Philippines 2016: Governance, Growth, Development and Security Keynote Remarks

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It is a pleasure to return to John Hopkins SAIS and to work with the US-Philippines Society again. I enjoyed the privilege of speaking to the society on June 7, 2012, just after President Benigno Aquino had presented me with the Lakandula Award. I was especially pleased that several friends in the Philippines noted the foundation of the U.S.-Philippines Society and my award and sent thoughtful messages of support. I would like to congratulate Hank Hendrickson and his team for all the work they’ve done and the many successes they’ve achieved.

I also would like to thank Ambassador Cuisia for all the work he has done over many years, both in Manila and more recently here in the United States, to serve his country and to strengthen the relations between our two countries.

I am sure you have had a very productive and informative morning discussing the development of economic and security relations between the United States and the Philippines. During my time on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, I always tried to emphasize that economic development and security go hand in hand. They are two sides of the same coin. Often in our relations with countries, we find it easier to emphasize the security dimension. I am pleased to say that I believe in the Philippines, lately, we have gotten the balance just about right, even as events in the South China Sea have brought security issues to the fore.

It is also important to remind ourselves that relations between the United States and the Philippines are between two democratic allies, with a Mutual Defense Treaty that goes back more than 70 years. Many young people today in both our countries may take that for granted. But we all know that just a few months ago we celebrated the 30th anniversary of the restoration of democracy under President Corazon Aquino. At the time, it was a touch and go thing.

I won’t go into detail about the dramatic events surrounding the so-called “snap election” and the People Power revolution or my modest role at that time, but I would like to use that episode to make a larger point. When I was asked by President Reagan to lead the election observer delegation, many of my colleagues in Congress did not want to come along. They suspected that President Marcos would try to steal the election, and thought that the U.S. would end up supporting him.
Many in the U.S. government disliked Marcos’ authoritarian rule, his corruption, and his human rights abuses. But they felt that keeping Marcos in power was the only way to keep the two U.S. bases, and they believed that Marcos was our ally in the Cold War. But others and I felt differently. We believed that Marcos’s policies were fueling an insurgency, and his government would inevitably fall. Only by restoring democracy could we hope to retain a healthy relationship with what was then the world’s 15th most populous country.

The Marcos proponents had another argument on their side. They pointed to the fall of the Shah of Iran, and to the end of the Somoza regime in Nicaragua. Both dictators had long been supported by the United States. Both situations resulted in governments that were no more democratic and very hostile to United States’ interests.

But this idea that we had to choose between Marcos or the Communists was, in my view, far too simplistic. One of its many flaws was that it ignored the fundamental attachment of the Filipino people to democratic values. We had seen that in the 1984 national assembly elections. I saw that as I toured the country on election day in 1986. I met many courageous people who had risked threats of violence and intimidation to come to the polls. And certainly the world saw it when TV cameras broadcast around the world the huge crowds, up to a million people, that attended Cory Aquino’s rallies after the balloting.

Democracy won the day. But equally important is what happened afterwards. Democracy prevailed over time. Despite several coup attempts against it, Cory Aquino’s government survived. She changed the constitution, restored the institutions of government, and re-established democratic procedures. Then she did what so many rulers have failed to do, she transferred power peacefully to a successor in a free and fair election. It is not too strong to say that the Philippines’ peaceful revolution, televised to the world, swept around the globe and inspired or strengthened democratic movements in many countries.

Let me just pause for a moment pay tribute to an American who played a crucial role in that period, Ambassador Stephen Bosworth, who passed away earlier this year. During those tumultuous days, Ambassador Bosworth directed the United States embassy with a steady hand and provided wise counsel to me and other members of our observer group. He was one of the finest diplomats of his generation, one of the youngest American ambassadors ever, and he made great contributions to the cause of U.S.-Philippine relations.

The world’s experience over the 30 years since then makes the Philippines’ achievement, a vibrant democracy with a robust civil society, even more remarkable. While we have seen the birth, or re-birth, of many democracies, in South Korea, Taiwan and in the former Communist countries of Eastern Europe, we have often seen democratic aspirations crushed. The Arab Spring, which began with such hope, largely ended in disappointment. We have seen democratic governments sabotaged by corruption, toppled by coups, or commandeered by autocrats who use, and then abuse, democratic processes. In the greater Middle East we have seen efforts at democracy derailed by religious, ethnic...
and tribal conflict.

When our own democracy was being born in the late 1700s, someone asked Benjamin Franklin what kind of government we would have. He replied, “A republic, if you can keep it.” So the Filipino people should be proud that they have kept their democracy, even as they have worked to correct what they would agree are its many flaws. The United States has tried to be a strong partner in this endeavor, by supporting efforts to combat corruption, strengthen the judiciary, improve fiscal policies and promote broad-based economic growth. I hope that we have been helpful, but there would have been no success without the willingness of the people of the Philippines and their leaders to settle their differences, to respect the rule of law, and to maintain open debate, a free press, academic freedom, religious liberties and other institutions of democracy.

We are about to witness another peaceful transfer of power in Manila as Cory’s and Ninoy’s son, President Benigno Aquino III, gives way to the winner of next month’s presidential election. He leaves with some of the highest approval ratings for a departing president, and a solid record of robust economic growth under his watch. The Philippine economy is expected to grow around six percent in 2016 and 2017 at a time when many economies in Asia have been slowed by a slowdown of Chinese growth. The American business community in the Philippines has given his administration high marks for the economic reforms that have been passed by the Congress during his term, and the international rating agencies have steadily upgraded the country’s credit scores. This growing international confidence bodes well for future foreign investment and more jobs. I am particularly pleased that he has made government transparency and combating corruption a hallmark of his administration. When I was in the Senate I often noted that in many countries, corruption was a disease that greatly weakened economic development and political stability. I supported efforts by our government and various international institutions to make more effective their efforts to reduce corruption in our partner countries. I hope that cleaner government will be one of President Aquino’s lasting legacies.

We’ll know in a few weeks just who will succeed him. I know that most of you are following closely the presidential race in the Philippines. I won’t make any comment on the candidates. (I would note parenthetically that a number of Americans are also following the vice presidential race because it features two well-known names from the past, Ferdinand Marcos’s son and Gregorio Honasan.) I will say that, like all of you, I hope and expect the elections will be free and fair. I am confident that the U.S. government will be able to work with whoever is elected.

Looking forward, the major bilateral question is whether the United States and the Philippines will maintain the strong partnership that has developed under President Obama and President Aquino, now that both are leaving office. It is especially difficult to forecast because on the U.S. side, only one of the current candidates has a clear record on foreign policy issues.
On the Philippine side, the issue of U.S.-Philippine relations has a higher profile and is sometimes buffeted by shifting political winds. I hope the new leadership will take a long-term view, and consider many factors in evaluating the depth and nature of our future relationship. There are countless benefits for both countries in continued strong relations.

However, while personalities are important, countries’ relationships with one another are also shaped by their interests, and those won’t change just because of the elections. As I am sure you discussed during the morning panels, the improved military cooperation between our two countries, including the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, or ECDA, and the use of the five military bases by American forces, are based in large part on our shared concern over China’s assertive actions in the South China Sea. The recent visit to the Philippines by my friend Ash Carter, the Defense Secretary, demonstrates the Pentagon’s enthusiasm for strengthening military ties, and so far the Congress seems supportive. I also believe the new basing arrangements may be less controversial than the old ones at Subic Bay and Clark because they were drafted with both American and Philippine security interests in mind, and because the rotating American forces will have a much smaller footprint.

As the strategic situation changes over time, of course, both sides will want to reassess the specifics of our military cooperation. Such normal adjustments should not be disruptive if both sides consider security cooperation in the much larger context of our overall relationship, which is broad and long-standing. However, there is a U.S. election at hand. I have witnessed a number of U.S. presidential transitions over the years, and I have seen a disturbing tendency for a new administration, especially when there is a change of party, to take harsh campaign rhetoric at face value and reject, out of hand, anything the previous administration had done. I am hopeful that whoever the new American president is, he or she will appoint experienced foreign policy advisers who will evaluate U.S.-Philippine relations on the basis of our shared interests, and not through an ideological lens.

I would be remiss if I did not comment, if only briefly, on the current presidential campaign. Like nearly everyone in Washington, I have been repeatedly surprised and often confounded by the tone and the rhetoric of the candidates, especially on the Republican side, and by the poor showing of the many well-qualified candidates who were thought to be part of the so-called establishment. Now, presidential primary elections almost always feature candidates who bill themselves as outsiders striving to change the process. This appeal to voters from outside the system is a natural and useful part of our democracy that stretches back at least as far as Andrew Jackson.

Yet in this election, the outsiders are campaigning in ways that break the mold. Most of the notable anti-Washington candidates of the past four decades were experienced governors who vowed to bring the skills and successes they had developed in their states to the Federal Government. Among these were Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush, all successful contenders who communicated detailed programs and legislative visions during their campaigns. In contrast, the most successful outsiders of this cycle – Mr. Trump and Senator Cruz – have no experience as a governor or even as a mayor. Senator Cruz occupies a Senate seat, but his tenure has been short and
he has devoted his time to institutional opposition rather than legislating.

Moreover, in this election too often an anti-establishment posture has been used as an excuse for irresponsible behavior and statements. This draws attention and distinguishes a candidate from the crowd, but ultimately it hurts the reputation of the United States and our own political process.

Frequently, candidates have excused their incivility by saying that they are giving voice to an angry majority. I have no doubts that some voters are motivated by their anger and some of this is justified by failures in our political culture. However, it is one thing to channel that anger into a set of ambitious proposals for change. It is quite another for the anger to be exercised in a fashion that is misguided and destructive. We know from numerous lessons of history that popular anger can be manipulated in ways that lead to intolerance, civil unrest, violence, and self-destructive national policies.

I believe that one source of the anger is the breakdown in bipartisanship in Washington. This has led to dysfunctional government on the one hand, and a growing intolerance both for other views and for those who hold those views on the other. Political opponents have become enemies. The candidates may not have originated this divide, but their behavior has excused the growing disrespect Americans have for fellow citizens with different political opinions.

This unrelenting partisan mindset has deepened cynicism, shattering many voters’ faith in our public institutions. Congress ranks poorly in nearly all public opinion polls; the approval ratings of both President Obama and former President Bush show that political polarization has reached new heights in recent years, according to a Gallup report last year; and even the Supreme Court has become politicized in the public mind.

The sources of this hyper-partisanship are many, and solutions are neither obvious nor easy. At The Lugar Center, we have a Project on Bipartisan Governance that aims to encourage more cooperation across the aisle. Experts have proposed a number of technical fixes, but to work ourselves out of this partisan morass, we will also need to change the mindset of the voters and, most especially, our elected representatives.

Let me end on a more optimistic note. Through all the shifts of policy and politics over the years, both in our country and in the Philippines, one thing has provided a lasting foundation for U.S.-Philippine relations. That is the strong bonds between our two peoples. As many as 400,000 Filipinos served with the American military in World War II. More than 3.5 million Filipino-Americans today live in the United States, as well as large numbers of immigrants, and Ambassador Cuisia has been tireless in traveling to meet with them. More Americans are retiring to the Philippines, and every first-time American visitor to the Philippines marvels at the warm reception he or she receives. 400,000 Americans now visit the Philippines each year. As President Obama told President Aquino when they met here in Washington a few years ago, “we have incredible person-to-person relations between our two countries.” Simply put, Filipinos and Americans like each other. That’s why I am confident that whatever happens in the Philippines’ elections and in ours, the mutual affection between our citizens
will continue to be a source of strength. The U.S.-Philippines Society will be a major factor undergirding that affection.

I thank you all for your vision and your leadership.