

Published: 19 August 2024

Remarks of the Secretary for Foreign Affairs Enrique A. Manalo

Roundtable at Seoul National University

(SNU) Asia Center

07 August 2024

Seoul, Republic of Korea

**“Strategic Interests Shaping the
Future of Philippines-South Korea Relations”**

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Excellencies, and members of the ASEAN Embassies here in Seoul.

Distinguished professors and experts, and

My colleagues,

First let me thank the Asia Center of the Seoul National University for the kind invitation, giving me the opportunity to speak before this distinguished audience.

My Official Visit this week to South Korea is part of our two countries' commemoration of our seventy-fifth anniversary of our diplomatic relations. And through the years, our ties have flourished steadily through our sustained bilateral engagement in areas ranging from security and defense; trade, investment, development cooperation; as well as cultural and of course people-to-people exchanges.

Yet there is much more to our relations than these tangible and mutually beneficial areas. Our partnership is anchored on our common commitment to our shared democratic values and the rule of law. It is animated by our advocacies for peace, stability, and prosperity. It is also a future-oriented partnership based on the growing convergence of our strategic goals.

This convergence is rooted in our shared history. Our two nations share similar experiences in valiantly asserting our right to self-determination following years of colonial rule. After the Second World War, we helped build a new peace centered around the principles of the United Nations Charter.

And when this new peace faced another danger on this peninsula, we did not hesitate to deploy over 7,000 troops to fight with our South Korean brothers. Over a hundred Filipinos paid the ultimate sacrifice in defense of Korean freedom. And this legacy remains an enduring touchstone of Filipino-Korean friendship.

Today, our international community faces serious challenges not unlike those we had faced seventy-five years ago. Sharpening strategic competitions threaten our hard-won peace, even as we remain beset by the persistent inequities and inequalities. Transformative technologies also threaten to disrupt our social order, while of course climate change threatens our existence.

As President Marcos, Jr. stressed, we are now facing a “watershed moment” -- one that requires our international community to band together in support of our “open, inclusive, and rules-based international order governed by international law and informed by the principles of equity and justice.”

It is in this context that the Philippines is actively embracing its role in this region and around the world as a trusted partner, a credible pathfinder, and committed peacemaker. This resonates with President Yoon’s admonition “for South Korea to no longer be confined to this peninsula but to rise to the challenge of being a ‘Global Pivotal State’ that advances freedom, peace, and prosperity through liberal democratic values and substantial cooperation.”

The premise of South Korea’s vision of a “Global Pivotal State” is grounded on the same strategic thinking that informs the Philippines’ global outlook. In his speech at the Lowy Institute earlier this year in Australia, President Marcos, Jr. identified **four strategic considerations** that compel us to firmly defend the rules-based international order. I believe these are also relevant to South Korea.

First, the rules-based order is the best guarantee for the sovereign equality of all states. It rejects the notion of spheres of influence, buffer countries, and satellite states. It also rejects the hierarchical approach that views international affairs from the prism only of the so-called “major countries” and small states.

This approach tends to rationalize clearly illegal actions as consequences of, or reactions to, geostrategic rivalries. It subordinates the legitimate rights of states to the strategic interests of a handful of major powers. It reduces our countries to mere bystanders to unfolding world events, and our region as just another theater for major power rivalries.

The rules-based order demands that the sovereign equality of states remain sacrosanct, and that international law apply to all. This is why it is important to uphold the United Nations Charter as well as the peaceful resolution of disputes as affirmed in the 1982 Manila Declaration.

Unfortunately, current realities have made it an imperative even for law-abiding states to strengthen their defense and security capabilities. So, even as we in the Philippines pursue an independent foreign policy that prioritizes the rule of law, diplomacy, and dialogue, strategic exigencies compel us to modernize our armed forces and

undertake related actions, especially in the economic sphere. In this area, the Philippines finds a reliable partner in South Korea.

Our acquisition of South Korean fighter jets, corvettes, and frigates, along with our military-to-military and intelligence exchanges and joint exercises with South Korean counterparts, have boosted our efforts to modernize our armed forces in accordance with our Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept.

Beyond military capabilities, it is also important to build economic resilience. In this area, too, the Philippines finds the Republic of Korea an important partner. For the Philippines, trade and investment from South Korea now ranks fourth in terms of bilateral volume and fourth in terms of approved investments. The signing of our Free Trade Agreement last year has girded our economic partnership significantly by opening up cooperation in emerging sectors, such as electric and hybrid vehicles, green technology, creative and knowledge industries, and advancements in the health sectors, especially in vaccine development and bioengineering.

And this leads me to the **second** strategic consideration. The predictability and stability that the rules-based order engenders provides an enabling environment for sustained economic growth.

Under our, as we call it, “Ambisyon 2040”, we Filipinos are determined to build a high-income economy within a generation. The spirit of this ambition finds resonance in South Korea’s aspiration to become a “Global Pivotal State.” To achieve these, we both need an enabling environment—international and regional.

The Philippines thus agrees with the premise of South Korea’s Indo-Pacific Strategy, which directly links your national interests to the stability and prosperity of our region. This stability and prosperity are in turn premised on what President Marcos, Jr. calls the “three constants ” that should guide our region: the sovereign equality of states; the rule of law and the integrity of multilateralism; and ASEAN Centrality. And by the way, ASEAN just turned 57 years old today.

As the first Southeast Asian country with which South Korea formally established bilateral ties, the Philippines remains South Korea’s ideal partner in enhancing cooperation with ASEAN, including through the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative.

The **third** strategic consideration lies in how the rules-based order upholds a credible legal regime that guarantees equitable access to the global commons.

In this context of maritime democracies like the Philippines and Republic of Korea, the unified and universal character of the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) as the Constitution of the Oceans is crucial.

Nearly sixty million Filipinos reside in coastal areas and derive their livelihood from the maritime resources, including those found in our exclusive economic zone. This is why we are unyielding in protecting our sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdiction in the South China Sea or as we call it, the West Philippine Sea, despite illegal, coercive,

and aggressive actions, especially by China, that continue to undermine our legally settled rights.

International law is clear. Maritime claims in the South China Sea cannot go beyond what UNCLOS permits. The so-called Nine Dash Line is fictional. No single country can claim almost the whole of this area as its territory. There are pockets of high seas in the South China Sea.

And we are on solid legal footing. The 1982 UNCLOS as well as the 2016 Arbitral Award continue to be anchors of our policy in the West Philippine Sea, and we thank South Korea for supporting our efforts to defend international law.

Upholding the rule of law in the regional and global maritime space is also pivotal to the Republic of Korea, which is a major shipbuilding hub and trading economy. Crucially, sixty percent of the world maritime trade passes through our region. At the same time, our region is also home to nearly half of the recognized megadiverse countries in the world, the Philippines included. Marine biodiversity, including in areas beyond national jurisdiction, will continue to be indispensable.

This provides context to our Maritime Dialogue or Maritime Cooperation Dialogue established in 2022. We have made significant headways in critical areas, such as the blue economy and addressing marine litter and pollution.

The **fourth** strategic consideration pertains to how the rules-based order enables states to galvanize effective international action to confront challenges that no single state can successfully tackle on its own.

If I may paraphrase a piece of dialogue from a modern classic of television: “There are times when we are 195 countries, but there are times when we are one world and have global needs.”

The impact of climate change is a global concern. The Philippines has consistently called upon all nations to abide by their legally-binding commitments under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change as well as its various Protocols, informed by the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities.

We welcome South Korea’s stated intent to take on the mantle of leadership in climate change and energy security cooperation, as expressed in its Indo-Pacific Strategy. In this context, engagement with ASEAN on environment and climate change through the Dialogue Partner mechanism and the ASEAN Regional Forum offers the means to collaborate on enhancing policymaking and implementation.

In the operationalization of the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage at COP28, and the recent decision granting the hosting of the Fund’s Board in the Philippines, we see an opportunity for productive exchanges with South Korea in climate justice and climate finance. This is especially significant as Republic of Korea can draw from its extensive experience being the host country of the Global Green Growth Institute, as well as being a major contributor to the multi-billion-dollar Green Climate Fund, among others.

Nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation is another area of global significance and common interest. The importance of the multilateral disarmament and non-proliferation regime has become especially pronounced in the context of rapid expansions in nuclear arsenals in the Indo-Pacific region, as well as North Korea's flouting of its commitments to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and relevant UN Security Council Resolutions.

In the context of the NPT review process, our two countries are active in promoting nuclear risk reduction and transparency. The Philippines also advocates for the immediate negotiation of a fissile material cut-off treaty.

We are both firm in our belief that the path to peace requires the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. The Philippines has consistently condemned North Korea's nuclear tests and ballistic missile launches and has called on Pyongyang to fully comply with all relevant UN Security Council Resolutions and its obligations under the NPT and IAEA Safeguards Agreements.

Finally, in the area of rapidly emerging transformative technologies, the Philippines and South Korea are active players in multilateral efforts to future-proof the global governance regime. At the UN General Assembly, we are advocating for developing norms of responsible behavior in outer space and for promoting the responsible use of artificial intelligence in the military domain.

Let me conclude by some remaining remarks first by recalling a quote from the discussions in Manila regarding the outbreak of the Korean War in 1949, attributed to the great Filipino statesman, General Carlos P. Romulo: "Korea is next door to us and the outcome of the struggle there will have immediate and unavoidable influences... upon our country."

We knew even then that our interests were intertwined. We never hesitated to shed blood together with our Korean brothers in the defense of freedom and democracy on this peninsula.

And looking to the future, we see an even stronger convergence between the four strategic considerations identified by President Marcos, Jr. and the strategic premise of President Yoon's vision for a "Global Pivotal State." Clearly, the Philippines and South Korea share the same interest in defending an open, inclusive, and rules-based international order, and ensuring that it remains governed by international law and informed by the principles of equity and justice.

A solid foundation of friendship and cooperation has been established over the past seventy-five years. On it, our partnership shall flourish in the years ahead.

Thank you.

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