

Speech
of
His Excellency Benigno S. Aquino III
President of the Philippines
Before the joint session of the National Diet of Japan
[Delivered at the House of Councillors Session Hall, Tokyo, on June 3, 2015]

Honorable members of the Diet:

Allow me to begin by expressing my deepest condolences over the untimely demise of the former Speaker of the House of Representatives, the Honorable Nobutaka Machimura. On behalf of the Filipino people, I offer my profound sympathies to your honors, the National Diet of Japan, and the family of this esteemed and revered Statesman.

Your Honors, as I behold the beauty of Japan on my sixth visit as President of the Philippines, I cannot help but recall a story, which I feel encapsulates what I most admire about your culture.

Perhaps some of you may have heard of the Nurburgring, the famous racetrack in Germany. This is where the best drivers get behind the wheel of the fastest, most modern cars in existence, comparing lap times to see which cars are the best.

I am told of one comparison in particular. The Porsche 911 Turbo, a European-made car, was pitted against the Japanese Nissan GT-R, to find out which is the fastest production car in the market. One could say that you went to the home grounds of your competitor, with all of its built-in advantages for them, with the end goal of proving your excellence. And prove it you did, with various articles saying that your single-mindedness of approach succeeded in besting the lap time of your erstwhile competitor.

This came as a surprise to everyone, except perhaps for the Japanese. After all, you know of the hard work, creativity, and constant pursuit of excellence that define every Japanese product. It is no wonder, then, that for the latter half of the 20th century, companies from all over the world lined up to learn of the “Japanese

method.” Many asked: What sort of processes allowed such quality and efficiency to blossom?

I respectfully submit, your honors, that the Japanese method is first and foremost not static. It is founded on the necessity for adaptation and innovation; it incorporates a thirst for knowledge and a passionate desire to achieve positive change. This constant polishing, this constant refinement, reflects your quest for perfection in everything that you do. This, in turn, has allowed your country to collectively overcome the challenges it has had to face in its history. Your kaizen philosophy of continuous improvement, which your country has been applying in production lines and supply chains, has been applied to the highest echelons of government.

Truth be told, this process has been a hallmark of the Japanese spirit for generations. We only need to look back to the opening of Japan during the 19th century, which ushered in the transformation of your society. Up until that time, Japan was way behind in terms of technology; I would say that you did not only start from zero, but from the negative, given the advancements that everyone else had access to at that point. As Japan pursued a collective national effort towards “Civilization and Enlightenment,” it was able to transform itself: Feudalism was shed, allowing for the formation of this very Diet; a once-cloistered nation began to welcome outside knowledge, and in fact sent its sons far and wide to acquire new insights; railroads, telegraph systems, and banks rose across your nation; backyard furnaces soon turned into state of the art factories, and within a few generations, Japan became among the most advanced nations of that age. Even after that, when new realities came about after the war, you again decided to change the status quo, directing your energies towards rebuilding, and thus becoming an economic powerhouse that has lent and continues to lend its support to so many nations.

Time and again, when confronted with extreme challenges to society, you have adapted; you met and overcame them to rise to even greater heights. The anxiety you have faced in recent years is another such challenge. I point this out, because in my own country, there is a saying: Those who fail to reflect on their roots or where they came from will not be able to achieve their goal. I submit, therefore, that your past is proof enough that you will once again meet current challenges, and in doing so achieve even greater things.

It is in this light that one can look to your culture of transformation and continuous improvement as a response to the unfortunate and complex economic realities that Japan, and in fact the rest of the world, have had to deal with in recent decades. I see the Japanese spirit embodied in Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's leadership, which has ushered structural and philosophical change in the bureaucracy, in the economy, and in society as a whole. I particularly admire Japan's current thrust towards gender equality. This has not only made a significant contribution to our pursuit of a fairer, more inclusive world; it has, I believe, infused new vigor into your workforce. Prime Minister Abe's efforts towards establishing a newfound sense of social mobility and meritocracy, along with his economic philosophy of prudence, initiative, and empowerment, is already bearing fruit, with the Japanese economy pulling out of recession in the last quarter of 2014.

The reforms you are implementing are bound to have even greater impact, given the proven ability of Japanese products to compete. I dream of a time when competition will allow us to fully flourish, rather than become a source of apprehension or something to be feared; a time when even more Japanese companies will establish a long-term presence in my country, as so many have already done. We are already seeing the dawn of an age when Japanese and Filipino business leaders, as well as our people, can innovate together knowing that such innovation brings a distinct advantage to the fair and open market. This can certainly be sustained and even accelerated; after all, in the Philippines, you will find a Filipino workforce that is even more skilled and creative, given our own transformation in recent years.

Your honors, the Philippines welcomes Japan's ongoing revitalization, as a friend that recognizes that Japan's economic fortunes are intimately tied to that of ours. Japan is the only country with whom we share a bilateral free trade agreement. You were our largest trading partner in 2014, with total trade amounting to 19.1 billion US dollars in 2014. The Philippines is now the fastest growing market for Japanese tourism among the ASEAN Member States, while Japan now ranks as my country's third largest market for tourists. In light of the engagement between our economies, I am also encouraged by this honorable Diet according attention to legislation that would more effectively synergize Japan's labor needs with my countrymen's capabilities. Without doubt, our cooperation is mutually beneficial: I have been told,

for example, that 70 percent of Japanese owned and controlled ships are manned by Filipinos; as our talent fuels your shipping industry, so too do our people get exposed to new technologies. The knowledge they bring home and share sustains the cycle of learning that further strengthens our maritime sector.

Your honors, it is a great cause for pride that Japan and the Philippines, through our economic and people-to-people engagement, provide a shining example of what can be achieved when peace and stability reign over our region. It is no wonder, then, that our two countries have become the most vocal defenders of that stability, which has recently come under threat. The prosperity of maritime and coastal East and Southeast Asia, which relies greatly on the free movement of goods and peoples, is at risk of being disrupted by attempts to redraw the geographic limits and entitlements outside those clearly bestowed by the law of nations.

The path that Japan will chart in addressing the common challenges that confront us is entirely for Japan to determine. But as we have come to realize, our domestic concerns are but weaves in the tapestry of an increasingly globalized world, and for this reason my nation is following with utmost interest and great respect this honorable Diet's ongoing deliberations, particularly in view of Japan taking a more proactive stance in fulfilling its responsibilities to the international community for the maintenance of peace.

I see my people's peaceful character reflected in the Japanese: We are both constantly willing to dialogue, bending over backwards to deescalate tensions despite repeatedly getting rebuffed, and still trying to resolve disagreements through peaceful means and internationally recognized norms. Perhaps I may share with you a question that I posed to a country that we both have had difficulties with: If all governments are there to serve the people from whom they derive their power, is it not incumbent upon all to maintain stability, which is a necessary prerequisite for prosperity? How does fomenting tension help us achieve the primary goal of bettering the lives of our people?

Your honors, Japan is one of only two countries with whom we currently have a Strategic Partnership, and we thus view our relationship as being at the forefront of ensuring freedom in our regional commons. Ours is a partnership that can only grow stronger, because it is based not on mere practicality, but on shared values

and mutual respect among equals. For both our nations, we know that harmony is a collective achievement, and not one that can be dictated through coercion. We steadfastly uphold that military might can never be the arbiter for the resolution of disagreements.

For over two generations, Japan's commitment to peace has been beyond question. So has its commitment to lifting up its friends and creating a more equitably progressive world order. The War was devastating for all of us; there was bitterness on all sides for the suffering that occurred. However, from its ashes, the relationship between our peoples was reborn like a phoenix. I look back upon this achievement of the past two generations with awe. For your part, you have gone beyond fulfilling the obligation to heal the wounds of the past, and acted with truly altruistic intentions; you rebuilt not only yourselves, but those of us who would have been left further behind had it not been for your unselfishness. Despite times of uneven governance in my country when you had to deal with less than desirable individuals, you kept on giving. Your contributions to our development have not only been large; they have been consistent throughout the years: Among countries, Japan is the Philippines' biggest source of official development assistance. In times of calamity, we have been there for each other, with support coming in an almost automatic manner when disasters hit. There is no better illustration of this spirit than in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan, when the Japanese vessel Ise approached Leyte Gulf. The battleship Ise once journeyed to our waters to participate in the largest naval battle of the modern era; this time, a ship bearing the same name brought relief, compassion, and solidarity to a people devastated by natural disaster. Whether in Leyte, or in Ishinomaki, which I visited on behalf of my people to extend our own modest expression of solidarity after the great earthquake and tsunami of 2011, one can see how tragedy brings to fore the common humanity that binds us all.

Allow me also to underscore my deep appreciation for Japan's long-standing and critical support for the peace process in our island of Mindanao. In August of 2011, without hesitation and upon short notice, you provided an environment that engendered trust and candor, allowing me to personally hear the concerns of leaders from our Muslim minority. This proved to be a powerful catalyst for the negotiations, and through the various roles you played in the peace process and your assistance to grassroots development, we were able to conclude a

comprehensive agreement in March of 2014. An organic law is now being deliberated upon in our congress; once passed, this would bring forth a fair and genuine autonomy for the Bangsamoro.

For your support in igniting and sustaining Philippine economic growth, bringing us closer to our goal of an equitable and inclusive society; in helping us recover from disaster and increasing our resilience to vulnerabilities; and in promoting peace and stability in our conflict areas, on behalf of my people, let me say now: *Domo arigato gozaimasu*.

Your honors, like the Japanese people, we Filipinos place great value in long-term friendships. Indeed, our relations have been described as “a friendship of two suns.” I am confident that, as we deepen our engagement, our combined light will shine even more brightly upon our peoples and our region.

Allow me to close with a personal recollection. In 1986, I accompanied my mother on her own visit to this very beautiful country. She said back then: “Both of us...look to a future together with hope and expectation. There is a lot we can do together.” I reiterate that optimism today. Truly, there is much to look forward to, as our continued positive engagement provides anchorage for stability, prosperity, and inclusiveness in the region. I look forward to the fruition of a relationship that is now at the threshold of reaching even greater heights.

Please accept my heartfelt wishes for the good health and success of each and every member of the House of Councillors and the House of Representatives.

Thank you, and good afternoon.