Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to CSIS. On behalf of CSIS and our CEO, John Hamre, we’re very happy to welcome the Honorable Enrique Manalo, secretary of foreign affairs for the Republic of the Philippines.

My name is Victor Cha. I’m senior vice president for Asia here at CSIS and professor at Georgetown.

Ladies and gentlemen, the secretary is here in D.C. at a time of a real moment in the relationship between the United States and the Philippines. We have really witnessed a new momentum in this relationship under Presidents Marcos and Biden. The two countries started out the new year with a strong Bilateral Security Dialogue in January, and now the secretary’s here for the 2+2 meeting to discuss further advances in this alliance.

The U.S.-Philippines alliance, now over 70 years old, is our oldest military treaty ally in the Indo-Pacific. No offense to anybody from Thailand, but in terms of military treaty alliances this is our oldest. Indeed, it was the first spoke in the hub-and-spokes alliance system that the United States started to build at the end of World War II and the start of the Cold War.

I imagine that the secretary will have many issues to discuss with his counterparts this week. The agenda in the alliance is packed with issues, including information sharing, advancing the EDCA, cybersecurity, climate, human rights and democracy, supply chains, renewable energy, and, of course, Taiwan, which sits only 90 miles from the northernmost point of the Philippines.

This is a full agenda, which is a good thing. It’s good because it shows that the agenda of the alliance is not just providing private goods to the United States and to the Republic of the Philippines. It is also providing public goods to the region and to the world.

Let me just say one last thing, which is that as somebody who studies the history of U.S. alliances in the Indo-Pacific, I have always been impressed by the tradition of deep cultural ties in this alliance. It really is like no other. The alliance is bolstered by a vibrant 4.3-million-strong Philippine-American community in the United States. Moreover, over 300,000 Americans live in the Philippines, which is more than in South Korea and in Japan.

The longest-running U.S. Fulbright program is with the Philippines. One of our oldest Peace Corps program’s destinations is the Philippines as well. These programs among the younger generation create the new and future
constituencies of the alliance, which is so important for the alliance’s resilience.

So welcome, Mr. Secretary, to CSIS. I’m sure that you will preview for us all of the deliverables in the upcoming 2+2 meeting tomorrow. I’m just kidding. I don’t expect that you’ll do that.

I should add that it is also a pleasure to work with your embassy here in D.C. and with your wonderful ambassador, Ambassador Romualdez.

So we look forward to the discussion. Let me now turn the podium over to Greg Poling, our senior fellow and director for Southeast Asia.

So Greg, over to you.

Gregory B. Poling: Thank you, Victor, very much.

And thank all of you for coming out on a Monday.

This is a real honor for us. Let me echo that. The CSIS Southeast Asia Program firmly believes that the U.S.-Philippine alliance is a tentpole of our work in the region, as it should be, as it clearly has been under the current administration. We are very pleased to be hosting Secretary Manalo, restarting what was a pretty good run of hosting secretaries of foreign affairs in the Philippines until COVID had to put a crimp on that, as it did with so much else.

I would also like to echo the thanks to Ambassador Romualdez and the team at the Philippine embassy, as well as Ambassador Carlson, for helping us bring this together.

And before I formally introduce the secretary, just a bit of housekeeping. Today’s event is on the record. So we have a large audience watching online, along with those of you here in the room. I invite all of you to ask questions, both online and here. I will do my best, when we get to Q&A, to try to pick between the two.

Today’s event is made possible by general support to CSIS, and it’s being held under the banner of an event series that we launched last year called the ASEAN Leadership Forum, in which we have so far hosted the former secretary general of ASEAN, the coordinating minister for economic affairs in Indonesia, and now the secretary of foreign affairs of the Philippines.

So with that, let me go ahead and introduce our guest of honor and make way, as I should. So Secretary Enrique Manalo has been a professional
within the Department of Foreign Affairs in the Philippines for four decades. He has twice been appointed undersecretary for policy, the second time serving as the acting secretary of foreign affairs of the Philippines, a tryout for the job he currently holds.

He has been posted repeatedly to the U.S., to the embassy here; three different times, I think, to New York, including most recently as the Philippines permanent representative to the United Nations. He also was the Philippines senior official in the ASEAN senior officials’ meetings and helped lead Philippine negotiations with China on the code of conduct, among other things, and has served in various ambassadorial posts in Europe, including to Germany, the U.K., Ireland, Belgium, and Luxembourg, and to the entire European Union.

So with that, please join me in welcoming Secretary Enrique Manalo.
(Appause.)

Secretary Enrique Manalo:

Dr. Victor Cha, senior vice president for Asia and Korea Chair of the CSIS; Mr. Greg Poling, senior fellow and director, Southeast Asia Program of the CSIS; thank you very much for your introduction. My colleagues in the Department of Foreign Affairs, friends, and ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon.

On CSIS’s kind invitation I will be speaking on the present and future of the relationship of Philippines and the United States against the backdrop of the Christian celebration of Easter, a season of hope and triumph, and Philippine-U.S. relations are in that space at this time, a threshold of new beginnings and standing on the foundation of a time-tested alliance.

I’m actually in the – in Washington also for the 2+2 Dialogue as mentioned by Greg, which will resume tomorrow after a seven-year hiatus and this highlights the positive trajectory of our bilateral relations, which is happening now at all levels, and the shared intention of Manila and Washington to sustain this momentum.

This reforging of our alliance is taking place on the heels of the 75th anniversary of our formal diplomatic relations and the 70th year of the conclusion of the Mutual Defense Treaty, or the MDT, and the mood of our ties, especially since 2021 when we marked these milestones, has been celebratory and also probably circumspect, circumspect because both sides are conscious that the alliance must deliver, must also transform to be more firm as it is to fit the 21st century realities that differ from the context pervading at its birth.
President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., has called for, quote, “evolving the alliance to make it more responsive to present and emerging challenges.” The president has espoused an independent foreign policy with the national interest at its core and it’s rooted in Article 2 of our constitution and it serves as the touchstone of Philippine engagements with the world, and our alliance sits in a special place in the context of that policy.

First and foremost, it binds our two countries in the sacrosanct principles of freedom and democracy. Faithful to our roots as the first Asian republic and advocate of human rights and decolonization at the dawn of the United Nations, the Philippines considers this to be of foundational importance.

Secondly, our alliance is cast in a shared commitment to the post-1945 rules-based global order, and it is an order that has generally enabled the flourishing of nations and their citizens in peace. It has steered nations into beneficial convergences and through common experiences, which have only made multilateralism acquire more depth and meaning to a global community whose interests have also become more diverse and complex. In that sense, our alliance has served in good stead the Filipino and American people and also the world.

The future of the alliance is fixed on this bedrock of shared values and common purpose, and over the decades the Philippines and the United States have given the alliance the review and reflection that it merits.

But the currents of our times demand new thinking on configuring that future on the premise that this relationship is critical to advancing the interests of the Filipino and American people, our shared values and our common purpose to preserve the global order that must remain stable, and must allow nations to flourish in peace amidst transformative shifts.

And at this point I welcome the opportunity to share my views on why a rules-based global order is important to the Philippines and why we will continue to be invested and working with the United States and other partners bilaterally, regionally, and at all multilateral fora in this respect. And there are many reasons, but I’ll just cite a few.

First, the rule of law guarantees equity in the Global Commons. The Philippines is an archipelagic nation with more sea than land in our territory and the fourth largest coastline in the world, a coastline of 36,289 kilometers, or 22,548 miles. That is longer even than that of the huge United States mainland.

We are one of the 18 mega-biodiverse countries in the world, containing two-thirds of the Earth’s biodiversity and between 70 percent and 80
percent of the world’s animal and animal species. Our national footprint in the history of negotiations in the 1982 UNCLOS, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the future Treaty on the High Seas bears witness to our abiding interests in promoting equitable rules in the governance of the maritime commons. And with the establishment of the Philippine Space Agency in 2019, the first in Southeast Asia, we have set our sights to be a space-capable and spacefaring country by 2030. But we are hedging prospects for a high-income economy in 2040, and our climate change and disaster-risk-resilience capacities on space-based technologies, which permeate more and more the domains in contemporary societies, and for this we need democratic access, an equal playing field, and an inclusive and predictable governance regime in the maritime space and also in space itself.

Second, The Philippines is on the threshold of achieving the status of an upper-middle-income country and projected to be the 16th largest economy in the world by 2040. Philippine economic managers will be in Washington, D.C., this week for the Philippine Economic Briefing, and they intend to underline the high-growth forecast, bucking trends in the region and the world, and major investment reforms, some which are already underway and some which are in place. Our business pitch stresses our solid economic fundamentals and our demographic sweet spot. The national agenda for prospering the 110 million Filipino people and lifting the quality of life, especially of the marginalized, behooves The Philippines to engage in all means and endeavors to keep our region peaceful and stable, and we adhere to the central role of ASEAN in preserving a stable regional environment that promotes the social-economic well-being of the combined population of 600 million citizens in ASEAN.

The interdependence of economies in the Indo-Pacific – which is actually a regional powerhouse now, leading post-pandemic global recovery – is salient to its dynamism. And this is the very same compelling rationale for keeping – for states to keep to the path of cooperation, despite disruptive dynamics of competition and the strategic rivalry between the United States and China.

Third, multilateralism must thrive as a unifier and as a platform for inclusion and empowerment of nations and their citizens. Our rules-based global order underpins the kind of multilateralism that overcomes differences among actors, fosters effective global action vis-à-vis challenges such as public health emergencies, humanitarian crises, global warming, and response to emerging risks and threats that put us collectively in peril. This is the kind of multilateralism that the world deserves. And as long as there is no credible alternative to the United Nations and multilateralism, we need to persevere in making them work. And The Philippines has
always endeavored to make multilateralism more constructive, more inclusive, and fairer.

In our region, as it is in the world, it is important that the future is determined by the interests and agency of many, and not by one, two, or a few powers. Multilateral institutions must adapt to and leverage the rising engagement of more diverse sets of actors as the means for a broader ownership of multilateralism and its objectives and outcomes. More vital voices at the table mean more inclusivity and more resilience, and this fosters the centering role of middle voices, keeping the conversations grounded and productive and preventing them from degenerating into zero-sum debates and dysfunctional outcomes. And because of our multifaceted and distinct interests, owing to our history, geography, culture, values, and advocacies, and alliances, The Philippines has played a bridging role and moderating role in many multilateral settings where polarities threaten consensus. It is a role that we are comfortable to play and we will continue to play, given our overarching interests to foster international cooperation. And we believe that the United Nations charter and established principles and norms must be upheld, even as the world navigates change on many levels.

By recalling how President Marcos enunciated this view succinctly in New York last year, when he said before the General Assembly, I quote, “An open, inclusive, and rules-based international order that is governed by justice and law and informed by principles of justice and equity is an important ballast that stabilizes our common vessel amidst changing global tides.” End of quote.

Ladies and gentlemen and friends, President Marcos has also said that he, quote, “Cannot see a Philippine future without the United States as a partner.” I have shared my thoughts about how our common purpose for preserving a rules-based global order is very much at the heart of the future of our partnership. Our recent engagements, including the meeting between President Marcos and President Biden in September and high-level visits to the Philippines, including Vice President Kamala Harris, State Secretary Anthony Blinken, and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, in the past seven months have unleashed on both sides a fresh reimagining of how a modern alliance looks like.

While our engagements give due prominence to the upgrading of our credible defense capacities, the recasting of the alliance also focuses on reinforcing its socioeconomic moorings. Each element is crucial to enhancing our overall relationship in the 21st century, in terms of strategic depth, scope, and resilience. While it is arguably a relationship that has had its vastitudes, our work at the moment entails reshaping and fortifying its
contours to meet the contemporary challenges and opportunities as we take our ties forward into the future.

So let me first speak about developments related to the mutual defense treaty and our security partnership. One week ago the Philippines formally announced that the two governments have identified four new locations under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, or EDCA. This month, the Philippines and the United States are conducting the biggest joint exercise in EDCA history, with over 17,600 troops and observers from both the Philippines, U.S., of course, Japan, and Australia. The EDCA is a key pillar of our alliance, and the Balikatan exercises, for the first time, builds on our interoperability in the context of external defense.

The conclusion of our bilateral defense guidelines also elevates the level of mutual understanding of roles, missions, and capabilities within the alliance framework. They clarify ambiguities, while allowing new flexibilities. In the context of the MDT, joint patrols are also being envisioned. In the context of navigation operations, or FONOPS, support for the Philippines exercise of sovereign rights within our exclusive economic zone in adherence to international law and UNCLOS.

We are also exploring concrete steps to expand, where appropriate, operational coordination with like-minded partners, such as Japan and Australia. The Philippines has, on its own, scaled up its capacity as a reliable partner. The $40 billion AFP modernization is in full swing. It is modest in comparison to the scale of military spending in other nations, but it is a long-term mandate backed by the pledge of the president to shore up our minimum credible defense posture. And the Philippines has been clear and consistent about our interests in maintaining the South China Sea as a sea of peace and stability, and our aim to boost our defense capabilities, including in the framework of EDCA.

We recognize the value that the West Philippine Sea, or South China Sea, holds for all states around it, as well as its potential to unify littoral states and partners around the purposes and principles of UNCLOS as the constitution of the oceans. And we are at the heart of this seascape. And more than geopolitics, the South China Sea, for us, is also about people. Safeguarding our rights in our exclusive economic zone, or EEZ, and exercising those rights without harassment or denial of access is as much about protecting our fisherfolks’ livelihood and ensuring their access to fishing grounds as it is about preserving our marine resources for future generations.

The president has firmly said that we will continue to uphold our sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdiction in the West Philippine Sea.
And we will do so through peaceful and legal means. The 2016 arbitral award on the South China Sea and the UNCLOS serve as the moorings for the peaceful resolution of disputes and the regime in the South China Sea that would bring all parties together. A peaceful, UNCLOS-based regime necessitates sincere dialogue among all claimants and, bilaterally, the discussions between and amongst ASEAN and China on a code of conduct. We want an effective and inclusive code of conduct based on UNCLOS and one that considers the interests of all stakeholders beyond ASEAN and China. And realizing these ends demands from all parties the highest commitment to dialogue and diplomacy. Nevertheless, repeated infringements on our sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction; and other destabilizing actions that go against international law, the 1982 UNCLOS, and the spirit and letter of the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea also necessitates the enhancement of our defense capabilities.

In the meantime, cooperation and counterterrorism remains important as a component of our security relationship. The shift in the U.S. counterterrorism policy to one that is partner-led and U.S.-enabled gives due merit to other partners’ priority. In this context, our future collaboration can highlight more civilian-led, non-military counterterrorism initiatives where feasible and effective. And our growing security cooperation in cybersecurity, space situational awareness, maritime domain awareness, strategic trade, and aviation security is inextricably linked to our common duty to continue global security and – to contribute to global security and prosperity.

In the same context, the Philippines and the U.S. are working closely together in relevant regional mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and other forums such as the United Nations to develop rules and processes to address new and emerging threats, including in the context of biosafety and biosecurity and the holistic updating of the global governance regime covering outer space, and also the strengthening of the multilateral export-control regime. While we both recognize the impact of new technologies, we share the sense of responsibility to put guardrails to their exploitation for the wrong purposes.

On the economic partnership between the Philippines and the United States, new variables emerge heralding that our ties have set a foot in the future. Economic security and resiliency in the face of geopolitical turmoil, disruption in the global supply chains, and external shocks in general are key watchwords in this regard.

And there is a palpable zeal to capitalize on synergies in resilient global supply chains, clean energy including wind energy, green metals,
decarbonization, climate-smart food systems, agriculture innovation, health care and health security, safeguarding emerging and critical technologies, science and technology, innovation, and climate transition financing. This momentum benefits from the tailwind of the record volume of our two-way trade in goods – worth over $21 billion – achieved in 2022 and an expected fresh surge in direct investments in light of the recently amended laws on foreign investment in public utilities in the Philippines. There’s a growing need for more capital investments from the United States for sectors such as agriculture, food security, clean energy, decarbonization of energy, transport, and industry, as well as digital infrastructure.

And the alignment of our climate transition agenda also brings forward new synergies in green-metals cooperation. The low-carbon future hinges on minerals such as cobalt and nickel, which are abundant in the Philippines. Together, we are tapping opportunities in clean and sustainable production and processing of these critical materials. Our discussions on the 1-2-3 Agreement paving the way for civilian nuclear cooperation in the future also falls under this common agenda and the Philippine blueprint for an energy mix by 2040 that is cleaner, more sustainable, and cost-efficient.

The U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, or IPEF, promises to expand our economic engagement, especially by closing the infrastructure gap among partners, strengthening supply chains and building resilience, and opening up access and opportunities to the digital economy. We hope that this will eventually pave the way for renewed discussions toward a bilateral free trade agreement. The Philippines welcomes this drive for depth and vitality in our economic relations.

I will now conclude my remarks by highlighting that our partnership has thrived on other vibrant connections, and people are the throbbing core of our ties. This year marks the 75th anniversary of the Fulbright program in the Philippines, which has 8,000 alumni and is the longest continuing Fulbright program in the world.

The seeds of the future of our alliance are borne in the many platforms in our relations where our peoples, whether they are scientists, entrepreneurs, civil-society partners, youths, and artists incubate new ideas and contemplate on visions together. Our cooperation in humanitarian and disaster risk-resilience response, cybersecurity, counterterrorism and pandemic preparedness already recognize that public-private partnerships are salient to the Filipino brand of civic action and governance.
And we’ve only begun to underline that beyond aiding the modernization of military facilities, the EDCA sites support the local economies and present new interfaces for socioeconomic projects involving the national and host local governments. And woven into the fabric of our alliance are the vital contributions of the more than 4 million Filipino-Americans to the progress and secretary of the United States. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Filipino-American health professionals were among those at the frontlines protecting their communities. Filipino-Americans have made and continue to make a positive impact as teachers, servicemembers, artists, financial and social-services workers, tech innovators and civil-rights advocates. We also nurture the rise of Filipino-American leaders who advocate for their communities’ interests but also serve as a bridge between our two countries.

It is said that people who live in the next century already live amongst us. This brings home the point among people living and communities at the heart of our enlightened recasting of our alliance.

And I wish to conclude by reiterating the importance that the Philippines accords its alliance with the United States and its special place in the context of our independent foreign policy. Our alliance stands proud in the nexus of relationships and arrangements buttressing the regional security architecture. This architecture must maintain trust and confidence among parties amidst the U.S.-China rivalry and other geopolitical pressures.

The present and future relationship between the United States and China is a defining feature of this regional ecosystem. As responsible powers, each with a stake in the region’s long-term peace and security, Washington and Beijing need to manage their strategic rivalry with dialogue, transparent and sincere engagement, where possible. The Philippines and the United States, individually and through our enduring modern and responsive alliance, must ensure that even if this architecture heaves to the shifts in the dynamics of the multifaceted evolving interests of actors in the region, the rule of law as its fulcrum, and it brooks the challenge from any party engaging in any form of coercion, intimidation, the use of threat, or even the use of force, in violation of the U.N. Charter.

President Marcos has described our independent foreign policy to be, quote, “always looking for ways to collaborate and cooperate with the end goal of mutually beneficial outcomes and working to develop consensus in case of differences.” End of quote. This is a policy that owns our place, our stake, and our responsibility in a peaceful and stable Indo-Pacific region, that it should witness the further flourishing of our nations and our peoples in advancement of mutually beneficial interests and goals.
Thank you very much for your kind attention. (Applause.)

Mr. Poling: Thank you so much, Secretary Manalo, for a fantastic set of remarks.

Let me offer a few questions, as the prerogative of the chair here, and then we’ll open it up to both the room and online.

As a reminder, those who are watching online, you’ll see a little box where you can write in your questions. I’ll see them here and read them. So please identify yourself so I can tell the secretary who is asking the question.

And for those in the room, we have an old-fashioned stand mic over there, just like we did in the olden times. You can ask your question yourself.

So let me pick up kind of where you left off. The Philippines has an independent foreign policy. At the same time, we are seeing this really generational effort to modernize the alliance in what both the current administration of President Marcos and the previous one of President Duterte call a more equal alliance. So what exactly does a more equal alliance look like from the Philippines? And how does it fit into this concept of independent foreign policy?

Sec. Manalo: Well, I think there will be many aspects to what we mean by an equal relationship. And I think it’s really identifying common objectives, having a clear direction of where we both want to go. And I think this could take place in many means. For example – in many ways. For example, in the – in the defense or security part, we recognize we may have common perceptions, we may recognize common challenges, and we undertake activities to face them. And in terms of the economic front, we both recognize the importance of maintaining not only economic growth, et cetera, and prosperity, but also ensuring economic security and resilience. And we adopt similar and common approaches or activities to achieve that. And in that sense, it’s equality and having common perceptions and working together.

Mr. Poling: I suppose the elephant in the room is China, and China’s reaction to all of this. So the president went to Beijing in January. The deputy foreign minister of China was just in Manilla. How is the Marcos administration balancing this effort to modernize the alliance while still keeping doors open, if Beijing wants it, to a more conciliatory approach?

Sec. Manalo: Well, we, of course, are trying to modernize, and we are modernizing, alliance with the United States. But at the same time, and consistent with our independent foreign policy, we’re also dealing with our other partners or countries in the region. Of course, China is a fairly big country in the
region. We’re also neighbors of China, so we obviously have to work with them. And but ensure that when we do work with them it’s always an effort to see that we give the proper perspective to what we’re doing. So we don’t want to really – if we work with China, we certainly want to make it compatible with our modernizing the alliance with the United States. So it’s that kind of relationship that we’re having at the moment with countries in our region.

Mr. Poling: Well, let me address the other elephant in the room, Taiwan. So Victor Cha referenced earlier the geographic proximity of the Philippine coastline to that of Taiwan. There are almost 200,000 Filipinos living in Taiwan. President Marcos has said that he – that any contingency and crisis around Taiwan would involve Philippine interests in some form or another. So what is the discussion like at the moment in Manilla about how a Taiwan crisis affects Philippine national interests?

Sec. Manalo: Well, there are many aspects to this. And, first, as you mentioned, we already have about 150 to 200,000 Filipinos living and working in Taiwan. Taiwan is literally next door to the Philippines. So it’s – just looking at that, any kind of escalation of tensions or, even worse, some kind of a conflict, military conflict, would have really adverse repercussions on the Philippines. Of course, it would probably have repercussions on the entire region, but particularly the Philippines, given our proximity.

So we have always been very concerned if tensions escalate. Of course, there have always been tensions. But occasionally they tend to erupt and become more intense. And so we naturally look with concern at that. And we’ve always urged the parties concerned to try and, let’s say, manage these tensions by having, wherever possible, dialogue in order to prevent these tensions from escalating into something more. Because our view is that not only would it affect the Philippines, but it would affect the entire region, and could escalate to even something, you know, more dangerous.

Mr. Poling: And let me – we’ll close with one more from me, and then we’ll open it to the floor. You are not the secretary of national defense. And the 2+2 is not just about defense issues. The relationship is bigger than that. So on the economic front, what is it that the Philippines wants to see from the U.S.? And how do you feel about what’s on offer so far?

Sec. Manalo: Well, we think that our relationship on the economic front should really try to become more robust. I think because – I think we recognize, for example, not only will greater economic cooperation lead to, let’s say, more prosperity for our peoples and our countries, but it would also provide a form of economic security and economic resiliency, which is very important especially in today’s world with so many issues taking place –
geopolitical turmoil, et cetera. And then, of course, we have the issues of climate change, et cetera. So all of these factors really necessitate looking forward and having, really, a robust economic cooperation.

Now, we intend to raise this tomorrow at the 2+2 to see the areas where we can cooperate more effectively in the economic front and I think we’re really ready to explore, as I mentioned, the cooperation, for example, in areas which are important to the Philippines now, especially agriculture, food security, renewable energy, investment in infrastructure, and I think all of these would really benefit both countries if we managed to, let’s say, find areas where we can cooperate and this includes both cooperation of the public as well as the private sectors.

Mr. Poling: Thanks. Let’s turn to the audience. I’m going to go online first because I already see the queue there developing. If anybody in the room would like to ask a question, make your way to the mic and I’ll recognize you.

Let’s start with Ray Powell. Ray is with the Gordian Knot Center for National Security Innovation at Stanford. He’s also now a frequent commentator in Philippine media of late.

Ray asks, one of the most striking recent developments has been the routine release of pictures and video by the Philippine coast guard about Chinese vessel swarms and other activities in the West Philippine Sea or South China Sea. What does the Philippine government hope to accomplish through this maritime transparency policy?

Sec. Manalo: Is that the question? (Laughter.)

Mr. Poling: The question is why is the Philippine coast guard releasing so much video and pictures all of a sudden after many years of doing just the opposite?

Sec. Manalo: Well, I think there’s a growing realization that people should have – I mean, I can’t speak for them, but what I believe is that they want to make the issue more public, more known to the people. We have a better idea of what’s going on in those particular areas. Where they have encountered incidents which have – which have – let’s say go against our interests, for example the issue of the laser thing near one of our shoals, I think that generated a lot of concern in the Philippines. And we felt that that’s something which should be made more public.

Mr. Poling: Thanks.

All right. We have another, from David Brunnstrom at Reuters: Will U.S. weaponry such as artillery and missile systems be allowed on EDCA sites
for a defense of Taiwan contingency? Will there be any restrictions on what can be stationed at the sites?

Sec. Manalo: Well, I think at this stage we basically identified the sites. There will have to be, as in the case of the other sites, discussions on terms of reference, the type of activities, and I think these all have to be agreed on.

So at this stage it’s really very difficult to respond to questions like that. It will all depend on how discussions go on the type of activities and the terms of reference of those activities within any of those sites.

Mr. Poling: Can I follow up quickly on this? Of course, all of the narrative, I think, in both the U.S. and the Philippine press about EDCA sites has been Taiwan, Taiwan, Taiwan. It’s worth pointing out seven of the nine are not in Cagayan province.

From the administration’s point of view – the Philippine administration’s – what is the primary point of EDCA? Because I assume it’s not Taiwan.

Sec. Manalo: Actually, I think I mentioned also one of the key benefits, for example, in the new sites is the ability to work together to respond to humanitarian or natural disasters and because in some of those areas – well, some of those areas have been hit even more frequently now because of more of these severe weather disturbances and I think it’s important that – and the U.S. has been providing assistance.

But in this time if we have more chance to work together and to improve our interoperability, I think we would be in a much better position to respond should these consequences happen. And if there are any activities there, they also provide benefits to the local communities.

So I think that’s how we feel many of these – the purpose of many of these locations should really be viewed in that context and those are where the real benefits would arise.

Mr. Poling: All right.

Next we have Don Tagala with ABS-CBN News in the Philippines. Don asked: How does the Philippine government safeguard the country’s sovereignty when it comes to the U.S. military presence in the Philippines?

I assume this is a reference to the long debates around criminal jurisdiction and the like around U.S. soldiers.
Sec. Manalo: Well, you know, we’re governed by the Mutual Defense Treaty and any activity which is undertaken in that context would have to merit the agreement of the parties concerned, especially the Philippines, and we try – and if there – and any activities should be fully consistent with our constitution. And I think that’s the basic means we have for ensuring that our sovereignty is protected. Even though we may have our allies and we may have our activities, it is – should be in accordance with our constitutional requirements.

Mr. Poling: We have a theme developing here, so next up is Murray Hiebert with CSIS as well as BowerGroupAsia. Murray says: China has put a lot of pressure on The Philippines in the South China Sea since President Marcos took office. How much of a role does China’s assertiveness in the sea play in driving the new administration to bolster the alliance with the U.S.?

Sec. Manalo: Well, we made it pretty clear to China in the times we’ve talked with them that of course many of these activities, especially some which have been more recent, have been causing concern to The Philippines. And our objective here is to first, of course, talk with China to see how they can be resolved, if it all, or stopped or minimized, and then, from there, build on a way to ensure that we can manage our differences. And at the same time, though, we’re also looking at our internal needs to expand our security at the same time, whether it be with the United States or even other partners in the region. So we are doing this simultaneously, improving our ability to defend ourselves and at the same time talking with China and urging them to observe the UNCLOS and other aspects of the rule of law.

Mr. Poling: I have to note that those in the room are clearly intimidated by you. There you go. I’ve shamed them. Hazen, go ahead.

Q: All right, so, thank you, Secretary Manalo. My name is Hazen Williams from the U.S.-ASEAN Business Council.

Thank you for your threads on economic integration and multilateralism. And continuing on that thread and moving away from the South China Sea, what are The Philippines’ priorities for APEC and ASEAN at this time?

Sec. Manalo: Well, I think we have actually lots of priorities in ASEAN. But I think the main thing, at least from the political standpoint, is to enhance the role of ASEAN’s centrality in the region, especially in the Indo-Pacific region, because we feel the ASEAN countries are basically the middle powers in the region, and at the same time we’re affected by any turmoil in the region amongst the biggest powers in the region, so we feel that ASEAN is the natural forum to try and provide or promote stability and get the powers to talk peacefully, at least in the same room, and address regional challenges
there, rather than through conflict or other means. So I see that’s the role that ASEAN is trying to build, a consensus builder and also as a forum for addressing the regional issues of concern to all of us, because it’s the only forum now in Asia that really has the capacity to attract basically all the countries in the Indo-Pacific.

There are a lot more, but maybe I could give you – (laughter) –

Mr. Poling: All right.

Let’s go back to our online audience. Gavril Torrijos with the International Foundation for Electoral Systems said the alliance is becoming more comprehensive. Are there any efforts to expand the alliance to include improving governance and the health of Philippine democracy?

Sec. Manalo: Oh, yes. I mean, we have lots of activities. You know, our alliance is not only on the military and the economic, it’s on, as you mentioned, on human rights, good governance, how to promote, you know, the role of civil society, et cetera, so I think these are all aspects of our relationship and it’s all intertwined and it’s also part of our people-to-people relationship and how we can improve contacts amongst our peoples, even through cultural and other forums. So I think that is part and parcel of our alliance.

Mr. Poling: Any others in the room? Yeah.

Q: Thank you, Mr. Foreign Secretary. Shaun Tandon from the AFP news agency. If I could make one more try on Taiwan: I wanted to see if you have any reaction to events of recent days regarding Taiwan, both the military exercises launched by Beijing and the meeting that President Tsai had with Speaker McCarthy here. From your standpoint, sitting from Manilla or sitting here in Washington now, how do you see that? Do you think – are there any lessons for that for The Philippines? Thanks.

Sec. Manalo: Well, I mean, we’ve also been monitoring the developments here, the visit and China’s reaction, because, as you recall, last August – well, that really escalated tensions. But so far, what we see now, at least in this visit, is hopefully it’s not as it was in August, and this could hopefully pave the way, let’s say, for, let’s say, calming the situation a bit on the straits between, you know, China and the United States. And hopefully from there, see how the tensions can be lowered and we can move back from the tensions and all of this. So of course, we’re looking very carefully at both developments related to Taiwan, because as we talked earlier the Philippines is right next door.

Mr. Poling: Henry.
Good afternoon, Mr. Secretary. Thank you for your comprehensive remarks. It’s also very good to see you and all of your senior colleagues here from the DFA.

Would you comment on the advent of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, and how it enhances the armed forces of the Philippines to be a more robust external security force? Thank you.

Sec. Manalo: Well, first of all, let me say that – and thank you – the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region has really moved forward. I think now it – the priorities are more on economic development, prosperity. So they move the government also to focus more in and trying to really uplift our brothers in Muslim Mindanao. But the BAR has been a very successful project. The president is very optimistic about it. And that’s had secondary effects on everything.

It’s enabled us now to, as I said, focus more on development, and also enabled us to look more and to expand and look at external factors. Because before we were very absorbed in that region. Now it seems things are moving forward very well. It enables the government now to focus on other priorities. And that includes also, for example, in looking – dealing more with our external partners and enhancing, for example, as I mentioned earlier, building up our defensive posture and, at the same time, searching for economic cooperation and opportunities. So it’s really had an overall positive effect on the government and the situation in the Philippines.

Mr. Poling: All right.

We’ll go back online. We have Thomas Lipika with Mercyhurst University.

Do you see the U.S.-Philippine alliance impacting China’s expansion in the South China Sea and the militarization of islands within it? I suppose that could cut both ways. Do you see it as a successful deterrent or does it provoke greater Chinese adventurism?

Sec. Manalo: Well, let’s hope. (Laughter.) What I see is that, first of all, we’re undertaking our alliance because we feel that the United States is an important partner. And I think we’re – that’s really what we’re looking at. We’re seeing us, I think, to enter a more modern type of relationship. We see there are many challenges in our region. And as really treaty partners now for almost 75 years, I think it’s proven that we have a time and tested relationship.
And that it’s important that we work together, continue working together, enhance our alliance, modernize it, so that it improves the security of the Philippines, as well as the United States and the region. So I think that’s the main purpose of this. And I think that’s important because once we have, as we shore up our defensive posture, I think it makes the Philippines more secure in that respect.

Mr. Poling: All right.

I’m going to give the last question to Cathy Phong with VOA. And, Cathy, with apologies, I’m going to ask your second question because we only have time for one, and I think we’ve tried to get the secretary to say something saucy on Taiwan about every way we can. So what will the 2023 Balikatan military exercise aim to achieve this year? What else needs to be done to further enhance the U.S.-Philippine alliance to counter Chinese aggression?

Sec. Manalo: Well, I think Balikatan really is – this is the largest exercise. And the main benefit really – it really will aim at improving the interoperability of our – of our forces and our partners. And it’s not only the United States will be involved here. There’ll be Australia and Japan. And I think it’s really very important that we learn to work with each other. And I think not only on the terms of purely military exercises, because there have also been – on many occasions the military now is involved in other types of operations, such as humanitarian assistance, and disaster – responding to disasters. And military forces take a very active part in that. And it’s proven that working together has been of great benefit. So even improving the ability to work together would certainly be very important. And that’s the – I think the main benefit of this type of exercise.

Mr. Poling: Basically, what are your other priorities for the alliance?

Sec. Manalo: Well, they’re actually – as I mentioned in my statement, I think our main concerns there is to really operationalize/modernize it, make it more attuned to the 21st century. And what are those factors which would do that? Well, of course, there’s defense. I mentioned, of course, economic. There’s so much we can do on the economic front in various areas, whether it be through renewable energy or through agriculture, food security, or infrastructure. I think those are the areas that we’d like to focus on, increasing investments in our two countries. And we’re also working in the context of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. Once that can be – once that can be formalized and actually put into action, it also creates – will create a springboard for further opportunities.
So that's where we really would like to focus on. And this is not, also, without prejudice to the areas which were also mentioned by yourself, I think, or Dr. Cha on the education, culture. And we also see the importance of people-to-people contacts because this is where I think, in the end, the strength of our relationship really lies, in the 4.3 million Filipino Americans here and the over 300,000 U.S. citizens in the Philippines. And I think that's already a sound basis for us to even pursue more and more cooperation in the future.

Mr. Poling: Well, thank you. I think that's all the time we have. I wish you – I'm sure I speak for all of us – wish you all the best with what'll be doubtless a very long day of meetings tomorrow for the 2+2.

Before I let you all go, please join me in thanking the secretary for his time.

Sec. Manalo: Thank you. (Applause.)

(END)