

**SHIFTING INDO-PACIFIC AND GEOPOLITICAL TIDES POLICY ADDRESS  
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Chairman Sunjoy Joshi, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen.

Good evening.

The First Lady and I are elated to be visiting this great country—a close friend and vital partner of the Philippines—upon the gracious invitation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

As President of the Philippines, Asia's oldest republic, it is indeed an honor to visit the world's largest democracy.

Before I proceed, allow me to express my deepest sympathy to the Indian nation, especially to those bereaved, who lost loved ones in the tragic flash floods in Uttarakhand yesterday.

Over the past two days, I paid my respects to the Mahatma, father of this nation whose powerful ideas continue to resonate the world over and continue to guide our lives.

I had insightful discussions with your President and, of course, with Prime Minister Modi, and other eminent officials. I reiterated to them our abiding support and solidarity in confronting terrorism and our grief over innocent lives lost to this scourge. We discussed our cooperation in defense and

security and more importantly, we charted the direction of our future-looking engagement.

I explored with the captains of Indian businesses a path towards mutual growth in what is, by many measures, still very much a blue ocean of opportunities between the Philippines and India.

Through the Indian media, I engaged in a conversation with the broader public on their perceptions and queries on the rising prominence and relevance of our ties.

From tomorrow, our sojourn shall take us to India's "Garden City" and the "Silicon Valley" of Bengaluru to further our economic agenda.

This opportunity to share further reflections is the most fitting way to conclude the Delhi leg of our visit: on the centuries-old and enduring friendship of the Philippines and the Indian peoples, the state of our Indo-Pacific region, and its complex challenges and uncertainties against which we must, as nations and as partners, propel forward.

I therefore wholeheartedly thank Chair Joshi and ORF for hosting us for this gathering this evening.

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Friends, this State Visit is occasioned by our commemoration of seventy-five years of diplomatic relations. Yet, the ties that bind our two nations extend much further back in time. Our histories are intertwined.

Southeast Asia is India's next-door neighbor, but the Philippine archipelago lies at its far edge, bordering on the Pacific. And yet, our civilizations bridged this chasm. Despite this distance, the Philippines' archipelago was touched by the Indosphere.

More than artifacts, this influence was of the intangible kind—ideas that seeped into our worldview, a Maranao version of the Ramayana called the Maharadia Lawana, and Sanskrit-derived words that, to this day, roll off Filipino tongues.

The British Occupation of Manila lasted all but eighteen (18) months, but that expedition's Madras infantrymen stayed behind.

They are progenitors of a vibrant circle of Filipino-Indian families in Metro Manila's eastern reaches.

And speaking of linguistic influences, my late father always used to sum up the history, or described the history of the Filipino people in one word: “tadhana”—Filipino for “history” or “destiny”.

Auspiciously, it is believed to be related, if not rooted, in the Sanskrit “sandhāna”—a term that denotes both “journey” and “unity.”

Both “sandhāna” and “tadhana”—a shared journey and destiny—capture the story of the friendship between our two countries.

We see this in our similar experiences as peoples that went through colonial subjugation, and through tenacious struggles, won independence.

It was there when Philippines and India, at the very infancy of our statehoods, became two (2) of only three (3) Asian nations in San Francisco that labored to establish the United Nations.

This journey and vision imbued the pivotal conferences in New Delhi in 1947 and Baguio in 1950 to forge our pan-Asian solidarity. And five (5) years later, we converged in Bandung to define the rallying creed of the Global South.

The Cold War would see our strategic outlooks diverge as we acted on our respective realities and security environments. The Philippines found security in alliances, while India chose the path of non-alignment.

In that extended period, we embarked on our parallel and respective paths towards attaining our national aspirations and cultivating our international standing.

Today, in a far different and indisputably multimodal world, our respective journeys converge once again.

We remain bastions of democracy, but this time, we are also amongst the most ascendant economies. The Philippines is on the cusp of upper middle-income status, attainable as early as next year.

India, of course, can be proud of your spectacular rise under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi and the intellectual gravitas, innate talent, and industry of Indian people—rising to become the world’s fourth largest economy and a country wielding enormous global influence.

As an emerging middle power, the Philippines is likewise determined to be a force for good.

What has this meant for our ties?

A re-convergence—one of such proportions that the Philippines and India are interacting, collaborating, at levels and scopes not seen before.

Since 2023, our trade has breached and consistently exceeded the three-billion-dollar (USD 3 billion) mark.

Our functional and development cooperation has turned multifaceted, spanning health, tourism, agriculture, financial technology, science and technology, education, maritime security, and even space. We now reinforce each other's strengths very concretely by our defense cooperation, of which the BrahMos project is by far the largest.

But this intensification is not confined to supporting bilateral aspirations. Our mutually supportive approaches also find expression in cooperation on shared geopolitical and geo-economic challenges.

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It is this same re-convergence and alignment of interests that led Prime Minister Modi and me to Hyderabad House yesterday, to inaugurate the Philippines-India Strategic Partnership.

There may be an impression in some circles that Strategic Partnerships have become common currency in international diplomacy and national toolkits. Not so for the Philippines.

We approach the forging of such relationships with great deliberation—less of caution but more of adherence to a very high standard—the standards that uphold mutual and strategic trust, a common cause, a clear alignment of interests, and indeed, of track record of being responsible players in the international arena and the global commons.

Well, India has emerged as one of the countries with which the Philippines finds these sterling qualities.

Our Strategic Partnership with India is only our fifth such partnership — after Japan, Vietnam, Australia, and the Republic of Korea.

Sea lines of communication crisscross the Indian Ocean. Maritime trade to and from the Far East and the Pacific through the Indian Ocean has, and continues to underpin, our prosperity and our peoples' aspirations for the last centuries.

Safe navigation and security are important, especially for Filipino and Indian seafarers who are on almost every ship plying these historic and strategic sea routes.

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I again thank the Indian people and the brave men and women of the Navy, of your Navy, through Prime Minister Modi, for the kind rescue and succor of our nationals in 2024 after they were attacked by Houthi rebels. We recognize India's influence and "first responder" role in this critical area.

We welcome our new Strategic Partner India, then a crown jewel for an empire, and now the key to unlock a free and open Indo-Pacific.

As two of Asia's biggest democracies with a deep historical linkage, the Philippines and India should transform our natural friendship into a robust and modern partnership. This is but a natural progression of things.

Just yesterday, a flotilla of three (3) ships from India's Eastern Naval Command, including the guided missile destroyer INS Delhi, and accompanied by tanker INS Shakti and corvette INS Kiltan, joined two (2) frigates from the Philippines, BRP Miguel Malvar and BRP Jose Rizal, and completed their first-ever maritime cooperative activities in the South China Sea and in the West Philippine Sea.

It attests to our shared determination to work for the greater good in a way that protects our trade and our prosperity, our freedoms, and the heritage for future generations.

Our relations with India form part of a larger latticework of partnerships—of formal alliance, strategic partnership, and minilateral groupings—that we have built in recent years with and amongst the states that share specific interests. All these build into pillars that support the architecture of regional stability and guarantee the preservation of prosperity.

They reflect the value that we put in investing in diplomacy, even as we steadily ramp up and modernize our defense capabilities, undergirded by our Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept, to project our forces into areas where we must, by constitutional duty and legal right, and we must protect our interests and preserve our patrimony. These we all pursue, even as we remain true to our commitment to ASEAN, to its centrality, its convening power, and proven positive impact in shaping regional peace and prosperity for close to six decades now.



India takes a similar, albeit uniquely and necessarily Indian approach, with its pragmatism and pursuit of optimization of relationships via multi-aligned, multi-vector policies in its foreign relations.

Indeed, our Strategic Partnership reflects the growing convergence of our long-term interests in the context of the historic shifts that will inform the ebb and flow of this century.

In this tenth year of India's impactful Act East Policy that grew out of the Look East Policy, the Philippines has also turned its gaze towards India, and our visions met.

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Friends, at the United Nations in 2022, I defined the transcendent challenges facing the global community—widening geopolitical polarities that threaten our hard-won peace; unresolved inequities and inequalities; powerful technologies with the power to transform but also with the danger of destabilizing our political and social order; and the existential threat of climate change.

Despite resounding calls, global unity to address these challenges have, unfortunately, become even more elusive.

In the three (3) years since then, geopolitical developments have exerted only greater pressure upon the very structures and norms designed to prevent and to resolve conflicts, facilitate trade-driven growth and economic integration, or urge forward collective global action.

We see all these in our very own shared neighborhood of the Indo-Pacific, the locus of our hopes, growth, and very existence.

In Singapore last year, I described the realities impinging upon the region's present and future:

- A multipolar world being shaped by the experiences, aspirations, and agency of nations, and challenged by attempts to undermine prevailing international norms.
- Within this multipolar world, the impact of continuing strategic competition amongst the great powers, which permeates the evolving regional landscape and creates dilemmas that weigh on the strategic choices of regional states.
- The abiding relevance of ASEAN in holding the center amidst this fluidity, even as ASEAN Centrality and cohesion are under siege.

- The role of bridgebuilder-nations in forging decisive multilateral actions and solutions, even as geopolitics seeps into the infrastructure of global governance.
- The vital importance of securing and keeping global commons free, open, and accessible, for the rightful benefit of everyone.
- The urgent need for action on climate change, whose impact and worsening threat are very much felt by our region.
- And finally, the world and our region must be able to seize maximum gains from the transformative power of advanced technologies, while paying due attention to their disruptive potential.

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Ladies and gentlemen, the responses to these realities are equally manifold. Of the many potent prescriptions, the Philippines has long stressed shoring up the rules-based order to be crucial, and this for four (4) reasons:

- First, it is the best guarantee for the sovereign equality of all states, regardless of size.
- Secondly, the predictability and stability that it engenders provides an enabling environment for all states to pursue their respective aspirations.
- Third, it provides a credible legal regime that guarantees just and equitable access by all states to the global commons, and to all frontiers that could lead to sustainable development.
- Fourth, it enables states to galvanize effective international action to confront challenges that any single nation could not successfully manage on its own.

Yet some of our fellow defenders of the international system that we built together in 1945 have since shifted their priorities, turning more inward and prioritizing urgent national concerns, at times at the expense of the principles we used to champion collectively.

Meanwhile, other powers are seeking to take advantage of this shift.

Unfortunately, such narratives at times dominate, obscuring the international community's judgment.

For instance, the complex issue of competing claims in the South China Sea has, for years, been unfortunately and simplistically reduced to “the South China Sea disputes”, as if all claims are equal. They are not.

The assertions of littoral states have to pass the test of conformity with international law, particularly the UNCLOS and definitive, binding interpretations, such as the 2016 Arbitral Award.

Such misinformation or inaccurate narratives distract us from calling out illegal and unlawful actions for what they are: violations of international law. Indeed, there are those who sometimes justify such provocations under the pretext of geopolitics.

Just as disconcertingly, there are those who seek to discredit international legal procedures and dismiss binding rulings to cloak opaque claims with a semblance of legitimacy.

It has thus become the responsibility of all stakeholders—including the Philippines and India—to play a more active role in upholding, in defending, and in preserving our rules-based order.

The Indian vision for multipolarity, which resonates with the Philippines, that emphasis on strategic agency, is no longer an aspiration, it is an exigency.

These are the moorings upon which we must anchor our Strategic Partnership going forward. Through our Strategic Partnership, the Philippines and India must assert the clarity of international law. As co-architects of the rules-based international order, we have a solid foundation on which we can build.

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We Filipinos are proud of our efforts to promote the rule of law, including through the 1982 Manila Declaration on the Peaceful Settlement of Disputes.

We also find inspiration in India’s contributions, example, and its own adherence to the law. For a country with rapidly growing power and influence, India has submitted to the judgment of international tribunals on matters concerning maritime disputes—a model of how a responsible major power and a good neighbor should behave.

We see this same responsibility and sincerity, in India’s “MAHASAGAR” vision — “Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions” — on the basis of trust, transparency, and genuine respect for the rights and interests of all nations in the Indian Ocean Region.



The Philippines has firsthand experience of this, when our distressed seafarers sailing through the dangerous waters of the Red Sea found safety and humanity in the rescue and aid of the Indian Navy.

Thus, when Prime Minister Modi assures the world that India intends to be a *vishwa bandhu* —a friend to the world—we Filipinos feel his and the Indian people's sincerity.

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So, looking ahead, the Philippines and India must continue to work to strengthen the resilience of our world community.

Our diplomatic initiatives must buttress the current structures of global governance. These structures must withstand geopolitical shocks, remain [credible] providers of global goods, and meaningful venues for nations to find common ground.

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

This also means meaningful linkages between the efforts of ASEAN Member States and those of the Indian Ocean region, including collaborating on synergies between the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI).

In the broader international arena, this entails an even more 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.

Our work to strengthen the multilateral system must ensure that the so-called “major countries” do not exert undue influence. It should lead to meaningful reforms in the United Nations, and the Security Council itself, towards inclusivity, equity, and justice.

Ladies and gentlemen, earlier I touched upon how the Philippines, as do many other countries, has in its folk literature a version of the Ramayana. This attests to the universal and lasting relevance of this revered and ancient epic from these lands that it transcends time, distance, and cultures.

Perhaps this appeal derives from the Ramayana's portrayal not just of friendship and of loyalty, but of such bonds being in the service of righteousness, truth, and of justice.

Our Indo-Pacific home is now the world's fastest-growing economic hub and the foremost driver of global growth. But the promise it holds, for all of us collectively and our respective nations, will not be given, but it must be secured.

It behooves all of us, as individual nations, as agents acting in concert with others, be it in the context of strategic partnerships, formal alliances or any other framework, to be invested in an Indo-Pacific that is free, open, and firmly undergirded by a rules-based order.

True to our common destiny—"tadhana"—and in the spirit of "sandhāna"—our bonds and common journey—never has the Philippines and India been better positioned as now to put our ties in the service of both our peoples as well as our larger region's future.

Prime Minister Modi, with whom I met yesterday, eloquently, brilliantly described the Philippines and India as "friends by choice, but partners by destiny". These words capture the sense of an inevitable friendship, anchored on a meeting of purpose for our nations and a shared journey for our peoples.

With our Strategic Partnership, we unfurl the sails and steer our hopes and dreams through challenging tides. Our vision for a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific is our compass. Our commitment to international law is our ballast.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much, it has been a great privilege.  
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**BAGONG PILIPINAS**