

THE purpose of Philippine Foreign Policy is to secure the national interest in our dealings with foreign nations, regional organizations and international bodies. This has been done through its three long-established pillars, namely: 1) promoting national security; 2) enhancing economic diplomacy; and 3) protecting the rights and welfare of Filipinos overseas. In terms of a practical work program, this must mean advancing under these three pillars the national development and good-government objectives of the administration of President Benigno S. Aquino III.

Our program of work will follow from an assessment of where the country stands today and what corresponding actions we must take in foreign affairs such as: What is the current regional and international environment that we must confront? What is the best way to engage in order to obtain the greatest advantages for our country and our people? How do we mobilize international cooperation overseas to promote our primordial goal of nation-building at home?

I. PROMOTING NATIONAL SECURITY

Under our first Foreign Policy pillar, national security, we must consider prevailing geopolitical conditions. New centers of global power and influence have emerged. The Cold War is long gone and new alignments must take into consideration these shifts.

Our major concern should be to build a safe and strong regional neighborhood. We should consider the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as the bedrock of Philippine Foreign Policy for the 21st century. The Philippines will strengthen its bilateral relations with member states of the Association, will rely on the Association in resolving its territorial disputes with other countries, and will strive for the realization of an ASEAN Community Council, an ASEAN Political-Security Community Council, ASEAN Economic Community Council, and an ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Council.

Through ASEAN and on our own, we must engage China, India, Japan and other major regional powers such as Republic of Korea, Australia, New Zealand and Indonesia in mutually beneficial security and defense dialogues. This includes, of course, an enduring strong defense partnership with the United States, built upon our bilateral PH-US Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT), which will remain crucial for our defense modernization.

Our country must also continue its vibrant relations with the countries of the Middle East in resolving the Mindanao problems, the Palestinian issues, and global terrorism.

We must design defense and security relationships to manage new realities. Classic ideas of balance of power and containment have outlived their relevance. In their place we have emphasized new cooperation on fresh dangers, including transnational crime, piracy and terrorism, as well as on cooperation for humanitarian emergencies.

Since the Philippines is less likely to affect these emerging political and security arrangements on its own, it makes sense to do so in concert with others. The mechanisms constructed in recent years by ASEAN, including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), engage all the powers

with interests in our region in non-confrontational, inclusive and transparent dialogues that serve to enhance peace and stability.

We should also remain active in the United Nations in promoting global peace and development. Last May, the Philippines successfully chaired the 2010 Review of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which is the cornerstone of the global nuclear non-proliferation regime. The Philippines should also continue its involvement in peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance. In this manner, the Philippines is doing its part as a responsible member of the international community of nations.

Why must the Philippines continue to be engaged on the regional and global stage? It is because we seek stability not just for its own sake, but also for our own reasons. We want to avoid foreign problems spilling over into our homeland or our region. We want to pursue national development for which access to prosperous world markets and safe maritime routes is essential. We want our Filipinos overseas to be safe and secure in their host nations.

II. ENHANCING ECONOMIC DIPLOMACY

Under our second Foreign Policy pillar, economic diplomacy, it is imperative for us to give priority to and to address the challenge of poverty alleviation. To successfully do this, we must manage the reality of globalization with greater aggressiveness and skill if we do not want the Philippines to be left further behind in the global development race. Increased competition, expanding foreign markets and investments, new products and services, financial flows, technology transfer, BPO, ICT, tourism, and international labor migration will all be of importance in this regard. This will also apply to such issues as food and fuel security, currency stability, sustainable development and HRD.

As directed by our President, we will need to effectively use the resources of the DFA on as many areas of economic diplomacy as we can afford and sustain. Based on national export and investment priorities, we will have to be more engaged with traditional economic and commercial partners in East Asia, North America and Europe, and new ones in South and Central Asia, South America, the Middle East and Africa. To be as effective as possible, our economic diplomacy must be anchored on transparent and good governance, stable and predictable policies, and competitive domestic conditions that are attractive to foreign investment.

We must objectively assess the national benefit of new free-trade agreements (FTA) and economic-partnership arrangements, even as we should implement in good faith what was already concluded.

Carefully coordinated government approaches are needed at home to truly promote priority investment areas, including natural-resource development, mining, clean and green energy, and tourism abroad.

We should also not ignore other regional and international forums and organizations, such as APEC, the WTO, the World Intellectual Property Organization, UNCTAD and other United

Nations bodies, whose deliberations have a fundamental impact on national development. In those bodies, the Philippines must show solidarity with developing nations whose economic concerns are similar to our own. Together with them, we have to oppose protectionism in the industrialized economies, reform global economic governance to give developing nations a greater voice, and enhance global justice in areas such as climate change where developing countries have for so long endured unfair and inequitable conditions.

III. PROTECTING THE RIGHTS & WELFARE OF FILIPINOS OVERSEAS

Under our third Foreign Policy pillar, the protection and promotion of the rights and welfare of Filipinos overseas, we should continue the forward policy that has been built up over the years on their behalf. The Philippines has one of the best internationally recognized systems among developing countries for helping its citizens overseas. This should be strengthened further as Republic Act (RA) 10022, or the Amended Migrant Workers Act, is implemented.

An urgent concern is the Filipinos facing capital punishment in other countries. The Philippine Government must spare no effort to ensure that their rights are respected, that they are afforded full due process and that, even after conviction, appeals for humane understanding and clemency are pursued, as was done most recently in China. Beyond this, the Government must be resolute in the fight against drug and human trafficking syndicates that victimize Filipinos and endanger them overseas.

With so many Filipinos abroad, this effort will be increasingly broadened. We should pursue or enhance migrant worker-related bilateral agreements, regional arrangements and international standards and consultations. The latter includes the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD), both of which the Philippines helped to realize.

Furthermore, in this modern age, Philippine Foreign Policy should be able to draw ideas and inputs from broad sectors of Philippine society. Not only must the Philippine Legislature provide its perspectives to the Executive Branch, but partners can also be embraced in the private sector, civil society, academia, media and the Filipino diaspora abroad.

If the Philippines is to move forward, we must all pull together in the quest for the enduring aspirations for peace, prosperity and progress.

(This was also published in Philippine Daily Inquirer, Philippine Star)