

**PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE
PRESIDENTIAL NEWS DESK**

**OPEN FORUM BY PRESIDENT FERDINAND R. MARCOS JR.
AT THE FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS ASSOCIATION OF THE PHILIPPINES (FOCAP)
50TH ANNIVERSARY PRESIDENTIAL FORUM**

[Held at the Rigodon Hall, The Manila Hotel, Manila | 15 April 2024]

Q: Good afternoon, Mr. President. It's great honor to meet you in the DC last week, and also here in Manila, and I wish to ask you about the historical trilateral summit held in DC, and the joint vision statement announced the establishment of trilateral maritime dialogue to cooperate, and collective response and coordination – to enhance coordination. What is this dialogue meant for? Is it to respond to illegal and dangerous actions in the West Philippine Sea, and when, and where, and by who the next meeting will be held? Thank you!

PRESIDENT MARCOS: Thank you, thank you for that. Yes, I think it bears explanation. First of all, the trilateral agreement, as I was explaining when I was in Washington, DC, was that, it is not, it is not a response to the immediate occurrences, incidents that are happening to us, with us, around us.

But really, a continuing develop and evolution of the relationship that we always have with the United States and with Japan. And in truth, it formalizes what the US and Japan and the Philippines have already been doing together. Now, of course, security and defense are a great part of that trilateral agreement. But an even greater part of that trilateral agreement are the economic cooperation that are being fostered by the trilateral agreement.

We went, during the summit Prime Minister Kishida and President Joe Biden, we went into quite a bit detail as to what those areas are: semiconductors, renewables, the transfer of technology, green minerals. All of these things were spoken about. And, that plays an essential part of that trilateral agreement.

So, it is, it's not directed at anyone, or against anyone. It is merely a strengthening or formalization and institutionalizing, I supposed, the relationship of the United States, Japan and the Philippines.

Now, the security and defense part of the trilateral agreement, of course speaks of interoperability, speaks of joint exercises, which seemed to be perfectly, which we have been doing, again we have already been doing before, but we have now put it down on paper and in a formal document as to what we plan, and that partnership will continue to evolve as time goes on.

So, when it comes to security and defense aspect – I'm sorry – of the South China Sea, of the West Philippine Sea, really what the aim of the trilateral agreement and, but it's only the United States, Japan and the Philippines, it's very many other countries all around the region, and even as far as EU, as far as North America is really to maintain the freedom of navigation along the South China Sea, simply because it is a recognition that the world right now is still having to recover from the pandemic economy, from the shocks that came from the Ukraine, the war in

Ukraine and then now the Middle East, which had a big escalates with Iran, Iran, attacking Israel.

So, these are the elements that we are having to deal with. These are the shocks that are completely beyond our control. So, we have to maintain commerce, we have to maintain the peace, we have to maintain stability. And that is what really the point of the trilateral is so that we will provide for ourselves in the Region, in the Indo-Pacific region, an area of peace and stability so that we can all find our way in this new global economy, post-pandemic economy. And I think that's really the point of the trilateral agreement.

Q: Also, this statement mentioned, as you mentioned about the HADR exercises to [inaudible] ones. And that can be integrated in the maritime activities such as Balikatan 2025. Does it mean that Japanese defense force can be regular member of this Balikatan exercise and how, and when is the faster HADR exercise will take place? Thank you.

PRESIDENT MARCOS: Well, 'Balikatan' is traditionally between the Philippines, which together with the Philippines and the US. That's part of our mutual defense treaty that we hold these exercises ever year. Now, with the inclusion of Japan, and to some of these exercises that we've been doing, not only balikatan but others, I don't see any reason why Japan should not be part of those exercise in the future.

That I again, I think it's a good move for us to make simply because it will make it easier for us to work together, and to coordinate together and to, so that we can do the most, focus where the problems are, do maximize the resources that we have so that we can maintain the peace and stability, freedom of navigation and adhere totally and completely, and constantly to the rule of international law and specifically the UNCLOs.

Q: So, the 'Balikatan' can be [inaudible] through that exercise next year?

PRESIDENT MARCOS: Well, we'll see about that. You're not the first person to mention it. And, I think that may be something that we can study. We'll, let us just do this Balikatan now, the Balikatan exercise that we're coming into now are the largest exercises that we have ever had. The most complex, and it touches on areas that we have never really had to deal with before, specifically cybersecurity, command and control – all of these things that we did not before, that previously we had not included in our coordinative efforts for Balikatan.

So, let's get to that and then after that, we'll look again, where, how the trilateral agreement has allowed us to more options, to include Japan, and, we'll see and I, for one, have no objection to such an idea. Thank you.

Q: My question is regarding about the West Philippine Sea, and also the mutual defense treaty. Despite the Ayungin incident recently where some soldiers were injured, President, you said that there were no reason to invoke the mutual defense treaty, so, under what conditions would it possible be invoked.

PRESIDENT MARCOS: I think Secretary Austin explained it very well. If any serviceman, Filipino serviceman is killed by an attack from any foreign power, then that is time to invoke the mutual defense treaty. I, actually, when I spoke to him in Washington, I thanked him for making it very, very clear to everyone and he did precisely that. He was asked the same question that we're all asked when do you invoke the mutual defense treaty? When does it kick in to action?

And, he said 'that if a Filipino serviceman is killed because of an attack, or an aggressive action by another foreign power.

Q: So, just a follow-up. The treaty be invoked against also the patrol vessels, or the maritime militias, rather than the military?

PRESIDENT MARCOS: Well, as long as they have actually caused casualties and has killed the serviceman, then whatever their designations are, whether they are merchant marine, or coast guard, or actual gray vessels or navy vessels, it does not matter. That is an attack on the Philippines by a foreign power.

Q: Does the Philippines have a plan to give the US military access to more Philippine bases as part of EDCA such as building one in Batanes, and are you concerned that such a move could provoke even stronger actions?

PRESIDENT MARCOS: The answer to that is no. The Philippines has no plan to create anymore bases or give access to anymore bases. So, yes. Is anything else you would like to ask? I'm happy to answer.

Q: Given that it being granted access to nine bases, so far, as you concerned that this is part of – this could be provoking a strong actions by China in the South China Sea, or do you actually consider these sites as protection in case of a conflict between the US and China?

PRESIDENT MARCOS: No, I think [inaudible]

PRESIDENT MARCOS: No I think that's [not the situation in his head?]. These are reactions to what has happened in the South China Sea. To the aggressive actions that we have had to deal with: the water cannoning, the lasers, the collision, the blocking, blocking of our banca our fishermen, the putting of barriers across a Scarborough shoal. This is a reaction to that. This did not cause that. That happened before we had EDCA.

Q: And just to clarify, that's a categorical note to more EDCA bases.

PRESIDENT MARCOS: No, definitely. No, no, no, no. The Philippines has no plans to, to open or to establish more EDCA bases.

Q: As my follow-up question, are you concerned that a Donald Trump administration would not offer the same iron-clad commitment to the Philippines that the Biden administration has repeatedly made as recently as last week? And what impact would that have on the Philippine strategy of pushing back against Chinese actions in the South China Sea, such as publicizing incidents?

PRESIDENT MARCOS: Well, I think it would be artful to say that we do not watch closely the political cycle that is ongoing in the United States. Because inevitably, if there is a change in government, if President Biden is re-elected, then we have a fairly solid ground to base our positions on, because we have already spoken with him. But inevitably, if there is a change in government, then there will be changes in policy. We do not know what those are. But I believe that what we have agreed with the United States are beyond politics. And I think that since they are, they almost rise to treaty agreements, those treaty agreements must be honored. And that I think puts us on a good ground, but I will not deny that we look, certainly, we examine who's going

to be in charge. In case the former president Trump is re-elected, what will be the changes that will affect us? It's hard to say. It's all speculation for now.

PRESIDENT MARCOS: Good afternoon.

Q: This is concerning the Arelma case involving ill-gotten wealth of your family of at least \$40 million in barrier bonds invested by the Banamenian Corporation Arelma in Mary Lynch in New York. The Philippine government petitioned to get it back. But you filed a petition in 2009 in New York, also later, before the Supreme Court here to stop it. According to the World Bank, it is still pending. Now that you are the president representing the Philippine government, with a solicitor general and the PCGG under you, which side will you represent Mr. President? Will you fight yourself so that the Philippine government that you now represent can finally get it for the Filipino people?

PRESIDENT MARCOS: It's hard for me to answer. You clearly know more about the case than I do. I really haven't looked at it in years and I would advise you to talk to the lawyers that are handling it because I'm not being specious or anything like that. Matagal ko nang hindi narinig yung pangalan na Arelma. We were still in Hawaii when we were hearing that name. So we haven't really been attending to it. The previous cases that are post 1986, I have not touched. It would be highly improper for me to involve myself in that. Besides, I don't have the time to do it, so I leave it to the lawyers.

Q: The Philippine government is already compensating martial law, human rights victims under your father's rule, why have you resisted issuing an apology for atrocities committed during martial law under your father's rule? And will you continue doing so as the president?

PRESIDENT MARCOS: Well, I don't think it is a duty for President to be involved. That is a personal matter for the Marcos family.

Q: But you are a member of Marcos family.

PRESIDENT MARCOS: Definitely. The role of the President is more important right now than my role as a member of the Marcos family. So I think that's my first priority.

Q: So will you apologize as president of the Republic in behalf?

PRESIDENT MARCOS: The president of the Republic? No, that seems highly a little contrived. Who is apologizing to whom now?

Q: Thank you, Mr. President. Thank you.

Q: Thank you once again for being with us today. Mr. President, your government has been saying that this is related to the South China Sea, my question, particularly on oil and gas exploration. Your government has said that it was prepared to guarantee and I quote unimpeded and peaceful exploration of all natural resources within the EEZ and other areas where we have jurisdiction. May I ask how does your government plan to accomplish that and what will that entail?

PRESIDENT MARCOS: Ah, that's a fairly sensitive question because we... Let me categorize those areas for that are ripe or that we are looking at for exploration. There are those who are in non-conflict areas. That's what we defined. That's what we termed them as now, the conflict areas and non-conflict areas.

As far as the Philippines is concerned, if those prospective reserves are within the EEZ conflict area or otherwise, then any exploration should be conducted by the Philippines. So, if that, however we choose to do it, if we choose to do it by ourselves, if we choose to do it in partnership with other corporations, which we probably will be the case because we don't have the capacity for that very large scale heavy engineering in terms of exploration.

But how that's going to be done because in our case in the Philippines, it is really not a matter of choice. Let me take it back a couple of steps. In the Philippines, we are presently trying to shift our mix of power generation from fossil fuels away from fossil fuels towards renewables. Now, that doesn't happen in an instant. You do not flick a switch and you are suddenly all renewable. You have a transition period which is turning out to be much more complicated than everyone thought.

But anyway, in the Philippines, we have decided that LNG is going to be our transition fuel and that is why it is imperative for the Philippines to now examine and to see to a guarantee the supply of LNG to our country so that we have sufficient power, because it's not enough that we maintain the levels of power generation that we have now.

With all the plans that we have, essentially to industrialize the Philippines, essentially to enter into the digital space, all of these things require a great deal of power. And so it is important to the Philippines that we explore those reserves and see exactly what there are and how we go about exploiting them and bringing that gas supply to the Philippines.

So we are doing our best. I think we will, of course, keep it simple. I think the prevailing term these days is pick the low-hanging fruit. So the low-hanging fruit will be those reserves that are within our EEZ that are not in a conflict area. Uunahin natin, we will attend to that first. And then we will see what else we can do. We need them all though. We need them all. Even if we do well with the non-conflict areas reserves, we still have to look at all the others whether they be in conflict areas or otherwise.

Q: Just a follow-up, Mr. President. Has progress been made on the oil and gas stocks between the Philippines and China? Last year, if I'm not mistaken, both countries have agreed to resume oil and gas stocks. So has progress been made if yes, why and if no, then why not?

PRESIDENT MARCOS: Well, we always come up against the same argument between China and the Philippines, because when we say that we would like to explore, they insist that these areas are in Chinese territories and therefore Chinese law must prevail. We of course, do not accept that. We say, this is Philippine territory and therefore, Philippine law should prevail. That's really where the sticking point is. Since, even before I came into office, that was already the situation we've in. I hear a great many, optimistic reports that they're saying that we have agreed, we come to an agreement but I haven't really seen something that we can work, we can use to work forward. In other words, I don't really think we have a proper agreement. When it comes down to that issue, which law shall apply and the reason that there is an argument is that China claims that these territories belong to China. We dispute that and that's where the problem is.

Q: Sir, my question is about Japan in the Reciprocal Access Agreement. When will the Philippines and Japan sign the agreement, and can you please give us a timeframe?

PRESIDENT MARCOS: For?

Q: For the RRA, sir.

PRESIDENT MARCOS: For the?

Q: The RRA, sir. The Reciprocal Access Agreement.

PRESIDENT MARCOS: Ah the Reciprocal? Ah yeah, we're working on that. Yes, we are--- malapit na--- I'm sorry, that would be coming soon.

We spoke about it again in--- with Prime Minister Kishida when I was in Washington. There aren't any real conflicts in principle, it's just a question of getting the language down and defining precisely how it's going to work, the logistical systems and how that's going to work.

But it should not take very much longer. I think we're very close to completion of that.

Q: Okay, sir, just a follow up. Filipino Comfort women who are still seeking World War II justice and reparations are raising concerns about RAA. How do you ensure that this agreement doesn't compromise the country's interest and which country do you think should take custody of Japanese soldiers committing crime on Filipino soil?

PRESIDENT MARCOS: I cannot see how the Reciprocal Agreement would affect any of that. It is entirely--- it essentially it talks about that we--- that Japan allows us to make port of call in Japan and vice versa.

How it will possibly affect the issue about comfort women and what allegation against war criminals during the second world war, I cannot see how it will bleed into that. I think it's quite distinct and discreet in its effect.

Q: About the custody, sir.

PRESIDENT MARCOS: About the?

Q: Custody.

PRESIDENT MARCOS: Of?

Q: The custody of [airing?] Japanese service men on Filipino soil. Which country do you think should take custody of these Japanese servicemen in case RAA is approved?

PRESIDENT MARCOS: It's not the same as a Visiting Forces Agreement. That, I think--- that's not--- it's not similar--- we've had problems with that with the Americans, some American forces, we all know. But that's not--- it's very, very different from what the Reciprocal Agreement will be with the Japanese.

It's not going to be as if it's their base and they--- their seamen will come down and will go into the city and go--- I don't think that that's a part of the agreement.

Q: Sir, you already reiterated the position of the Philippines regarding the ICC.

PRESIDENT MARCOS: Yes.

Q: So, sir, I raised the issue of the Philippines advocating for an international rules-based order, we're pushing for it when we are resisting Beijing's aggressive actions against the Philippines in the West Philippine Sea. But we are opting out of the Rome Statute when an adverse case has been lodged against us.

So, sir, is the rules-based order only applicable to the Philippines when it's convenient for us.

PRESIDENT MARCOS:: Okay. What is the rule about the ICC? When do they adopt jurisdiction? They adopt jurisdiction in a country or they have jurisdiction in a when no judicial system is working, is functioning, no police--- no police force is functioning.

In other words, probably there is war and none of these issues about war crimes and all of these are being attended to, simply because the administration especially the judiciary, especially in law enforcement, are not functioning.

That is the reason why we are saying, we are well within the rules. It is their rules, it is the rule of ICC that they come in when there is no judiciary. They come in when there is no police force. We have a judiciary, the chief justice--- former chief justice is sitting right here, he will explain to you how healthy and robust and how active the judiciary is. The police force I think is the same thing.

So that is the reason. It is not--- we are well within, we are well within international law when we take the position of not recognizing the jurisdiction of ICC in the Philippines.

Q: One follow up, sir. If the ICC issues an arrest warrant against former President Duterte, will the Philippine government hand him over?

PRESIDENT MARCOS:: Will we do what?

Q: Will the Philippine government have him over if the ICC...

PRESIDENT MARCOS:: We don't recognize the [war?] that they will send to us.

Q: So, that's a no?

PRESIDENT MARCOS: That's a no.

Q: Thank you, sir.

Q: Good afternoon, Mr. President. last week, you said that you were horrified that the prospect of a gentlemen's agreement between former President [inaudible] China...

PRESIDENT MARCOS:: Wouldn't you be?

Q: Of course...

PRESIDENT MARCOS: I think we all should, right?

Q: And you said, as well, Mr. President, that he should be held accountable. And since then experts have said that any such agreement compromising PH sovereignty or territory would be a violation of not just the 2016 arbitral ruling but Philippine law.

So my question for you sir, is how do you intend to hold former President Duterte accountable? Are there any actions being taken on this front?

PRESIDENT MARCOS: Well, we still have to find out what it is all about. We cannot--- I've talked to--- I've tried to be in--- get in touch with former officials of the previous administration who could possibly had been involved in this discussion. And, I have to tell you I haven't gotten a straight answer out of anyone.

One party says--- one person says there's no agreement, another says there was talk but it's only status quo, no there was--- the other one will say, there was an agreement.

So, I'll go back to the three questions that I asked when this subject came up. Number one, the first question I want to--- I want answered is, was there an agreement in fact? I think by now we can see that in fact there was a secret agreement.

And what verifies that and what--- I think for me, at least, convinces me that there was, of in fact a secret agreement, is insistence of the Chinese government that there was a secret agreement.

I do not think the Chinese government--- I don't think Beijing will just make up--- just out of nowhere say, there was a secret agreement when there was no such thing.

Alright, so, I think, to my mind that is sufficient to me--- to prove to me that there was such an agreement.

The second question I need answered is, what is contained in that secret agreement? What did we agree to? Why did we agree to them, to that? And what exactly is it that we compromised? Number two.

Number three, and this is a critical question, why did you keep it secret? Why is that not--- why is there not one single document that contains that agreement? Why is there not one shred of evidence that can show that this agreement exists? Why when we [were] in the transition period in the previous administration to this administration, did no one mention a secret agreement? Why was it kept secret?

That's a--- these are simple questions but I find--- I'm finding a great deal of difficulty finding answers for them. Because I hear one thing, and another thing, and another thing, and another thing, it's all very--- maraming palusot, in other words. I don't know how to translate that in English but maraming palusot.

Q: Let me add a fourth question to that, Mr. President. What happens if you find out that there might be a legal liability on the part of former President...

PRESIDENT MARCOS: I cannot see how that could possibly be a legal liability. There is no evidence of any agreement.

Q: Okay.

PRESIDENT MARCOS: Another--- what--- is there a document that is signed? I'd love to see it. You know some--- it does not affect the Philippines.

And if there is--- I've said that before, when this first came up a few months ago, and it turns out the Chinese are insisting that there is a secret agreement and perhaps there is, and I said, I didn't-- I don't know anything about the secret agreement, should there be such a secret agreement, I am now rescinding it.

So, I've rescinded it, if indeed it exists.

Ang labo--- we are so far from getting to the truth--- to the numb of a thing. We are so far away from it yet, that is very hard to give a reaction to that--- to those questions.

Let's get those three questions answered. We've answered the first one. Now, what is contained in that secret agreement and why was it kept secret, those are the two questions left. Once we get those three answers, real answers, then we will know what to do.

Q: Just a quick follow up, Mr. President. You also said last week that you've found the silence of Vice President Sara Duterte understandable. Even as her family members have attacked you lately. And some analysts have even said that the family is out to undermine your policy. How would you describe your relationship with the Duterte family currently? And how would you reconcile your continued allyship with the Vice President and her family's vocal disdain for your policy?

PRESIDENT MARCOS: It's complicated. *[laughter]*

It's complicated. But if you ask about the--- one of course, the most contact with Inday Sara, how we were with each other during the campaign, after the election, I don't know, it hasn't really changed.

'Yun na nga, that's what she always says, she said, "oh are you alright na you were going in the middle of all of these?" And she's just, "No, I 'll just work. I don't--- I'll just work and work, and work, and work."

That's her attitude

Q: Thank you.

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