

Philippine and German Perspectives on Geopolitical Developments in the Indo-Pacific

REMARKS of
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**“Philippine and German Perspectives on
Geopolitical Developments in the Indo-Pacific”**
Berlin, Germany
20 February 2023

Good morning everyone and at the outset, I wish to thank the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung for their kind invitation to speak on this very relevant topic today that is the Philippine and German Perspectives on Geopolitical Developments in the Indo-Pacific.

Let me begin my remarks with thoughts on the common threads of Philippine and German diplomacy:

The Philippines and Germany’s commitment to the rules-based international order each have a long history.

The Philippines was an active voice in building the post-1945 order with the U.N. at its core, championing decolonization as well as Article X of the UN Charter.

This legacy was reinforced with the adoption of the 1982 Manila Declaration on the Peaceful Settlement of Disputes. For the first time, the UN had a normative text consolidating the legal framework of peaceful settlement of international disputes.

Working with his French counterpart, Chancellor Adenauer pursued the vision of a common European steel and coal community, which became the precursor of European unity and integration, leading eventually of course, to the European Union.

Similarly, President Elpidio Quirino of the Philippines, his idea in the late 40’s for a “Pacific Union” was the first articulation of our region’s aspirations for a rules-based regional architecture. This led to different sub-regional iterations, culminating in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967.

So while both countries maintain their security commitments to their allies, the Philippines and Germany are known for their independent outlook and constructive bridge-building roles.

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We see this in the area of disarmament, non-proliferation, and arms control, where the Philippines and Germany are among the staunchest vanguards of humanitarian principles.

We closely cooperate as bridge-builders in discussions in disarmament and non-proliferation of all weapons of mass destruction.

And we also seek to future-proof international legal and normative frameworks in the context of emerging technologies.

This brings to mind the current initiative of Philippines and Germany in the United Nations in efforts to develop norms of responsible behavior in outer space.

This has been the mode of our bilateral cooperation elsewhere in the multilateral sphere, that is to bridge divides, promote consensus, and create a middle space for constructive consideration of difficult issues.

I have purposely drawn broad strokes to illustrate the Philippines and Germany's shared work in supporting multilateralism, shaping global rules and norms that recognize a mutuality in purpose, and also building consensus to address challenges requiring collective action. This illustration is useful especially in connection to sharing perspectives on the Indo-Pacific region.

The promise of the Indo-Pacific region as the "fastest growing economic region and largest contributor to global growth in the next 30 years" is grounded on sound numbers and projections.

The region headlines news of the global economic turn-around, a bullish recovery in terms of trade, investment, production and consumer spending, despite the scars of the pandemic and the challenges of the war in Ukraine.

The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), composed of all the ten ASEAN member states and their dialogue partners China, Korea, Japan, Australia and New Zealand, is hailed as the world's largest trade deal, as it covers a population of over 2.3 billion people, a combined GDP of \$26.2 thousand million US dollars accounting for over

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a quarter of the global GDP, and nearly a third of global economic output.

There is also the nascent Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) with the United States and 12 other countries in the region.

Ladies and gentlemen,

For the Philippines, which is an archipelago with over 36,000 kilometers of coastline at the heart of the Indo-Pacific region, an economy projected to be the 16th largest in the world, a population of over 110 million aiming to be a middle class society by 2040, a peaceful and predictable rules-based order is essential.

Our diplomacy therefore aims for conditions for sustained and inclusive economic dynamism and a system of relationships that serves mutual interests and preserves stability.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a core expression of Philippine diplomacy.

ASEAN has enabled the peoples of Southeast Asia to flourish in peace for over five decades.

It has embedded its values and principles in important instruments such as the ASEAN Charter, the Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (SEANWFZ) and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) in Southeast Asia, which now has 50 High Contracting Parties.

It has forged itself as the hub for dialogue and cooperation in the broader Asia Pacific or Indo-Pacific region, with formal partnerships with 20 states and the EU, each with their own vitality and depth. It leads mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+). These are living examples of what we term ASEAN centrality.

Security engagements within the auspices of ASEAN have been, and will remain, an important feature in the regional security architecture. ASEAN anchors a robust regional order that must navigate sharpening polarities among the major powers, the rise of new security

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arrangements such as AUKUS and QUAD and the evolving complexions of a geopolitical space with State actors of varying degrees of power and influence.

We hope these developments will not upset the core of a delicate but functioning equilibrium that has taken over decades to set and has the ownership of actors in the region, such as ASEAN.

ASEAN centrality and ASEAN-China talks on a Code of Conduct

It is also impossible to imagine a Code of Conduct (COC) for the South China Sea being negotiated outside the framework of ASEAN.

The Philippines seeks a substantive COC whose provisions are in accordance with international law, and do not give prominence nor special status to any of its parties, nor carve out a special regime apart from the UNCLOS. Our position is that the Code should give due importance to the rights of third parties in the South China Sea under international law.

This is a process that has been persevering, even as it bears the pressures of day-to-day developments on the ground such as destabilizing actions and incidents of harassment and intimidation.

All parties negotiating for a Code, and that is the ASEAN plus China, are seeking the successful conclusion of a Code of Conduct must contribute to creating conditions of confidence and trust, and an atmosphere of peace and stability in the South China Sea.

Success means an effective COC, that affirms the Law of the Sea, is forward-looking.

ASEAN and the Indo Pacific

The ASEAN Security Outlook in the Indo Pacific (the AOIP) exemplifies the outward-looking and inclusive engagement that ASEAN fosters with our like-minded partners.

This Outlook pursues maritime cooperation in the continuum of security, connectivity, the UN sustainable development goals, and economic

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cooperation. It seeks to harmonize strategies with partners such as the EU, UK, Canada, Japan and the United States

Philippine policy resonates with the focus of the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific on secure sea lines of communication, capacity-building, enhanced naval presence, and joint exercises to protect safety and freedom of navigation.

Germany's Indo-Pacific Guidelines can further broaden its engagement with the region.

Convergences in our interests must translate into practical initiatives and woven into regional cooperation in the continuum of maritime security, connectivity and development.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Widening polarities and the sharpening strategic competition between the United States and China, are realities that permeate the global landscape.

And they do put strains on multilateralism.

The Philippines is well aware that if not managed well, this rivalry can undo hard-won peace and economic vitality of the Asia Pacific and Indo-Pacific.

Nevertheless, we must avoid the trap of thinking that we are reverting into a new Cold War, of framing the US – China rivalry as a zero-sum game and looking at issues and disputes in the region narrowly from the prism of that rivalry.

There are many ways that such over-simplification obstructs the complexities of the dynamics in the region and more importantly, the clear-headedness required for managing this strategic rivalry vis-à-vis the disputes and potential conflicts that involve a community of State actors and claimants, all of whom have legitimate interests.

The Indo Pacific itself is an evolving political construct that recognizes that multi-faceted interests and influences which are at play, even if there are asymmetries.

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In this regard, Chinese narratives conveniently frame Philippine positions on the South China Sea within the duality of the China-US rivalry, whereas the Philippines looks at it in a wider context, including terms of our national interest and bilateral relationship with China.

In a way, China's characterization delegitimizes the interests of the Philippines. This only serves Beijing's interests in that it shores up domestic support for its approach to the disputes. Yet, this approach fails to acknowledge the role of domestic stakeholders and public opinion in other countries. Moreover, fishermen have been prevented from plying their trade and this has a decidedly human element, and this of course is what affects public opinion in our countries. This is also an issue that is often understated in discussions focusing on the security aspects of the disputes. In other words, these disputes render the human face as invisible to these issues.

People have always been central variable for Philippine diplomacy, and it is true in the case of the South China Sea disputes.

For the Philippines, our interest in keeping the South China Sea as a sea of peace and stability is profound, and is enmeshed in our identity as an archipelagic maritime nation and our vision for the future.

We are at the heart of this seascape and I have underlined earlier that more than geopolitics, the South China Sea is, for us, about people.

Our positions and activities in the West Philippine Sea, and the broader South China Sea, find anchor in the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, and which were affirmed, resoundingly, also by the 2016 Arbitral Award on the South China Sea.

Rival claims can only be solved peacefully by adhering to peaceful and a rules-based approach.

This Philippine approach, articulated long before and formalized in the 1982 Manila Declaration on the Peaceful Settlement of International Disputes, enjoys the support of the international community.

The Philippines appreciates Germany's principled backing for the 2016 Arbitral Award as a mooring for the peaceful settlement of the disputes and a rules-based maritime regime in the South China Sea.

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We count on Germany to use its influence and institutional assets as a vanguard of a rules-based international order, to counter the use of lawfare strategies which tend to undermine this Arbitral award and UNCLOS as the Constitutions of the oceans.

Nevertheless, the Philippines and China share the understanding that the South China Sea disputes do not constitute the totality of our bilateral relationship and a strong and comprehensive relationship between Manila and Beijing brings only gains for our peoples and the region.

The recent state visit to the PRC by President Marcos just last month affirmed this understanding as a basis for furthering our work to advance this very important relationship.

The Philippines intends to sincerely engage in the multilateral, bilateral levels and mechanisms with China to promote constructive maritime cooperation, and dialogue to address risks to maritime security, and to improve communication lines to address incidents in the South China Sea.

At the same time, President Marcos last week, completed a successful visit to Japan, which ushered in a new era of economic and security cooperation.

Early this month, the US Defense Secretary was in Manila, to follow through on the visit to the Philippines of US Vice President Kamala Harris late last year.

The United States' continuing and enhanced presence serves as a stabilizing force in the region.

The United States is the Philippines' only treaty ally. This alliance and partnership is critical to ensuring our individual and collective ability to promote peace and stability in the region, addressing new and emerging security challenges, and sustaining the environment for economic momentum.

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The Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with the United States is one of the cornerstones of the PH-US security and defense relationship. Our new agreements bolster our interoperability and the effective posturing of forces to address humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) as well as security threats.

The Indo Pacific, ladies and gentlemen, is a geopolitical theater of rivalry, interplay of interests, power, and influence.

The stability of this region therefore rests on strong partnerships, and strong institutions that reinforce incentives for engagement, dialogue and cooperation.

The experience of ASEAN offers important lessons in conflict management and states coalescing around a common agenda.

The Philippines and Germany both recognize in the context of the ASEAN and EU experience that strong regional institutions entrench habits of dialogue and cooperation and give states a shared sense of purpose.

I wish to conclude my remarks by recalling President Marcos' words recently at the that UN General Assembly, namely that our world is in a watershed moment, and that (and I quote) "an open, inclusive and rules-based international order that is governed by justice and law and informed by the principles of justice and equity is an important ballast that stabilizes our common vessel amidst changing global tides." (End)