

I share the joy of the entire Japanese people as we commemorate today the 62nd birthday of His Majesty the Emperor of Japan. This delightful occasion is even more meaningful because we are able to celebrate it with the people of the Philippines.

To begin with, Typhoon Odette caused catastrophic damage to the Philippines last December. On behalf of the Government of Japan, I would like to once again express my heartfelt sympathy to all of those who have been affected.

In the meantime, the world remains clouded by the unprecedented crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we have observed a decreasing trend in the number of infections here in the Philippines.

In our prolonged fight against COVID-19, Japan has been with the Philippines every step of the way. We will strive to keep strengthening our cooperative relationship. On our path to recovery from the pandemic, we will ensure that “no one will be left behind.”

Yet, regardless of the struggles happening around us, there still lies a great deal of good news. Especially, the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games scored a huge success. Both the Philippine and Japanese public were immensely inspired by Filipino Olympians and Paralympians, especially Ms. Hidilyn Diaz. Her outstanding attainment of the first Olympic gold medal for the Philippines deserves my warmest congratulations once again.

Turning our eyes to the situation in the Indo-Pacific region, the regional security environment is becoming more testing and uncertain at a remarkably faster speed. Given the situation, what is important is close cooperation among like-minded countries bonded by such universal values and principles as freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. In particular, the sustainment of the maritime order in the South China Sea is directly connected to protecting our global commons.

I believe this can only be achieved not through force or coercion, but through actions based on the principles of the rule of law. This is why the Philippines is one of our most reliable partners, and Japan highly values the Philippines' efforts to pursue peaceful settlement of disputes on the basis of international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The Philippines' renewed commitment to the Arbitral Tribunal's award issued in 2016 is its eloquent testament. Importantly, Prime Minister Kishida reaffirmed Japan's support for the Philippines' position at the

Summit Telephone Talk held with President Duterte last November.

Mr. Francisco Sionil Jose, a great Filipino writer, sadly held his last breath in January. It would be my honor to quote a passage from one of his literary pieces:

“It is the heart which dictates, which rules, which lets us live and die.”

I cannot help thinking about how this passage reflects the essence of Japan-Philippines relations. Our relations developed through mutual thoughtfulness following our heart. Owing to the relentless efforts of both our predecessors, our bilateral relations have overcome a history deeply upset by war and have now become extremely amicable. Indeed, the Philippines now refers to Japan as a “friend closer than a brother.” I am deeply grateful for the generosity and kindness of Filipinos.

I also think the hardships posed by the pandemic rather accentuated our bilateral cooperation during the past year. In 2017, then Prime Minister Abe announced Japan’s commitment of one trillion yen (roughly 500 billion pesos), both government assistance and private investment, for state building of the Philippines. This pledge was fulfilled within its five-year period despite the challenges arising from the pandemic. The public and private financing was effectively utilized and thus created substantial results in various fields, including the vitalization of the Philippine economy through numerous big-ticket infrastructure projects, the facilitation of the Mindanao Peace Process, the improvement of healthcare and medical system, and the modernization of the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG)’s maritime law enforcement capacity. I am also greatly looking forward to the ongoing Metro Manila Subway and the North-South Commuter Railway projects improving the living standards of Filipinos in the near future.

Our two countries have been heading over to a better future together. I say with confidence that the bond between Japan and the Philippines will continue to be immutable. I expect that the Philippines will continue to regard Japan as a reliable partner. Meanwhile, it is also our sincere desire to further nurture our relations with the Philippines, a country blessed with young and talented people and thus full of potential.

I would like to conclude my message by sincerely wishing for the continued good health of His Majesty the Emperor of Japan and His Excellency President Rodrigo Roa Duterte, and for the everlasting friendship between Japan and the Philippines.