progress, and I hope to further deepen our cooperation in such areas as the economy, maritime cooperation, peace in Mindanao and response to natural disasters, among others.

Needless to say, cooperation in the economic field is one of the pillars of our strategic partnership. As foreign direct investment in the Philippines has been increasing in recent years and its population is expected to continue to increase in the next several decades, the Philippines is equipped with conditions for economic growth. Japan is the largest trade and investment partner of the Philippines, and our two countries have extremely close economic relations. The economies of our two countries have a mutually complementary relationship as Japan has advanced technology and capital while the Philippines has an excellent labor force and a huge demand for infrastructure. I believe there is great potential in our two countries cooperating to

build infrastructure in Metro Manila, which is urgently needed, benefiting from the vital energy of the private sector.

In addition, the dedicated performance of Filipino nurses and caregivers has been widely appreciated by Japan's hospitals and nursing-care facilities.

Likewise, Japan and the Philippines, with their free market economy and dependence on sea commerce as island nations, share a strategic interest in the secured safety of sea lanes. Both countries jointly tackle regional stability and prosperity. Cooperation in the maritime field may well be considered an important aspect of our strategic partnership. The Philippines is the biggest supplier of seafarers in the world, and about 70 percent of seafarers working in Japanese commercial ships are Filipinos. On Japan's part, the activities of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces against pirates off Somalia contribute to the protection of Filipino seafarers. Moreover, enhanced maritime salvage capabilities in the seas near the Philippines lead to the protection of the lives and assets not only of the Filipino people but also peoples of neighboring countries, including Japan. In this sense, thus, Japan attaches importance to the enhancement of the maritime security capabilities of the Philippines, and does not begrudge it of assistance and cooperation for that purpose.

With the recognition that peace in Mindanao is indispensable for the stability and prosperity of Southeast Asia, Japan has actively supported the peace process.

In 2006, Japan started dispatching development experts to the International Monitoring Team (IMT), and launched the Japan-Bangsamoro Initiatives for Reconstruction and Development (J-BIRD). Japan also joined the International Contact Group (ICG) in 2009. In retrospect, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and then Foreign Minister Taro Aso, currently Deputy Prime Minister, respectively announced the dispatch of experts to the IMT and the launch of J-BIRD in Manila.

In August 2011, President Aquino and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) Chairman Al Haj Murad Ebrahim held a historic summit meeting, the first of its kind, in Narita, Japan. I heartily welcome the signing of the Framework Agreement in October 2012, and pay my respects to all the parties concerned. Japan would like to continue to lend its full support to achieving peace in Mindanao.

In the wake of the Great East Japan Earthquake in March 2011, the Republic of the Philippines not only supplied emergency relief goods and dispatched a medical assistance team but also President Benigno S. Aquino III himself kindly visited one of the disaster areas, Ishinomaki City of Miyagi Prefecture. Further, the Filipino caregiver candidates working at a nursing home in Shirakawa City, Fukushima Prefecture, insisted that they could not desert the elderly and stayed in the disaster area to

continue their dedicated care. Your kindness will forever be in the Japanese people's memories.

Our two countries share the challenge of addressing numerous natural disasters. I cannot help recalling Makoto Migita Street in Ormoc City, Leyte Island. I believe many of you recall the catastrophic incident caused by the heavy floods in 1991 that struck Ormoc City, where more than 8,000 lives were lost or unaccounted for. As a result of flood countermeasures funded by Japan's grant aid, not one life was lost in the equally torrential rain of 2003. I was profoundly touched when I heard that the Ormoc City Council named one of its roads after the Japanese engineer and project manager, Mr. Makoto Migita, who had passed away prior to the project completion, in order to express their appreciation. As a close friend jointly tackling natural disasters, Japan is determined to continue developing our cooperation in disaster prevention with the Republic of the Philippines.

Upon my visit this time, I show my great deference to those who have devoted themselves to developing our mutual relationship, and express my heartfelt gratitude for the warm friendship of the Filipino people. Let us further develop a future-oriented Japan-Philippines relationship together. I, as the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan, am determined to do my utmost to strengthen our relations with the Philippines, a true friend of ours.

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