

**Remarks of Senator Juan Miguel “Migz” Zubiri at the Awarding
Reception**

26 January 2026, Ambassador’s Residence

I am incredibly grateful and honored to be with you all today to celebrate my being conferred the Grand Cordon of the Order of the Rising Sun, which has truly been one of the greatest achievements of my public service career. I thank the Government of Japan for considering me worthy of this honor, and I especially thank our good friend Ambassador Endo Kazuya, Mrs. Endo, and the entire Japanese Embassy here in Manila for strongly endorsing me, and advocating for this award for me.

I do not take this honor lightly, especially after learning that this is the highest honor given by the Japanese Government to foreign nationals.

It was deeply humbling to stand before His Majesty the Emperor Naruhito, as well as Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi, and be recognized for my efforts to strengthen bilateral relations between the Philippines and Japan. As President of the Philippines-Japan Parliamentarians Association, I am proud to note that these last few years have been an especially robust time

for parliamentary exchanges between the Philippine Senate and the National Diet of Japan, and the Government of Japan as a whole. We were even able to bring our Senate and House of Representatives together for a historic joint session to hear a policy address from former Prime Minister Kishida Fumio in 2023. It was during our delegation that we personally invited the Prime Minister to address the joint session of Congress and he gladly agreed.

In the area of the economy and trade, we in the Senate have ratified agreements and developed legislation to encourage Japanese investors to come and operate in the Philippines, generating income and creating thousands of jobs for our people. And I can never forget this, and I'll always tell all the Ambassadors to the Japanese Embassy that come and go, that I was the deciding factor in the approval and ratification of JPEPA. I was the 16th vote. As you know, in the Senate, you need 16 votes, that is two-thirds (2/3) of the members of the Senate to ratify. And I believe then, Former Senate President Manny Villar called me up. I was in a convention in Singapore on biofuels. I was the speaker that afternoon to discuss our biofuels. And he told me, "Migz, I think we don't have the numbers. Please come home. And give us the deciding vote." So I left the conference without

being able to give [the speech], I have to apologize, of course, to the conference organizers, flew immediately, taking the afternoon flight, arriving at around 7:35 in the evening. They had to suspend the voting, and I arrived, and when we had the vote, mine was the number 16th vote. So therefore, that was the start of my love affair with the Japanese government in my term as part of the parliament.

And more recently, I am very honored to have the role that I played with the CREATE MORE Act. When I became Senate President, I had almost weekly meetings and negotiations with members of the Japanese businesses and companies that are here. You know, in Bukidnon, we have ITOCHU, that's DOLE Philippines who actually employ more than maybe fifty thousand people all over Mindanao, and they were complaining, of course, of the difficulties that they had, being exporters, but yet not getting the same incentives as in export zones, because they plant their pineapple all over Mindanao and not in export zones. I would like to thank the Chairman of the Committee on Ways and Means at that time who was Senator Win Gatchalian. Because of our initiatives, we were able to push the amendments in the CREATE MORE, and we were able to pass it. And thankfully now, I

think their lives are a little bit easier and a bit better in the business environment here in the Philippines. So that's one of those of the initiatives that we pushed to be able to really fulfill our role as government, facilitating the private sector for better trade partnership.

In terms of peace and security, many of you here will know how ardently I campaigned for the establishment of a Reciprocal Access Agreement between the Philippines and Japan. When I was first elected as the Senate President, I had a chance meeting with the President at that time, President Marcos, and I was the one who actually asked him, "Mr. President, why don't we have the VFA, (at that time, it's called the VFA), why don't we also have the Visiting Forces Agreement with the Government of Japan? So that we can strengthen our partnership, particularly in the area of the South Pacific in terms of defense corporation between our two countries?" We didn't even have the name RAA at that time, and the President told me to look into it and that he'll talk to Secretary Gilbert Teodoro. And that's how we're able to start the ball rolling. And I would always, every time I meet the Ambassador, every time I meet the Defense Department heads, I'll ask how are we moving forward with the Reciprocal Access Agreement.

Unfortunately, I was no longer the Senate President when we ratified it, but you still have our full support and our group here, all eight members of the “seatmates group,” we voted as a bloc, when all of us voted for the Reciprocal Access Agreement. This time, it was unanimous for the Japanese Government for regional peace and stability.

And I think, my dear colleagues, I raised this and the reason why we do this for our brothers and sisters of the Japanese government and Japan as well, is because I truly believe that Japan is our best friend and our biggest ally in the region. And I say this because if you look at the foreign assistance given by countries, Japan has one of the biggest, in fact *the* biggest foreign aid given by any country who are here. You help us, Ambassador, your government has helped us in our subway rail system—that finally after how many decades, we will now have a subway in Metro Manila. And that's also because of Prime Minister Abe who paved that way to be able to have the loan from JICA, and include all the best technicians and the best men and women engineers from different countries who are doing the project today.

So all of this, from security and defense, trade and industry, to culture, and not to mention, tourism—we were one of the biggest Southeast Asian nations to provide tourism for Japan. I think almost 200,000-300,000 a year Filipinos go to Japan. It's now a fashion, when you go. You ask people, this Christmas, where are you going? We're going to Japan. In the summer, where are you going, we're going to Japan. When you ask your friends, in spring, they'll go to Japan. As a matter of fact, I just came from Japan with my whole family. We were in Fukuoka. For the first time we visited Fukuoka. It's also a lovely, beautiful city. I encourage all of you to visit Fukuoka as well.

And so this friendship, and the bond between the two countries, I felt deeply when I had a chance to meet the Emperor during the ceremony last November. I must share with all of you, I was starstruck. How many people can actually meet the Emperor of Japan? It may be easier to meet an emperor or a king of another country, but the Emperor of Japan very very [rare]. And so it is a very deep honor for me to be able to meet the Emperor of Japan. And when I did meet him, my dear friends, despite the constraints of the ceremony, because I know our Japanese brothers and sisters' are fastidious when it comes to ceremony and time. When he gave me the award and then

the Prime Minister handed to me this beautiful document that certifies my award, you take a step back, you bow, and then you proceed towards the holding room. I thought that was it, that was my only chance encounter with His Excellency, the Emperor of Japan. Shortly after they called us back into the meeting room, and I was seated at the rightmost side, and I did not know that he was going to approach each of the awardees. I was the very first person he approached, and I did a deep bow as tradition and respect, as should be for an Emperor. He went up to me and he shook my hand, and he shook my hand for a long time. And I was in—my wife was right behind me, I was in deep shock and awe. And he was asking me about the victims of the earthquake that hit Cebu and the typhoons that hit Mindanao and Bohol. And he was deeply concerned. And I really felt from the bottom of my heart this feeling of friendship and concern from the leader of Japan for our country. He took time to express himself, his heartfelt sympathies, for the families affected by the typhoon and the earthquake.

Suffice to say, I left the ceremony with a stronger sense of kinship with the nation of Japan. And I always tell you this, Mr. Ambassador, that you have friends in the Senate. And I would like to be number one on that

list to always help promote our deep ties and friendship between our two countries. We must continue that because I consider Japan the best ally and the best friend of the Philippines in this region—not by words, but by deeds, and we thank you for that.

So I carry the Grand Cordon with great honor and humility, and I remain committed to strengthening the ties between our two great countries, as strategic allies and economic partners securing a future of peace, harmony, and progress, not just for the Philippines and Japan, but for the entire region.

Maraming, maraming salamat po! Domo Arigato Gozaimasu! Thank you.