

Administration of Barack Obama, 2015

Remarks Following a Meeting With President Benigno S. Aquino III of the Philippines and an Exchange With Reporters in Manila, Philippines

November 18, 2015

President Aquino. I'm honored to welcome our very good friend, President Barack Obama, and his delegation to the Philippines.

Prior to engaging in comprehensive exchanges in this week's APEC economic meeting, President Obama and I took the opportunity to meet and continue our discussions on the enduring bilateral partnership between the Philippines and the United States. We reaffirmed our treaty alliance, the strategic partnership, and the historic friendship between our countries. I'm confident that this firm foundation of broad cooperation and shared values will enable the Philippines and the United States to face the challenges of the present and those in the decades to come.

Our defense and security alliance commenced more than 60 years ago to this day. It remains a cornerstone of peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific. As a treaty ally of the United States, the Philippines receives security assistance from the U.S. Government, particularly through the foreign military financing program. We recognize with the deepest appreciation the significant contribution to our efforts by the United States, contributions that help us ensure that we can ably respond to current security challenges, particularly in the area of maritime security and maritime domain awareness.

The National Coast Watch Center, completed early this year, was constructed with significant assistance from the United States. This project was first discussed during my visit to Washington, DC, in 2012, and our administration is very pleased to see it come to fruition this year.

Today President Obama and I discussed a number of avenues of cooperation. There is the Philippine Strategic Trade Management Act, which will enforce measures to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction from or within the Philippines in fulfillment of our international obligations. We look forward to its implementation upon the completion of domestic procedures.

We also exchanged views on cybersecurity threats and resolved to explore cooperation in this area, knowing full well that all countries have a stake in maintaining peace and order in cyberspace, so that principles of international law can be applied. This area of collaboration with the United States can impact positively on the capacity of the Philippine Government effectively and swiftly respond to cybersecurity threats and challenges.

President Obama and I, likewise, had the discussion of maritime security, including on the maritime disputes in the region and how international law should remain the framework for behavior of all countries and for the peaceful resolution of disputes. I take this opportunity to reiterate the Philippines' view that the freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea must be continuously upheld consistent with international law.

On the economic front, we welcome the continued strengthening of trade and investment relations between our countries. I conveyed the keen interest of the Philippines in the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and we hope that the United States, as one of our most important economic partners, can assist us in the process.

The Philippines is also proud to announce that the first Millennium Challenge Cooperation compact is nearing completion, and the Philippines has been deemed eligible for a second MCC compact. The Philippine and U.S. governments are working closely in the development of projects to be implemented under the second compact.

We discussed climate change, and our two governments are looking forward to fruitful discussions at the COP21 in Paris, which will start later this month. As a country highly vulnerable to climate and disaster risks, the Philippines underscores the importance of all countries contributing to the global effort to address the problem of climate change for the benefit of future generations.

Finally, President Obama and I reiterated the longstanding and multilayered engagement between our two peoples, and we pledged to ensure that our two countries work together not only to strengthen defense cooperation and increase mutual prosperity, but also to foster more meaningful ties between our people.

Thank you. Good day.

President Obama. Well, thank you very much, President Aquino, for your warm welcome. It is wonderful to be back in the Philippines. I have very fond memories of my state visit last year, and once again, I can feel the friendship and hospitality of the Filipino people. So *salamat*.

We're here as President Aquino and the Philippines host the APEC summit. And this is a reflection of Filipino leadership. Mr. President, I especially want to commend you for the summit's focus on growth that is inclusive and sustainable and that helps lift up small businesses and empowers more women.

Of course, the Philippines and the United States are great allies, so this is an occasion for me to reaffirm our unwavering commitment to the security and defense of the Philippines. We stand shoulder to shoulder—*balikatan*. I'm grateful for my partnership with President Aquino, who's been a valuable and trusted friend to the United States.

Here in the Philippines, you're pursuing reforms and good governance. Together, we support a rule-based order in the region, which is critical to regional security and the global economy.

Our rebalance to the Asia-Pacific is rooted in our treaty alliances, including with the Philippines. Our enhanced defense cooperation agreement, when implemented, will bring our militaries even closer together. And we're especially committed to ensuring maritime security in the region, including freedom of navigation. During my visit yesterday with members of the Filipino Armed Forces, I was able to announce that we're increasing our maritime security assistance to the Philippines to record levels, including two new vessels.

We discussed the impact of China's land reclamation and construction activities on regional stability. We agree on the need for bold steps to lower tensions, including pledging to halt further reclamation, new construction, and militarization of disputed areas in the South China Sea. As President Aquino indicated, disputes need to be resolved peacefully. That's why the United States supports the Philippines' decisions to use arbitration under the U.N. Convention of the Law of the Sea to peacefully and lawfully address differences.

We also had a chance to discuss the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which is a pillar of America's rebalance in the region. We welcome the Philippines' interest in TPP. And we've directed our Trade Ministers to have discussions about how TPP is going to be implemented

among the original 12 countries and how we can work with the Philippines to follow through on their interest. TPP is designed to be an open and inclusive trade pact for countries that can meet its high standards.

And finally, we discussed the urgent challenge of climate change, a threat to which the Philippines is especially vulnerable. I appreciate the contribution that President Aquino has made in climate talks over the last year. The Philippines has recognized the importance of a global agreement for the future of this country and the world, and we look forward to a successful outcome in Paris.

So again, Mr. President, thank you so much for your welcome and your leadership of the APEC summit. And thank you to the Filipino people for their friendship and hospitality.

Philippines-China Maritime Dispute/Philippines-U.S. Defense Cooperation

Moderator. President Obama and President Aquino will now take questions from the media. For the Philippine media, may I call on Ms. Joyce Panares from the Standard?

Q. For both Presidents, please. Since the U.S. is supportive of the Philippine arbitration, did you have a chance to discuss whether other claimants should also take that track? And also, with the EDCA pending before the Supreme Court, what role can the Philippines play in the pivot—in the Asian pivot of the United States?

President Aquino. Well, on the first part of the question, we have—we didn't discuss getting other claimants to join us in arbitration with America. But we have been discussing with some of the other claimants who have been asking us our experience and the studies we have done leading us to the arbitration move. I think you just pan—if you look at a search of previous statements with other claimant countries indicative of—they were watching us closely in this arbitration battle and are very close to a decision whether or not to join us in arbitration.

And the role of the Philippines in the pivot, well, we are one of the oldest allies of America in the region. There is the longstanding treaty, the Mutual Defense Treaty of 1951. And the enhanced defense cooperation agreement seeks to make the operation—operationalization of both forces that much more real, because we will really have—on the Philippines' part, we will have access to the most modern technology that will bring us into higher capabilities. And that's how we welcome—why we welcome—well, very open arms this agreement pending before our Supreme Court.

Now, as America gets the use of our bases to be able to have more stability in its ability to project its own power within the region in an effort to help in the stability and the orderliness and the diffusion of the tension within the region.

Thank you.

President Obama. As I've stated earlier, we're not claimants ourselves, but we fully support a process in which, through international law and international norms, these issues are resolved. And we look forward to working with all parties to move disputes through these channels.

With respect to the enhanced defense cooperation agreement, obviously the Philippines has to go through its process and the Supreme Court review. But we're confident that it's going to get done and we're going to be able to implement effectively the provisions and the ideas that have come forward during the course of these discussions.

The broader point is, is that as a treaty ally we have a rock-solid commitment to the defense of the Philippines. And part of our goal is to continue to help our treaty partners build up capacity, to make sure that the architecture of both defense work, but also humanitarian work and other important activities in the region, are coordinated more effectively. And we think that the enhanced defense cooperation agreement is going to help us do that. Okay?

Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement/International Efforts To Combat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) Terrorist Organization/Russia-U.S. Cooperation in Syria/U.S. Policy on Syrian Refugees/2016 Presidential Election

Moderator. Press Secretary Josh Earnest.

White House Press Secretary Joshua R. Earnest. The next question will come from Kathleen Hennessey from the Associated Press.

Q. Excuse me. Thanks very much for doing this. First, to President Obama. You're under increasing pressure to coordinate on the anti-ISIL campaign, perhaps with Moscow. President Hollande is pushing for a more unified response. I'm wondering if you're ready to start coordinating with Vladimir Putin in a more—in a deeper way, if you feel like you trust him and can trust him on this at this point and if that more coordinated response might involve supporting France's invoking of article 5 of the NATO treaty.

And then also to—actually, I have one related question on that.

President Obama. It's all right. Go ahead.

Q. If you also wanted to comment at all on some of the discussion back at home about allowing Syrian refugees into the U.S.

President Obama. Good.

Q. There have been some lawmakers talking about closing—

President Obama. Yes, I've got some comments on that.

Q. Yes, I thought you might.

And, President Aquino, as you look at joining—considering joining the TPP down the road, I'm wondering if it gives you any pause that the President is facing some serious opposition to the deal back at home, particularly from the leading Democratic candidate to replace him. Thank you.

President Obama. Okay. I'm going to comment on all three though. *[Laughter]* There is not a trade deal that has been done in modern American politics that's not occasionally challenging, but we get it done. And I'm confident we're going to be able to get it done. So I just want to stick my two cents in on that one.

With respect to the activities of France, Moscow, and our coalition, from the start, our goal has been to unify the entire world around a concerted effort against ISIL. And that's why we lead a 65-nation coalition that has been systematically going after ISIL on the ground, but also trying to cut off their financing, cut off their oil exports, identify high-value targets.

And as I indicated in Turkey during my press conference, we continue to examine what's working well, what's not working as well. We adjust strategy in accordance with what we're seeing on the ground and continually encouraging other countries to do more.

So, obviously, in light of what happened in Paris, I think President Hollande wants to step up and be more involved in the work that we have been doing. He was already an excellent partner, and I welcome the fact that they're now willing to step up some of the strikes that they've been taking in Syria. And in fact, we're obviously helping to facilitate them doing so. There's been very close coordination from the start between Paris and the United States in the French response.

With respect to Moscow, from the start, I've also welcomed Moscow going after ISIL. The problem has been that in their initial military incursion into Syria, they've been more focused on propping up Mr. Asad and targeting the moderate opposition, as opposed to targeting those folks who threaten us, Europe, and Russia as well. And I've had repeated discussions—first in New York at the United Nations General Assembly and then most recently in Turkey—with President Putin that if in fact he shifts his focus and the focus of his military to what is the principal threat, which is ISIL, then that is something that we very much want to see.

That's not how they've been operating over the last several weeks. It may be that now, having seen ISIL take down one of their airliners in a horrific accident, that that reorientation continues. And we'll be in discussions with Moscow and Mr. Putin to see if that will continue.

We can't separate that out from the broader issue of how do we settle the war in Syria. And for the last several weeks, Russia has been a constructive partner in Vienna in trying to create a political transition. There is obviously a catch, which is, Moscow still is interested in keeping Asad in power; we do not believe that we can arrive at a political settlement so long as he remains President. But those differences have not prevented us from looking at how can we set up a cease-fire, how can we move forward on setting up a political transition period that could lead to new elections. And we will continue to work with not just Russia, but all the parties in the region, to see if we can arrive at a political solution.

If we get a better understanding with Russia about the process for bringing an end to the Syrian civil war, that obviously opens up more opportunities for coordination with respect to ISIL. And so the two things can't be completely separated. But we're going to wait and see whether in fact Russia does end up devoting more attention to targets that are ISIL targets. And if it does so, then that's something we welcome. That's exactly what I've been arguing for since we set up this anti-ISIL coalition. And that's what I've been arguing to all our coalition partners and those who have not been in the coalition over the last several years.

With respect to the refugee debate that's been taking place, I gather, while we've been gone, what happened in Paris is terrible. And because you have this vibrant, modern, open, diverse, tolerant Western city that reminds us of home, that reminds us of our own cafes and our own parks and our own stadiums, I understand why the American people have been particularly affected by the gruesome images that have happened there.

And it is important for us to be reminded that we have to be vigilant, that rooting out these terrorist networks and protecting the homeland is hard work, and we can't be complacent or lulled into thinking somehow that we are immune from these kinds of attacks. That's why we built an entire infrastructure over the last decade-plus to make it much harder for terrorists to attack us, to go after terrorists where they live and plan these attacks, to coordinate with our partners and our allies, to improve our intelligence. All the work that we've been doing in our intelligence communities and our military over the last decade is in recognition of the fact that this is something we should be concerned about and we've got to work hard to prevent it.

But we are not well served when, in response to a terrorist attack, we descend into fear and panic. We don't make good decisions if it's based on hysteria or an exaggeration of risks. And I think the refugee debate is an example of us not being well served by some of the commentary that's been taking place by officials back home and in the media.

Understand, under current law, it takes anywhere from, on average, 18 to 24 months to clear a refugee to come into the United States. They are subjected to the most rigorous process conceivable. The intelligence community vets fully who they are. Biometrics are applied to determine whether they are, in fact, somebody who might threaten the United States. There is an entire apparatus of all of our law enforcement agencies and the center that we use for countering terrorism to check and ensure that a refugee is not admitted that might cause us harm.

And if anything, over the last several years that the refugee crisis has emerged in Europe, we've been criticized that it is too—so cumbersome that it's very difficult for us to show the kind of compassion that we need to for these folks who are suffering under the bombings of Asad and the attacks of ISIL. They're victims of this terrorism.

And so if there are concrete, actual suggestions to enhance this extraordinary screening process that's already in place, we're welcome—we're open to hearing actual ideas. But that's not really what's been going on in this debate. When candidates say we wouldn't admit 3-year-old orphans, that's political posturing. When individuals say that we should have a religious test and that only Christians—proven Christians—should be admitted, that's offensive and contrary to American values.

I cannot think of a more potent recruitment tool for ISIL than some of the rhetoric that's been coming out of here during the course of this debate. ISIL seeks to exploit the idea that there is a war between Islam and the West. And when you start seeing individuals in positions of responsibility, suggesting that Christians are more worthy of protection than Muslims are in a war-torn land, that feeds the ISIL narrative. It's counterproductive, and it needs to stop.

And I would add, by the way, these are the same folks oftentimes who suggest that they're so tough that just talking to Putin or staring down ISIL or using some additional rhetoric somehow is going to solve the problems out there. But apparently, they're scared of widows and orphans coming into the United States of America as part of our tradition of compassion. First, they were worried about the press being too tough on them during debates. Now they're worried about 3-year-old orphans. That doesn't sound very tough to me.

So I—if there are specific suggestions about what it is that is not already being done under this rigorous 18- to 24-month process to admit refugees and the screening that's taking place by an entire set of U.S. agencies that are specialists in countering terrorism, if they've got a specific suggestion, then they can make it. But that's not really what's been going on.

They've been playing on fear in order to try to score political points or to advance their campaigns. And it's irresponsible. And it's contrary to who we are. And it needs to stop, because the world is watching.

I was proud when there were—the attacks in Boston took place and we did not resort to fear and to panic. Boston Strong. People went to the ballgame that same week and sang the national anthem and went back to the stores and went back to the streets. That's how you defeat ISIL. Not by trying to divide the country or suggest somehow that our tradition of compassion should stop now.

All right. Oh, one last thing: With respect to Congress, I know that there's been discussion about legislation suddenly surfacing around refugees. I've been waiting for a year and a half, or more, for legislation that would authorize the military activities that we're carrying out in Syria as we speak and have not been able to get anything out of Congress. And now, suddenly, they're able to rush in, in a day or two, to solve the threat of widows and orphans and others who are fleeing a war-torn land, and that's their most constructive contribution to the effort against ISIL? That doesn't sound right to me. And I suspect it won't sound right to the American people.

Sorry, Mr. President, I had a lot to say on that one.

President Aquino. No problem. [Laughter] Very educational, Mr. President. [Laughter]

With regards to trade, we have a political system that is very similar to that that exists in the United States of America. We are both facing elections come next year. We recognize the pressure to make populist statements at this point in time. At the end of the election period, there will be sobriety, and the argument that not opening ourselves up to a bigger market and freer access to that bigger market cannot be made. Therefore, we think that once elections are over, that current voice will die down, and there will be new champions of increased free trade amongst all countries.

President Obama. President Aquino is more succinct. [Laughter] All right. Good? That's it. Thank you.

Moderator. Thank you, President Obama. Thank you, President Aquino. And thank you members of the press. This press conference is now concluded.

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 9:19 a.m. at the Sofitel Philippine Plaza Manila. In his remarks, he referred to Secretary of Trade and Industry Gregory Domingo of the Philippines; President Bashar al-Asad of Syria; President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin of Russia; Gov. Christopher J. Christie of New Jersey; Sen. R. Edward Cruz; and former Gov. John E. "Jeb" Bush of Florida. He also referred to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist organization. A reporter referred former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton.

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