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I would like to thank you for this opportunity to discuss Philippine-American relationship. Our cooperation with the United States Armed Forces is the cornerstone of our bilateral mutual defense alliance. The men and women of America's armed services are valued friends of the Filipino people and important partners in our common quest for security and stability in our countries and the Asia-Pacific region we share.

I have brought with me some of my staff from the Philippine Embassy. Col. Nestor Sadiarin will give a power-point briefing of the current threat situation we are facing in the Philippines. I am sure you will find his briefing informative.

What I will do is to discuss current affairs in the Philippines and in our relations with the United States.

Today, the Philippines stands at a crossroads of challenge. In January 2001, then Vice-President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was elevated to the Presidency through a peaceful Filipino Peoples Power revolution. President Arroyo succeeded a corrupt administration that threatened the economy and national security.

Acutally, this was the second time the Filipino People rose in peaceful protest to remove a bad leader. Our first Peoples Power Revolution In February 1986 ended the Marcos dictatorship. Sometimes called the first 'CNN Revolution," it was seen all over the world and inspired freedom movements in Eastern Europe and elsewhere.

President Arroyo has made the building of a strong Philippine Republic the centerpiece of her government program for national development. Her program addresses a number of major areas. First is to improve government and, more generally, the quality of governance. The President seeks to overcome the lack of good governance, marked by pronounced corruption that had so endangered the Republic during the previous administration.

Second, President Arroyo is intent on implementing key policies required to sustain economic recovery and modernization. The Philippines is preparing for intensified competition in the global economy, because expanding foreign trade and investment also expands economic opportunity for all. Economic modernization at home through deregulation and reform is matched by increasing engagement abroad through the WTO, APEC and ASEAN.

Third, President Arroyo has a strong emphasis on poverty alleviation. More than half the Philippine population lives below the poverty line. Many must eke out an existence on one dollar a day. The President is determined that good government and economic modernization be designed to reduce the incidence of poverty. She has other direct intervention programs to help the poor with livelihood projects, rural development, land reform and basic social services.

In a supreme act of statesmanship, President Arroyo announced last December that she would not run in the 2004 presidential elections. She thereby placed herself beyond the fray of partisan politics, which enables her to focus all her energy on national development. The President does not have the temperament to become a lame-duck administrator, and she will continue as the national leader until her last day in office.

President Arroyo has also led in Philippine foreign policy. A strong Philippine-American alliance is a focal point of that policy. You will recall that she was the first Asian leader to commit full support for the US-led multinational coalition against global terrorism immediately after 9/11.

The Philippines was fighting terrorists long before 9/11, and we welcomed the new American resolve to confront and destroy them. Playing its part in the global effort, the Philippines galvanized its fellow-ASEAN members to intensify their regional counter-terror cooperation.

Manila and Washington have been working with increasing closeness to quell the threat of terror. President Arroyo assumed office just a few hours before President George W. Bush did in the White House. The two spoke shortly after their respective inaugurations and have become firm friends since then. In a special honor, President Bush has invited President Arroyo to Washington for a State Visit in April. President Arroyo is only the third foreign leader to receive such an invitation from President Bush.

Of course, our current closeness is not just entirely the handiwork of the present administrations in Manila and Washington. It reflects a century of close ties between our two countries.

The United States military first arrived in the Philippines during the Spanish-American War in 1898. After defeating the Spaniards with the aid of Filipino revolutionaries, the United States proceeded to annex the Philippines.

Annexation, of course, was not welcomed by the Filipino people. They had declared independence from Spain and had inaugurated Asia's first liberal democratic constitution and Republic. The result of this stand-off was the bloody Philippine-American War, which terminated the First Philippine Republic and firmly established American sovereignty.

Despite this inauspicious start, mutual respect and goodwill quickly healed the wounds of war. Unlike other imperial powers, the United States encouraged increasing self-government in the only sizeable colony that it ever acquired. Washington went on to promise independence for the Philippines.

Meanwhile, America sponsored improvements in Philippine public education, health, infrastructure and commerce. The US Armed Forces did extensive civic action in the early years, and later on, took charge of the external defense of the Philippines.

America's pledge of independence, and the commitment to democracy shared by Filipinos and Americans alike, meant that our two peoples fought side-by-side in World War II against Japanese aggression. The searing experience of that great global conflict made our troops blood-brothers. It sealed the enduring friendship between our countries.

After World War Two, we concluded a Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) as a shield against renewed external aggression. To hold the line against communist expansionism, we stood together in the Korean War, in the Indo-Chinese conflict and in the long twilight struggle of the Cold War.

Following the Cold War, we sought to promote peace in the new hotspots of the world. The Philippines joined multinational peacekeeping efforts in Haiti, Cambodia and East Timor. A Philippine medical contingent was sent to the first Gulf War. The Philippines strongly supported the case made by the United States against Iraq in the United Nations.

Our bilateral defense cooperation has been intensifying. In 1998, we concluded a bilateral Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA). Last year, our defense establishments finalized a Mutual Logistical Service Agreement (AMLA). Large-scale joint exercises and other defense activities are in full swing. Each year, our two armed forces should work better together as the United States assists Philippine defense modernization.

The Philippines especially appreciates the training and support extended in running the Abu Sayyaf terrorists to ground. The Abu Sayyaf do not speak for the vast majority of Filipino Muslims, who are peaceful and loyal citizens. We are profoundly grateful to the brave members of the US armed service who have given their lives to protect the Filipino people from the scourge of Abu Sayyaf terrorism.

The United States has also supported our efforts to stop the terrorism of the armed communist movement.

American troops are in the Philippines with the full consent of its government and people. Only a very small minority opposes our defense cooperation, mostly for out-moded ideological reasons.

Our ability to work so well together is a good sign for the future. Certainly, our two countries will continue to share fundamental strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific. The terrorist threat in Southeast Asia will remain a common apprehension. The Korean Peninsula, the South China Sea and the Taiwan Straits will continue to pose risks for the general peace of the region and, indeed, of the world.

In the face of such uncertainties, we should both invest in a strong bilateral alliance. Towards this end, we need a sustained and robust assistance program to enable the Philippine armed forces to more fully assume alliance responsibilities. It is no secret that the Philippines is far behind other regional countries in terms of defense capabilities.

In addition, we must build the regional institutions that will make it easier for Asia-Pacific countries to consult and cooperate on regional security. Our region does not have the security infrastructure that exists in Europe, even though it may face more compelling dangers. From this perspective, American engagement with ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum and other mechanisms for regional security dialogue is important.

However, we are joined by much more than strategic concerns. We must never forget that we are not merely allies. We are democratic allies. Our forebears defended democracy together from fascism, militarism and communism. Today, we are defending democracy from terrorism.

In closing, therefore, let me say that as democracies, the bond between Filipinos and Americans is the most important bond of all. There are some 2.4 million Filipinos and Filipino-Americans in the United States today, while 100,000 US citizens are living in the Philippines.

Many Filipinos are serving in the US Armed Forces. They have served wherever the forces have been. Two Filipino-Americans have become generals in the US Army. They and the Americans who have crossed the Pacific to assist the Philippines, are a living testament of our enduring friendship.

I thank you for your kind attention.

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