

**Remarks of the
Honorable Teodoro L. Locsin, Jr.
Secretary of Foreign Affairs
124th DFA Founding Anniversary Celebration
Thursday, 23 June 2022**

Happy 124th Founding Anniversary to our Department of Foreign Affairs.

It's been nearly 4 years since I took the helm of the DFA. In a few days, as the clock nears noon on June 30, I will turn off the lights in my bare office on the 11th floor.

I will take the elevator down, the one that sometimes works. I will walk across the lobby and stop to bow to the Sublime Paralytic; who went farther for our country without the use of his legs than most of us do on two; and the worst Filipinos on all fours.

At the door, I will bow to the women whose smiles brighten the day ahead however dark the sky. Then I step out of the most respected institution of the Republic. I will drive my car past the guards at the gate at a minute before noon when I cease to be Secretary of Foreign Affairs.

I will feel a great weight lift from my shoulders. And feel it replaced with equal gravity of gratitude to Rodrigo Roa Duterte for the heavy responsibility he entrusted to me. This weight shall I carry happily to the end of my days.

Behind me will be the building where I worked with the best of the best in the arcane field of foreign affairs; which takes a lifetime to learn just to navigate the hall of cracked mirrors of international relations.

Before the DFA, I spent a lifetime with the best in American and Philippine diplomacy; who dropped by the Free Press to bounce their insights off my father within my hearing.

Armando Manalo was a frequent presence; and I work with his son. So was Leon Ma. Guerrero. The US embassy in Manila was the equal in importance to the US embassy in West Germany. The two flanked both extremities of the Soviet Union which spanned the width of half Europe and all of Asia. West Germany and the Philippines were the

only countries on the planet with mutual defense treaties with the United States. Hence our safety and sovereignty in the hot wars of the cold war.

At diplomatic gatherings at home, I caught snatches of the 1965 killing season in a near neighbor, partly planned in Manila. Filipino Jesuits were suspected; the same ones that encouraged the massive First Quarter Storm against the first re-elected president of the republic. With reelection, he would have the most latitude to go independent in foreign policy. Protesters hurled a mock coffin at him; in the very place where his son will be inaugurated.

All those who then worked in the DFA had a narrower experience but a more pragmatic understanding of the fearful dynamics of interaction between the two superpowers. Left to their wits, they looked for a way out of similar dilemmas in our country — should things over here take a turn for the worst like in Santiago de Chile and Athens. One night in Manila, as I was closing the paper at midnight, soldiers came in. It was September 21-22, 1972.

Your elders and predecessors lived through it. Ask them to tell their stories. Never mind the judgments of the heart. Tell them to stick to facts: the unceasing protests on the streets with no hope of success and for nothing of value. Our neighbor's daughter was blinded with a pillbox. Try again to see the lay of that old land of the morning and if there really was another way out than the road taken.

When I said yes to the president to being his Secretary of Foreign Affairs, I did not know that a virus would largely define my tenure along with a new cold war starting in our neck of the woods. Submerged maritime features rose from the waves of the West Philippine Sea by reclamation, to be claimed by ancient right of the most recent vintage; at the cost of national territory and self-esteem.

After I was sworn in, the president walked away. "uh, sir..." I mumbled. He turned around. "Any orders?" He answered: "I tossed you the ball, play it as you see fit." He never criticized my moves or put a stop to any of them except when I trenched on what he said is the exclusive presidential prerogative to curse.

I came here on that first day on the job and affirmed the president's independent foreign policy. "friends to all, enemies to none" had a nice ring to it. But I rephrased it with realism to "friend to friends, enemy to enemies, and a worst enemy to false friends." We have lost more from faithless friends than open enemies.

I drew a blood red line in the West Philippine Sea. You here, in the audience, met me more than halfway to hold that line; firing diplomatic protests at intruders in our waters; not missing a single transgression; nor tempering the severity of your response. You didn't care for your careers; why should I care for a temp job?

We strengthened alliances with old partners; but turned off the United States — our only military treaty ally. It took almost four years but Babe and I re-established relations. "So, everything is back to normal?" I said to a powerful member of the US Foreign Relations Committee. "No," he said, "It is not back to normal; it will never be because we have matured; now we respect you." I said this to the president at the last cabinet meeting. He smiled. No one else, please, attempt a reprise; Duterte's been there and done that. He'd taken a beating for his pride.

Our richest recent acquisition is actually a re-acquisition: the discovery of India by the great writer Ambassador Leon Ma. Guerrero; and the expansion and deepening of our relations in my watch. Turkey followed in short order. They are dependable sources of weaponry to give teeth to toothless sovereignty. Now we have enough to unequivocally trigger mutual defense if push comes to shove.

We changed the narrative of being "pro" or "anti" this or that country; and stood proudly alone *pro Patria Filipina*.

If other countries return our affection and share our deep democratic convictions, we adopt them like our own. Hence, our all-out commitment to Burmese freedom and the restoration of Aung San Suu Kyi's democratic rule.

We stood proud in emotion as our President received the Balangiga bells and returned them to Samar. He passed his hand over the chiseled names of the slain as though

they were names of his forebears. Our President feels our history like it is still unfolding and in a way it is.

We rejected the lying narratives of our human rights record; and retained our seat at the Human Rights Council. I thank foreign minister Kono for outmaneuvering the vote on the Iceland resolution. I thank Gustavo Gonzales and Justice Secretary Menardo Guevarra for signing a landmark joint program on human rights with the United Nations.

We led the fight for and the drafting of the Global Compact for Migration. Since it could not be law, we raised it higher to a pact of decency in human conduct. Law merely says what should not be done. Decency goes farther to define what it is to be human. I watched the Swiss Permanent Representative cast his vote for the GCM in quiet defiance of his own government's rejection.

Decency guided our principled stand condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We are the only ASEAN country that voted "yes" to the UN General Assembly resolutions condemning the invasion of Ukraine, the humanitarian crisis it created, and suspending Russia from the human rights council.

But we had only disdain for the trivial resolutions that followed. Their only purpose was the self-gratification of seeing Russia isolated. They serve only to dilute the first 3 major resolutions. We have seen that diplomatic isolation does not serve the cause of peace. Look at the DPRK. Now, the Taliban is another matter.

We brought home 397 Filipinos from Ukraine, and assisted others to safe exit. I was the first at the border of Ukraine to take our people out. Courage is the oxygen of a foreign service.

On Myanmar, we've insisted on ending military attacks on the civilian population and the arson of their homes; and on the impartial delivery of humanitarian assistance to all in need including perceived enemies of the junta. ASEAN must act against the junta if there is no progress on the Five-Point Consensus. The credibility of ASEAN centrality and the ASEAN way hangs by a thread and it is fraying.

On negotiations for a code of conduct in the South China Sea, we insisted that it does not concede Chinese supremacy to the exclusion of other powers on a pacific footing. To be fair, China has never asked for that.

If her interest is harnessing the stopping power of water to stall an attack on herself, then littoral states like ours can give her ample forewarning. We have a mutual defense treaty with our only conceivable military ally. We have no joint aggression pact with any power.

To every intrusion we responded with protest; if it comes to it, we will answer with action. Duterte and Lorenzana have given us the start of a credible retaliatory force; and thereby helped me turn our foreign policy into a fist in the iron glove of the armed forces.

In upholding the rule of law and not of might as the way forward, we've held on to UNCLOS and the 2016 arbitral award. They are the twin anchors of the Philippine position on the West Philippine and South China Seas. Without the rule of law, none can thrive nor long survive the resulting anarchy. And no — the game of anarchy does not always go to the strongest. The weaker can strike up an alliance with a yet stronger — to keep the bone of contention for itself or deny it to all.

But let me say one thing: we have not surrendered a single inch of territory or a drop of our waters. Not by word or deed have we weakened our right to everything in the West Philippine Sea. Without inviting pity by asking, we achieved an international consensus that right is with us and might cannot ever take it away. In the 21st century, the first incontestable and most significant victory at sea is Filipino.

But just because we have differences does not mean we have to fight over everything. In that spirit I tried for three years to come to an agreement to facilitate exploration for and exploitation of oil and gas in the West Philippine Sea. We got as far as it is constitutionally possible to go. One step forward from where we stood on the edge of the abyss is a drop into constitutional crisis. That explains the sudden pull-back on my part which unravelled three years of sincere hard work on the part of Wang Yi and

me. We had both tried to go as far as we could — without renouncing china's aspiration on his part; and constitutional limitations on my part. I shut down shop completely.

The president had spoken. I carried out his instructions to the letter: oil and gas discussions are terminated completely. Nothing is pending; everything is over. Three years on and we had not achieved our objective of developing oil and gas resources so critical for the Philippines — but not at the price of sovereignty; not even a particle of it.

As we neared the end, I bitterly lost my most trusted envoy and guide, ambassador Chito Sta. Romana. Chito, I could not have done it without you. You were honor and service personified. Wang Yi and I trusted you. My chest is empty now you're not with me. My confidence is shaken.

It remains with the new administration to protect our sovereignty all the way to the wire. And now I can rest. The irreducible template of what is constitutionally possible is there in black and white. Surrender of any portion of Philippine sovereignty is not an option. Not for love; not for money. I thank my immediate team. Their names I will not say; the country still needs them to protect our country's sovereignty.

Simultaneously came the virus. It hit us all. Then came lockdowns. We ramped up our response and our exposure regardless of the risks. We were frontliners who repatriated nearly 500,000 overseas Filipinos, including seafarers trapped off foreign coasts that would not let their ships dock and crews disembark.

With partners from the Foreign Diplomatic Corps we expatriated stranded foreign nationals without their home governments asking. We don't need to be asked; we do what we must out of decency. Thank you, Foreign Diplomatic Corps; thank you, Berna Puyat; she reversed the very purpose of her department from inviting in tourists to sending them out to safety.

The DFA got close to 100 million vaccine doses, starting with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's huge offer of Pfizer and Moderna. We opened green lanes for

seafarers; and pushed for recognition of our COVID vaccine certificates. 68 countries now do so.

The greatest sacrifice DFA gave is the highest: lives lost. Ambassador “Bernie” Catalla of Beirut said goodbye to me at my office — all smiles, eager to return to duty. I touched her coffin at the airport when her remains returned. Other DFA officers lost their lives to Covid while in the service:

- Alicia “Alice” Magtaan, Consular, 32 years of service;
- Reynaldo “Rey” Enriquez, Consular, 19 years of service;
- Romeo “Romy” Gle, New Delhi, 21 years of service;
- Arcel Donato, Tripoli, 21 years of service; and
- Daisy Manalansan, OFMS, 33 years of service.

Passports and consular services are what most Filipinos know of DFA. With increased demand and backlog from lockdowns, we opened 9 new consular offices and numerous temporary offsite passport services; we rolled out passports-on-wheels and fast-tracked the shift to apostilles to replace authentication certificates. Consular affairs pushed the limits of the doable; did what none thought possible, but it was never enough for the public. Yet we did not complain; we took the criticism as votes of complete confidence in our capacity to give even more of ourselves.

We did our part in spades in the conduct of overseas voting which I, as congressman, put in the hands of the DFA. I trusted no other department with the job of honest overseas voting. My trust was perfectly placed. Despite restrictions on mobility and gathering, we got 40% voter turnout — the highest in overseas voting history.

We took care of our DFA people, putting in place benefits for single parents, and rationalizing deployment of private staff to make sure they are paid the right and stipulated wage with no kickbacks. We are set to allow single foreign service officers or married for that matter, to bring their aged parents along. Ours is not just a foreign service; it is a Filipino foreign service; we have added to it our best traditions and customs.

There are hiccups.

But not having a new building is not one of them. We have trillions to pay back for seeing our people safely through the pandemic. When the pandemic broke out, the President turned to me and said, "What about DFA; do you need more money?" I said, "Nope; we've enough; in fact, we'd like to return a third of our budget." I can hear your silent groans.

We're not throwing money at a new building when this one can withstand another half century of use. Sure, it looks shopworn; so are all of you inside — all our dedicated DFA personnel. This building fits us to a t: a DFA in the service of the Filipino — in the worst of times which is to say in the best of times to show our quality.

We're still working on the retirees' law. Retirement pay was recently raised; but what about those who retired on poor pensions before the increase? My successor will accomplish what I have not.

I leave the department with full confidence in its future; assured by its composition of dedicated public servants whose oath of service carries on. I leave with much work still to be done. But not in diplomacy. In the most critical parts of that we, here, have spoken the last word.

But much remains in the reform and improvement of working conditions in the DFA especially in the fairness of promotions. In this field, the best of the career must weed out the worst who are millstones around the neck of a better DFA by blocking the rise of the young and accomplished.

I recall what I said in my first DFA Day message:

"our honor is not to stay here. Our honor is to have been here; to have served here; to have stood here on such occasions as this — in the felt but unseen presence of those who make us proud to be here today as having been one of them; to have done the things that needed doing in our time as they did in theirs; to have done these things

well if not brilliantly though that too will be forgotten like all good deeds — and not remembered like bad ones. And to move on so that others shall have the chance to do the same.

Those who came before us had one thing we did not have when we first came in: experience. Those who come after us have one thing we may be running out of: fresh blood, other hopes, new ideas.”

And so as I bound out of those doors one last time on June 30, I ask that you who remain give to those who come after the wisdom of your experience; the generosity to recognize that they may be even better and encourage them; above all, the fervent ardor of your commitment to the very best of public service; no one can ask for more.

Congratulations on keeping the Department of Foreign Affairs the premier institution it is and has always been these past 124 years.

From Louie and I, a most grateful thank you for walking the path with us.

That's a long goodbye; but I had to do justice to the most productive time of my life. Farewell. God go with you wherever you sail this ship of the Philippine state. END