

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Event

Inaugural Manila Strategy Forum

“Introduction of the President and Keynote Address”

DATE

Wednesday, September 10, 2025 at 9:00 p.m. ET

FEATURING

Ambassador Jose Manuel “Babe” Romualdez

Ambassador of the Republic of the Philippines to the United States

H.E. Ferdinand “Bongbong” R. Marcos Jr.

President, Republic of the Philippines

CSIS EXPERTS

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INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Gregory B.
Poling:

Good morning. So, first of all, obviously, thank you, President Marcos, for honoring us with your presence today.

I'd also like to start by thanking ICTSI and its CEO, Enrique Razon, for his gracious support of the event we're having over these two days.

Welcome, all, to the second day of our Manila Strategy Forum. Yesterday we began our discussion on the big questions facing the world: Do we still live in the post-World War II international rules-based order? Our American and Filipino experts agreed that the order is irrevocably changed, but that does not mean that we've moved back into a might-makes-right system of international governance. As a new order emerges, small and middle powers like the Philippines can play a determinative role in what norms and institutions survive and thrive.

After that, we then welcomed Ambassador John Negroponte, Ambassador Jose Manuel Romualdez, and Ambassador MaryKay Carlson to reflect on the remarkable progress that's been made in the U.S.-Philippines alliance in recent years. The story of our deepening defense ties are well-known and vital, but the ambassadors also highlighted the important steps on economics even under the Trump administration, which has committed to support the Luzon Economic Corridor and announced that the Philippines would be the first country on Earth to receive new foreign assistance from the State Department.

Our afternoon panels then focused on those questions of economic cooperation.

Our experts on infrastructure collaboration highlighted the opportunities to work together to build a 21st-century road, rail, port, energy, and telecommunications infrastructure here in the Philippines. And while noting the difficulties presented by the dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development, speakers pointed to opportunities through other U.S. agencies and with partners like Japan and the Republic of Korea – but especially in cooperation with U.S. and Philippine private-sector entities, which are the most important actors in this space.

And finally, we ended with a discussion of the issue that now always seems to be dominating the news, and that is tariffs and trade tensions. Speakers noted that the tariffs imposed by the United States are inefficient and they raise costs on everybody. But the current rate on Philippine goods ensures that the Philippines will not be disadvantaged compared to its regional competitors, and exemptions for some of the most important sectors manufactured here in the Philippines are also likely to lower the overall effective tariff rate for the country. But in the long term these tariffs point to the urgent need for diversification – not diminishing the U.S.-Philippine

economic relationship, but increasing trade with other parties in Asia, with Europe, and with the Gulf in order to reduce overexposure to any single market.

I hope you all agree that yesterday was a rich and important series of discussions, and I look forward to more of the same today. On behalf of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, thank you all for being here with us again.

(Applause.)

Announcer: At this point, may we call on Philippine Ambassador to the United States of America Ambassador Jose Manuel Romualdez to introduce our guest of honor and keynote speaker?

(Applause.)

Ambassador Jose Manuel “Babe” Romualdez: Ladies and gentlemen, the president of the Republic of the Philippines, His Excellency Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr.

(Applause.)

President Ferdinand “Bongbong” R. Marcos Jr: Thank you, Ambassador Babe Romualdez, for your kind introduction. Please, let’s be seated.

The United States of America ambassador to the Philippines, Ambassador MaryKay Carlson; the excellencies of the diplomatic corps; DPWH Secretary Vince Dizon; the Center for Strategic and International Studies Southeast Asia Program Director and Senior Fellow Greg Poling; our former ambassador, the former ambassador of the United States to the Philippines, who has since become one of the greatest champions of the friendship between the United States and the Philippines, Ambassador Negroponte; participants – (applause) – all the participants in this CSIS Manila Strategy Forum; my fellow workers in government; distinguished guests; ladies and gentlemen; good morning.

It is a great pleasure to address this Inaugural Manila Strategy Forum. And like everyone here, I commend the CSIS for its active and continuous support for the Philippines through the years. I envision that this forum evolving – will evolve into one of the leading security dialogues in this part of the world, because if there is anyone who can realize this vision it is a staunch supporter of the Philippines, Director Greg Poling, alongside his Southeast Asia team at CSIS. Thank you again for this important and timely initiative.

(Applause.)

And I say timely because I continue to believe that the Indo-Pacific remains the most consequential region for the world. And we, the Philippines, are at the forefront, at the frontline of it all. It is only fitting that key security forums are centered in this part of the world. In this light, we can see the strategic value of our relationship with the United States and its increasing significance in the region. Allow me, therefore, to speak on the Philippines-United States relations this morning.

During my recent visit to Washington, I heard one word that was repeatedly used to describe these current times. That word was “interesting.” I think the CSIS, being based in Washington, as well as our Philippine ambassador to the United States who is here this morning, can attest to how interesting the political landscape there is today. All of us here know and have heard diplomatic-speak, but to be more precise these times are immensely challenging. Some may say unpredictable/bleak, but always gripping and eventful. This is true not only for the United States, but for the rest of the world as well.

It was certainly a great event for me to officially meet President Donald Trump and key U.S. officials with so much at stake. Regardless, it was an honor to be the first Southeast Asian leader to meet him at the start of his second term. Now, midway into my term, I have – and having seen our cooperation with the United States reach new heights, I can say with confidence that the Philippines-United States relations remain a beacon of stability. This is true not only today, but it certainly will be true for the years to come. Together, we continue to stand firm on solid ground. It is a testament to the depth and breadth of our relationship spanning more than a century of shared history.

When a major power shifts its weight, however, the effects are inevitably felt by all. These are times when the United States is rethinking its role in the world. Rightfully so. It is clear, however, that alliances and partnerships remain important. My hope is that as the United States progresses with its own changes internally, we come to the inevitable conclusion that its significant role in the world cannot be easily replaced, and that its continued engagement in global affairs benefits all – including the United States itself.

There are big changes afoot in the Indo-Pacific. As a result of decades of globalization and the upward mobility of Asian societies. These positive transformations are largely derived from decades of what has been called Pax Americana, and the creative forces of the American private sector, the cultural and educational reach of American institutions and its people, and the compelling vision of the American dream. But the road is turning. And I want to deliver this clear message to the United States: The place of the United States is here with us, in the Indo-Pacific. It will be crucial to the free

and open nature of our region that your vigor, inventiveness and resilience, essential drivers of the great American nation, continue to play a leading role in nurturing a strong and peaceful Indo-Pacific.

That being said, I would like to make three points to characterize Philippines-United States relations as they stand. First, the Philippines-United States alliance serves as the region – serves the regional interest of upholding the rule of law and maintaining peace, security, and prosperity. Secondly, our joint economic security complements our mutual defense. And third, the alliance has stood the test of time and will continue to progress in response to emerging challenges. So, as we approach 75 years of our alliance with the United States through our mutual defense treaty, next year, we reflect on the past years during which we have stood shoulder-to-shoulder against the most significant threats to international peace and to security.

This we did in the defense of democracy and the rule of law. Today, the most significant threat to the peace and stability we strive for is right here in our own neighborhood, here in the Indo-Pacific region. And this is not just an opinion. It is a fact. We in the Philippines can say this with certainty because we face the threat every single day. Our government vessels and fisherfolk continue to be harassed in our own waters. And we remain on the receiving end of illegal, coercive, aggressive, and dangerous actions in the South China Sea. This September is Maritime and Archipelagic Nation Awareness Month here in the Philippines. And we strongly believe that the protection of our marine resources and heritage is underpinned by a strict adherence to the rule of law.

We always thank the United States for its support in enhancing our maritime domain awareness and boosting our maritime security efforts. During U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth's visit to Manila last March, we committed to boosting defense industrial cooperation with the United States in areas such as production of unmanned systems, energetics, ship and aircraft maintenance and repair. The Philippines continues to build its resources to be an effective partner to the United States, a significant contributor to our mutual defense.

And this brings me to my second point. Strengthening our common security requires strengthening our economies. Simply put, we do not take our mature security alliance as a license to remain on autopilot, to be complacent. We are committed to pursue our growth targets and provide better opportunities for our people, ensuring that economic strength and resilience deliver the dividends for enduring stability and security.

A few months ago, we signed a grant agreement with the United States Trade and Development Agency for the development of 155-kilometer freight railway connecting key ports of Subic, Clark, Manila, and Batangas. Many

other areas are ripe for further economic cooperation between our countries, including ensuring semiconductor supply chain resilience, refining critical minerals, and developing civil nuclear power capabilities. Cooperation in these areas makes sense, not only economically but also strategically, in support of our shared security.

And this brings me to my last point. The alliance of the Philippines and the United States has reached a necessary and natural progression towards trilateral, and mini-lateral, multilateral engagements, building individual and collective capabilities to address common challenges, because today's challenges are not bound by borders. Because of that, cooperation is absolutely essential. We have a growing trilateral partnership with the United States and Japan. Under which we held a maritime dialogue last December and the national security meeting last May.

With the United States we have held multilateral maritime cooperative activities with Australia, with Canada, with New Zealand, within the Philippines exclusive economic zone. And we have seen the growth of our annual Balikatan Exercises, with the participation of more partner nations and observers. Such mini-lateral cooperation is not limited to defense and security either. The railway project mentioned earlier is one of the infrastructure projects under the Luzon Economic Corridor, an initiative that has received significant support from Japan and the United States. This trilateral cooperation also includes engagements on cyber, digital, and other areas of the new technologies. These have resulted from the firm commitment of three maritime democracies to a free and open Indo-Pacific that is connected, inclusive, and prosperous.

So, I'll conclude with two brief caveats. First, like the United States, the Philippines is very much open to cooperating with its neighbors. We have many bilateral channels of communication and areas of cooperation. But in all of these, respect for our sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdiction is and has always been, and will always be, non-negotiable. And second, we are aware that the United States has much on its plate, both geopolitically and economically. We certainly are closely watching developments in Ukraine, the Middle East, and other flash points, because we are keenly aware that the outcomes of the situations in these regions will certainly influence the outlook of – their outlook of the global community elsewhere. And yet, we remain confident that the United States, as a self-declared Pacific nation, will remain oriented and committed to the Indo-Pacific, as history has consistently proven.

Next year we mark the 80th anniversary of the establishment of the Philippines-United States diplomatic relations. And the United States will also celebrate its 250th year of its nationhood. Oftentimes we forget to bring geopolitical discussions to the heart of our respective national interest, and

that is our people. These twin milestones are another opportunity, as friends, partners, and allies, to work towards not only our common goals as governments, but towards a brighter future for our peoples. We have achieved so much together throughout history. I am humbled that there is still so much to be accomplished in the future.

So lastly, the Philippines has the honor of chairing the Association of Southeast Asian Nations next year, or ASEAN. In its almost 60 years of existence, ASEAN has enjoyed decades of unparalleled growth and enduring peace, thanks to its unique brand of multilateralism. Its extended relations have also grown exponentially. And I look forward to welcoming the world, including President Trump, to the Philippines next year to showcase ASEAN's significant achievements and potential.

So, once again, I thank CSIS for putting together this excellent forum, the first of hopefully many to come. I look forward to more productive discussions that you will have today. And I'm sure that those discussions will yield many, many outputs that will help us in our aspirations to maintain the peace and stability in our region. Thank you. And good morning.

(Speaks in Tagalog.) (Applause.)

(END.)