

**PRESIDENT FERDINAND ROMUALDEZ MARCOS JR.
AT THE LOWY INSTITUTE SPEAKING ENGAGEMENT**

Melbourne, Australia

March 4, 2024

[00:00:00]

Well, thank you very much to the Deputy Prime Minister of Defense, the honorable Richard Marles for his very kind introduction.

Dr. Fullilove, for the invitation to speak here at Lowy; the Minister for Trade and Tourism Senator, the Honorable Don Farrell; Senator, the Honorable Simon Birmingham, Shadow Foreign Minister; Secretary Manalo; Ambassador de la Vega; and the friends at the Lowy Institute; distinguished guests; ladies and gentlemen. Good afternoon.

I thank the Lowy Institute for this opportunity to share my views on the Philippines' perspective on these so-called great power rivalries and to speak to some of the brightest strategic minds in Australia, a country that the Philippines holds in high regard.

The Philippines and Australia are maritime democracies bound by meaningful commonalities.

As the oldest democracies in the Pacific, our respective strategic perspectives and actions are grounded in our shared values.

As pioneers of the post-war international order, we have an enduring commitment to upholding the rule of law, justice and equity in international affairs.

When I addressed the Parliament of Australia last week, I had the opportunity to reflect upon our shared history, our present bonds and our common aspirations for the future.

Our respective histories and identities, and our similar but separate perspectives, demonstrate that there exists in the region, and indeed across the world, a multiplicity of actors, each with its own distinct interests and aspirations.

The Lowy Institute understands this, having devoted much energy to discerning the multiple strategic calculations that motivate the various actors in this region,

and to measure the capabilities through the Asia Power Index. But this does not seem to be clear to all.

[00:02:13]

There are those who continue to see regional developments solely from the narrow prism of great power rivalries. There are those who reduce these developments for a regional regression towards outdated Cold War paradigms. And there are those who see in these developments a potential return to the hierarchical international system of centuries past.

The Philippines of course understands that widening geopolitical polarities around the world and the sharpening strategic competition between the People's Republic of China and the United States of America have become a reality permeating the regional strategic environment. But we caution against over-emphasizing this reality.

Such undue emphasis tends to subsume the legitimate rights and interests of countries like the Philippines, Australia, and other ASEAN Member States into the interests of the so-called major countries, as if we are mere pawns with no strategic agency.

It also obscures our judgment. It distracts us from calling out aggressive, unilateral, illegal and unlawful actions for what they are: attacks against the rule of international law and the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

Indeed, there are those who sometimes justify such provocations under the pretext of geopolitics and mischaracterize the remedies availed of by the aggrieved as mere tactics in this grand strategic game.

If we are to successfully navigate the treacherous waters brought about by this recent geopolitical flux, we need to clarify and we need to have foresight.

The future of this region will be shaped not by one or two, but by many actors, and they will each demand that their voices be heard, individually and collectively, as indeed they should be.

Thus, the Philippines begins any conversation regarding great power competition with a strong rejection of any – any subordination of our distinct national interests and denial of our sovereignty and strategic agency.

Ladies and gentlemen, We acknowledge the undeniable importance of the People's Republic of China and the United States of America to the security situation and the economic evolution of this region and of the world. We must deal with both of them constructively.

[00:05:09]

Along with Australia, the Philippines is the oldest treaty ally of the United States in Asia. We forged this alliance by our own choice and we continue to strengthen it by our own choice.

Our alliance has been a pillar of regional stability for decades, and we all need for it to continue to be a force for good in the coming years. It is rooted in a long history, built upon shared values, and strengthened by mutual respect as equal and sovereign partners.

At the same time, centuries of friendship and kinship bind the Filipino and Chinese people. We pursue with the People's Republic of China Comprehensive Strategic Cooperation founded on mutual respect and mutual benefit.

Our independent foreign policy compels us to cooperate with them on matters where our interests align, to respectfully disagree on areas where our views differ, and to push back when our sworn principles, such as our sovereignty, our sovereign rights, and our jurisdiction in the West Philippine Sea — are questioned or ignored.

In this specific context of the South China Sea, our interests are clear.

They lie in ensuring that the universal and unified character of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea or UNCLOS and in the final and binding determinations of the South China Sea Arbitration Award of 2016 are firmly and consistently upheld.

It is unfortunate that despite the clarity provided by international law, provocative, unilateral and illegal actions continue to infringe upon our sovereignty, our sovereign rights, our jurisdictions. This pattern of aggression obstructs our path towards ASEAN's vision of the South China Sea as a sea of peace, stability and of prosperity.

As a country committed to the cause of peace and the peaceful settlement of disputes, the Philippines continues to tread the path of dialogue and diplomacy despite these serious difficulties.

We will continue to engage China, bilaterally and through ASEAN-led mechanisms, to address our differences at sea. We are determined to make our bilateral mechanisms with China work, and we will leverage our bilateral mechanisms with other claimant states towards the peaceful management of disputes.

Our adherence to the 2002 ASEAN-China Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea remains steadfast, and so is our commitment to working with ASEAN and China towards an effective and substantive Code of Conduct

that finds its moorings in UNCLOS and respects the interest of all stakeholders, including Australia. And yet these efforts are not pursued in a vacuum — a conducive environment where tensions are effectively managed is crucial to the success of the COC negotiations.

[00:08:42]

We shall never surrender even a square inch of our territory and our maritime jurisdiction.

In this regard, we are upgrading the capabilities of our Coast Guard, pursuing the modernization of our Armed Forces. And earlier this year, I approved the updated acquisition plan of the Armed Forces of the Philippines called Re-Horizon 3, in line with our Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept.

Our forces must be able to guarantee, to the fullest extent possible, Filipino nationals, Philippine corporations, and those authorized by the Philippine Government, unimpeded and peaceful exploration and exploitation of all natural resources in areas where we have jurisdiction, including and especially our exclusive economic zone, in accordance with international law.

Philippine agencies, forces and institutions are working to strengthen our capabilities. We are on the frontline of international efforts to preserve, defend, and uphold the rules-based international order — the same platform from which the post-war Asian economic miracles took off, and upon which the continued prosperity of countries like Australia relies.

Ladies and gentlemen, we, in the Indo-Pacific, cannot ignore the existential impact of great power rivalries upon the survival of our peoples and our communities.

Amidst the alarming reversal of the historic trend of decreasing nuclear stockpiles in the region, we must remember that the tragic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons use were borne by peoples of this region, the hibakusha of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the victims of nuclear tests in the Pacific.

It is time to bring Indo-Pacific issues to the fore of global conversations on nuclear disarmament.

The People's Republic of China and the United States must engage in meaningful dialogue to maintain strategic stability, and to limit any nuclear arms build-up.

The Philippines and Australia, along with Japan, are at the forefront of efforts to reduce nuclear risks in the region.

[00:11:20]

These nuclear risks demonstrate the need for great powers to manage their strategic competition in a responsible manner.

We, in the Indo-Pacific, must ensure that great powers do not treat the world as an arena for their competition. The pursuit of the great powers' respective strategic goals must never come at the expense of the interests of smaller states, nor of regional and international peace.

At the same time, we must also put things into their proper perspective. Great power rivalries constitute only one of several storms that render turbulent the waters that confront humanity's common journey at this crucial juncture.

In addition to widening geopolitical polarities and sharpening strategic competitions, we are also confronted with uncertainties posed by transformative technologies and the existential threat of climate change, even as persistent inequities and inequalities within and among our nations remain unresolved.

Amidst challenging global tides, we remain convinced that the only ballast stabilizing our common vessel is the rules-based international order.

The Philippines and Australia, along with many other nations, fought a world war to build this rules-based architecture, and had painstakingly reinforced this architecture one brick at a time throughout the last century, from the onset and through the aftermath of the Cold War.

So, for the Philippines, our continuing commitment to this architecture reflects our history of upholding human dignity and promoting peace, and is premised on four strategic considerations.

First, this rules-based order is the best guarantee for the sovereignty equality of all states, regardless of size.

Second, the predictability and stability that it engenders provides an enabling environment for us to pursue our national ambition, that every Filipino should have a stable, secure, and comfortable life by 2040.

Third, it provides a credible legal regime that guarantees a just and equitable access by all states to the global commons, and to all frontiers that could lead to sustainable development. This includes the high seas, outer space, cyberspace, as well as peaceful uses of science and technologies.

Fourth, it enables states to galvanize effective international action to confront challenges that no one nation can successfully tackle on their own, including the existential threat of climate change and the uncertainties posed by— as yet unrealized transformative technologies that are becoming available to us.

[00:14:40]

To safeguard these four enablers of global peace and development, we need to build resilience. We need resilient diplomatic and global governance and governance structures that can withstand geopolitical shocks.

These structures must be grounded in international law, in which all nations seek balance and strength. They must remain credible providers of global goods and meaningful venues for nations to pursue common ground and decisive and equitable solutions to global and regional problems.

At the international level, building such resilience entails continued engagement and active leadership by middle powers that have the capacity to reach across political and ideological lines, forge genuine consensus, and lead credible efforts towards decisive multilateral solutions.

At the regional level, this means continued centrality of ASEAN in the regional architecture, and active engagement by all stakeholders in ASEAN-led mechanisms.

We must also build economic resilience against future uncertainties. We need to ensure that our economies remain powerful tools that positively shape the lives of our people and ensure the sustainability of the planet.

We expect Australia's Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040 that will build on the new ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.

We welcome with growing interest in Australia to explore and to further pursue investment opportunities in the Philippines, which is projected to lead ASEAN's growth this year, having managed to outpace major Asian economies with a solid growth rate of 5.6 percent last year.

At the heart of regional economic progress lies economic interdependence.

As nations engage in mutually beneficial trade and investment, they become stakeholders in each other's success. Yet, the Philippines also understands concerns regarding the strategic risks that integration entails.

So, amidst talks of decoupling and de-risking, what we seek is resilience to such risks. I am therefore of the view that securing strategic sectors and critical infrastructure is critical to our security and our development.

Securing our nations entails securing our economies and enhancing the resilience of our supply chains.

[00:17:44]

In our bilateral plan of action with Australia, we committed to work together to further develop capacities in critical infrastructure security, particularly in transport and in telecommunications. We will also broaden cooperation on mineral resources development, energy transition, and space science and technology applications.

Last week, we signed an agreement on cyber and critical technology cooperation that will promote the secure and peaceful uses of cyberspace.

Beyond our bilateral partnerships, we see value in building resilience, too, through reinforced habits of cooperation amongst like-minded partners in specific areas.

Our trilateral cooperation with Malaysia and Indonesia in curbing piracy in the Sulu Sea and the Celebes Sea is one such example. We intend to foster new arrangements to promote maritime security and freedom of navigation, amongst others, through other similar trilateral and multilateral formats.

We share this thinking with Australia, which has been at the forefront of efforts to forge security arrangements with like-minded states, including AUKUS.

We are clearly of the mind that AUKUS will enhance regional stability while respecting ASEAN Centrality and adhering to the highest standards of transparency in accordance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Finally, no talk of resilience is complete without the consideration of climate change.

This is a deadly challenge that threatens the very survival of millions, especially those in the small island developing states in the Pacific.

The Filipino people share this vulnerability with our kin in the Pacific Island States. For us, the time to talk about ifs and whens has long since passed, it is here and it is now.

We expect responsible states and partners to do more and they must do that now. We will continue to pursue just and equitable climate action in all our multilateral engagements, including in the context of the Loss and Damage Fund Board.

Developed countries have a responsibility to support vulnerable countries in climate adaptation and mitigation. We will also continue to pursue our climate action strategy, a pillar of which is our robust commitment to a just energy transition.

Ladies and gentlemen, we must not lose sight of our collective responsibility for peace and resilience in the Indo-Pacific.

Our work is about people and about communities, their security, their survival, their dignity, and their future.

It is about inclusion and equal regard to the interests of all nations, not just a few. It thrives on cooperation, not geopolitical contests, and it cannot progress without a stable and predictable order based on the rule of international law. We must not allow this so-called great power rivalry to distract or hinder us from the pursuit of peace and development.

Buoyed by one of the fastest growing economies in the region, the Philippines pledges to continue acting responsibly in line with our increasing potential as we inevitably rise in global standing.

We embrace our role in the region and in the world with a sense of purpose and dedication. We cannot be observers, but active participants, catalysts for innovation, architects for a better future.

We in the Philippines stand committed to promoting peace and prosperity in our region. We aspire to live peacefully with all our neighbors and continue to believe that the successes of all our regional partners contribute to our own success, as thus our success contribute to the region.

Together with our friends, especially our allies and Strategic Partners, we will face the challenges and opportunities that lie *[sic]* ahead , confident in our ability to create a safe, a stable, and secure future that celebrates diversity, mutual respect and collective progress.

Thank you all very much for this great opportunity to share with you some of the thoughts and perspective from the Philippines.

Mabuhay and magandang hapon po sa inyong lahat.

Good afternoon. [applause]

[00:22:49]
