

REMARKS of
Secretary for Foreign Affairs ENRIQUE A. MANALO
for the Munich Security Conference 2023
Roundtable Discussion on
“Bridging Troubled Waters – Mapping Escalation Potential in the Indo-Pacific
Region”
17 February 2023, 17:30-19:00, Gelber Salon, Hotel Bayerische Hof

Thank you very much, Bill and good afternoon to everyone.

As you mentioned, I will try to give the Philippine perspective in the context of today’s session on Bridging Troubled Waters – Mapping Escalation Potential in the Indo-Pacific Region.

The Philippines is an archipelago with over 36,000 kilometers of coastline at the heart of the Asia Pacific region, an economy projected to be the 16th largest in the world, a population of over 110 million and aiming to be a middle class society by 2040, therefore a peaceful and predictable rules-based international order is essential for advancing our national goals.

Our diplomacy aims for an environment conducive for sustained and inclusive economic growth as well as a system of relationships that serves mutual interests and of course preserves peace and security.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a core element of Philippine diplomacy and we believe ASEAN has enabled the peoples of Southeast Asia to flourish in peace for over five decades.

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

ASEAN has also forged the notion of ASEAN centrality, serving as the hub for dialogue and cooperation in the broader Asia Pacific region, with formal partnerships with 20 states and also mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum,” and the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM+).

These are engagements within the auspices of ASEAN which have been, and will remain, we believe, an important feature in the regional security architecture.

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

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

In the ASEAN –China process, the Philippines seeks a substantive Code of Conduct which is in accordance with international law and neither gives prominence or special status to any of the parties, nor carves out a special regime apart from UNCLOS. It should affirm the law of the sea. Our position also gives due importance to the rights of third parties in the South China Sea under international law.

This is a process that perseveres, despite the pressures of destabilizing actions and incidents of harassment and intimidation.

Incidents such as these have a decidedly human element to them, harassment of fisherfolks in their traditional fishing grounds, for example, have a political salience that is often understated in discussions focusing on security aspects of the disputes. They render the human face to the disputes and trigger public sensibilities that cannot be ignored.

All parties 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 to ensure success.

ASEAN and the Indo Pacific

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) brings to fore the outward-looking and inclusive engagement that ASEAN fosters with like-minded partners.

Currently, ASEAN and EU are mapping out joint action that draws on the synergies between the ASEAN Outlook and the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

ASEAN and dialogue partners such as Canada, Japan, United Kingdom and the United States, are also harmonizing Indo-Pacific strategies within the priorities of ASEAN.

Philippine policy also happens to resonate 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. We support tracks of cooperation along such lines.

Widening polarities and the sharpening strategic competition between the US and China, are realities permeating the global landscape.

If not managed well, it can undo the hard-won peace and economic vitality in the Asia Pacific.

The promise of the Indo-Pacific region as the “fastest growing economic region and largest contributor to global growth in the next 30 years” must hold.

A major military confrontation would, at the very least, have enormous costs to human lives, economies, and societies, in the region and even far beyond.

At the same time, we believe, we should not fall into the trap of thinking we are reverting to a new Cold War, of framing the US – China rivalry into 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 navigating disputes and potential conflicts that involve a community of State actors and claimants that have legitimate interests and stakes.

For the Philippines, our interest in maintaining the South China Sea as a sea of peace and stability is enmeshed in our identity as an archipelagic maritime nation and our vision for the future. We are at the heart of this seascape. More than geopolitics, it is about people.

Our positions and activities in the West Philippine Sea, and the broader South China Sea, find deep anchor on UNCLOS. They were affirmed resoundingly by the 2016 Arbitral Award on the South China Sea.

Repeated infringements on our sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdiction, and other destabilizing actions go against international law, the 1982 UNCLOS, and the full and effective implementation of the 2002 DOC or the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea between the ASEAN states and China.

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

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

There is broad support for the 2016 Arbitral Award as a mooring for the rules-based maritime regime in the South China Sea.

Ladies and gentlemen,

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

Recently, President Marcos visited the People’s Republic of China and affirmed this understanding as a basis for furthering our work to advance the very important relationship between the Philippines and China.

The Philippines intends to sincerely engage in the multilateral level and bilateral mechanisms with China, including steps to improve communication lines at all levels to address incidents and help manage differences.

Last week, President Marcos completed a successful visit to Japan, which ushered in a new era of economic and security cooperation. Our relationship with Japan is well-grounded on shared values of freedom, democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law.

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

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, as well as address new and emerging challenges in the region.

The Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement between the Philippines and the United States is one of the cornerstones of our security and defense relationship with the United States. Our arrangements in this EDCA bolster our

interoperability for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), as well as addressing security challenges.

The future of this region rests on strong partnerships as on 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 for the future.

ASEAN and individual Southeast Asian countries have offered time-tested best practices for forward-looking maritime security cooperation– including through the conclusion of maritime delimitation agreements, joint protection of marine ecosystems, joint patrols to police porous borders and securing vast maritime domains from the threats of environmental catastrophe, crime and terrorism.

Despite differences in their structures, the ASEAN and the EU have one common experience and this is that strong institutions succeed in entrenching habits of dialogue and cooperation.

Let me conclude by citing a part of the speech in New York last September by President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr, whereby I underline, (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 as an important ballast that stabilizes our common vessel amidst changing global tides.” and with that I will end my presentation, thank you very much.