

# CONFERENCE REPORT

CALD REGIONAL CONFERENCE 2025

## **SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTES UNDER TRUMP 2.0:**

Finding a Common Ground  
Among Claimant States

03 APRIL 2025 | MANILA, THE PHILIPPINES

# **SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTES UNDER TRUMP 2.0:**

## **Finding a Common Ground Among Claimant States**

02-05 April 2025 | Metro Manila, The Philippines

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## Concept Note

The foreign policy uncertainties brought about by Donald Trump's second term in the White House could have significant implications for the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, which have already worsened in recent years due to overarching claims and provocative actions of some claimant states.

This volatile environment, combined with possible US foreign policy changes, makes the region one of the most explosive global flashpoints. As *The Economist* warned: "In the South China Sea, long-running friction over disputed rocks and reefs has escalated into dramatic clashes at sea (which) have mostly occurred between Chinese and Philippine coast guard vessels." The tension between China and the Philippines came into full view in the 61<sup>st</sup> Munich Security Conference in February 2025, when representatives from the two countries had a heated exchange on the South China Sea row.

Scholars and analysts are divided on what could be the implications of US foreign policy changes for the South China Sea dispute. Some claim that the transactional leadership that Trump espouses could lead to a more inward-looking United States, raising questions on whether the country's existing commitments to its allies in the region would remain. Others argue that a more isolationist US could provide a space to avoid being drawn into superpower competition and come up with "Asian solutions to Asian problems."

The uncertainties on what could be the next steps of the US, together with sweeping claims of sovereignty in the South China Sea, contribute to the tense relationship among claimant countries in Southeast and East Asia. Numerous attempts to diffuse the tensions in the past have limited success, and recent developments in the disputed waters point to possible global ramifications – particularly in terms of freedom of navigation and securing lines of communication.

In light of the worsening tensions in the South China Sea and the uncertainties brought about by Trump's second term, it becomes imperative to have a regional forum where views of the claimant states in the South China Sea disputes can be raised with a goal of finding a way forward. Since most claimant states are small and medium-sized states which could not match a regional hegemon's prowess individually, it becomes important for them to find a common ground amidst their competing claims.

In this regard, the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats (CALD), in cooperation with the Center for Liberalism and Democracy (CLD), Department of International Studies - Miriam College and Philippine International Studies Organization (PHISO), and with the support of Friedrich Naumann Foundation Southeast and East Asia (FNF SEEA) Office will hold a regional conference which brings together representatives from South China Sea claimant states. Representatives from other states such as the European Union and South Korea are also invited given their links to the region's security arrangements.

The objectives of the conference are as follows:

- To describe the state-of-affairs in the South China Sea, particularly current developments and trends which impinge on regional peace and security;
- To discuss the key aspects of each claimant state's South China Sea claims, as well as their bases for pursuing those claims; and
- To identify possible areas for cooperation among claimant and allied states, and coordinated courses of action to deter aggression.

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## Programme

### 02 April 2025 (Wednesday)

Variable	Departure from country of origin to Manila  Hotel Check-in <a href="#">Brittany Hotel – BGC</a> 6 McKinley Parkway, Aura Complex Bonifacio Global City, Taguig, Metro Manila The Philippines +63 939 935 1910   +63 2 8860 5830
19:00 – 21:00	Welcome Dinner <i>Acacia Room, 8/F Brittany Hotel BGC</i> Welcome Remarks  <b>Celito Arlegue</b> Executive Director Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats  <b>John Joseph Coronel</b> President Center for Liberalism and Democracy

### 03 April 2025 (Thursday)

06:00 – 07:30	Breakfast <i>Origine Spanish Cuisine, Level 1, Brittany Hotel BGC</i>
07:30 – 07:45	Assembly at the hotel lobby
07:45 – 09:00	Transfer to Miriam College, Katipunan Avenue, Quezon City
09:00 – 09:30	Registration <i>Paz Adriano Little Theater Foyer, Miriam College</i>
09:30 – 18:00	CALD Regional Conference on the South China Sea <i>Paz Adriano Little Theater, Miriam College</i>

<i>Masters of Ceremonies</i>  <i>Karry Sison, Managing Trustee, Center for Liberalism and Democracy</i> <i>Jules Guiang, Co-Founder, 2030 Youth Force</i>	
09:30 – 10:15	<b>Opening Ceremonies</b>  <i>The opening ceremonies aim to present the South China Sea disputes from the perspective of the conference organizers and partners.</i>

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	<p><i>Opening Prayer</i></p> <p><i>National Anthem</i></p> <p><i>Welcome Remarks</i></p> <p><b>Trixie Marie Sison, Ph.D.</b> Vice President for Academic Affairs Miriam College, <i>Philippines</i></p> <p><i>Opening Remarks</i></p> <p><b>Mardi Seng</b> Chairperson, Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats Senator, <i>Cambodia</i></p> <p><b>Melanie Reyes, Ph.D.</b> Department of International Studies School of Arts, Sciences and Education Miriam College, <i>Philippines</i></p> <p><b>Gerry Bulatao</b> Chairperson, Center for Liberalism and Democracy, <i>Philippines</i></p> <p><b>Thekla Ebbert</b> Regional Programme Coordinator, Friedrich Naumann Foundation Southeast and East Asia Office, <i>Germany/Thailand</i></p> <p><i>Group Photo</i></p> <p><i>Performance</i></p>
<p>10:15 – 10:30</p>	<p><b>Coffee &amp; Tea Break</b></p>
<p>10:30 - 12:00</p>	<p><b>Session I: Treading on Dangerous Waters: A Discussion on Recent Developments and Trends Relating to the South China Sea Disputes</b></p> <p><i>In the past decades, tensions in the South China Sea have periodically flared among the claimant states. Most recently, however, the tensions have been the greatest between China and other claimant states like the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam. China also had skirmishes with Japan in the past years concerning territorial sovereignty over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.</i></p> <p><i>In this roundtable discussion, recent trends and developments pertaining to the disputed waters in the South China Sea will be discussed. In particular, the following questions may guide the discussion:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>What is the direction US foreign policy under Trump regarding the South China Sea disputes, and what are its potential impacts?</i></li> </ol>

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	<p>2. <i>What do recent events on disputed waters tell us about possibilities for escalation?</i></p> <p>3. <i>What role can EU (and other allies) play in the South China Sea disputes in the event US renege on its commitments to the region?</i></p> <p><i>Speakers</i></p> <p><b>Renato C. De Castro, Ph.D.</b> Full Professor, International Studies Department College of Liberal Arts De La Salle University Manila, <i>Philippines</i></p> <p><b>Edcel Ibarra</b> Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science College of Social Sciences and Philosophy University of the Philippines – Diliman, <i>Philippines</i></p> <p><b>Lai I-Chung, Ph.D.</b> President, Prospect Foundation, <i>Taiwan</i></p> <p><b>Alva Finn</b> Executive Director European Liberal Forum, <i>Ireland</i></p> <p><i>Moderator</i></p> <p><b>Marites Vitug</b> Editor-at-large, Rappler, <i>Philippines</i> Author, <i>Rock Solid: How the Philippines Won its Maritime Case Against China</i></p>
<p>12:00 - 13:15</p>	<p>Lunch <i>Our Lady's Court and MMJ Foyer, Miriam College</i></p>
<p>13:15- 13:45</p>	<p><b>Fireside Chat</b></p> <p><i>This fireside chat will focus on the human rights and social justice implications of the South China Sea disputes, from the perspective of a former Commission on Human Rights Chair and Secretary of Justice.</i></p> <p><b>Leila de Lima</b> Spokesperson, Liberal Party of the Philippines and ML Partylist Nominee Former Chairperson, Commission on Human Rights Former Secretary, Department of Justice, <i>Philippines</i></p> <p><i>Moderator</i></p> <p><b>Christian Esguerra</b> Host of Facts First, <i>Philippines</i></p>

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13:45- 14:15	<b>Press Conference</b>
14:15 – 15:30	<p><b>Session II: Understanding the Competing Claims in the South China Sea: A High-Level Panel on the Views of Claimant States</b></p> <p><i>In this high-level panel, the views of different claimant states on the South China Sea disputes will be analyzed. Apart from China and Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam have competing claims in the South China Sea. Indonesia is not a claimant state officially, but insists that the waters around Natuna islands (which overlap with China’s nine-dash line) are part of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).</i></p> <p><i>The discussion in this high-level panel may be guided by the following questions:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>1. What are the key elements of the South China Sea claims of the country you are representing?</i></li> <li><i>2. Are there legal, historical or geographic bases for those claims? What are they and how do these overlap with those of other claimant states?</i></li> <li><i>3. Are there so-called “redlines” in your country’s dealings with other claimant states in the South China Sea disputes?</i></li> </ol> <p><i>Speakers</i></p> <p><b>Agus Widjojo</b> Head of Mission Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in the Philippines, <i>Indonesia</i></p> <p><b>Rej Cortez Torrecampo</b> Senior Lecturer, Department of International Studies, Miriam College, <i>Philippines</i></p> <p><b>Chong Jia Wearn</b> Vice Leader for the Youth (Johor State) Parti Gerakan Rakyat, <i>Malaysia</i></p> <p><i>Moderator</i></p> <p><b>Richard Javad Heydarian</b> Columnist, Philippine Daily Inquirer Senior Lecturer, Asian Centre, University of the Philippines, <i>Philippines</i></p>
15:30 - 16:00	Coffee & Tea Break
16:00 – 17:30	<p><b>Session III: Finding a Way Forward: Exploring Possible Areas of Cooperation Amidst Competing Claims</b></p> <p><i>Taking from the discussion in the previous panel, this session will explore possible areas of cooperation among claimant states even in the context of their competing</i></p>

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	<p><i>claims for sovereignty in the South China Sea. In recent times, proposals for joint patrols, exploration, training, research and information-sharing have been forwarded as potential areas for cooperation and confidence-building. This session will discuss the feasibility of these proposals, as well as the role of ASEAN and the long-delayed Code of Conduct (COC) on the South China Sea.</i></p> <p><i>More specifically, the session may address the following guide questions:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>1. What are possible ways to diffuse the tensions in the South China Sea and pave the way for cooperation?</i></li> <li><i>2. What role do other non-claimant states and the ASEAN have to play to create an environment more conducive for negotiations and diplomacy?</i></li> <li><i>3. What short-term, medium-term and long-term measures do you recommend to contribute to the resolution of South China Sea disputes?</i></li> </ol> <p><i>Speakers</i></p> <p><b>Michael Lee</b> Deputy Representative Taipei Economic &amp; Cultural Office in the Philippines</p> <p><b>Andi Wijoyanto</b> Head of Research Agency, Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle Former Cabinet Secretary, <i>Indonesia</i></p> <p><b>Dae-Jin Jung, Ph.D.</b> Professor Halla University, <i>South Korea</i></p> <p><b>Jay Batongbacal, Ph.D.</b> Director, Institute for Maritime Affairs and the Law of the Sea College of Law, University of the Philippines</p> <p><i>Moderator</i></p> <p><b>Ricky Carandang</b> Journalist CEO, Ronin Consultancy, <i>Philippines</i></p>
<p>17:30 - 18:00</p>	<p><b>Closing Ceremonies</b></p> <p><i>The closing ceremonies will feature a synthesis of the three previous sessions as well as closing remarks from the organizers.</i></p> <p><i>Video Address</i></p> <p><b>Didrick de Schaetzen</b> Secretary General Alliance for Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party, <i>Belgium</i></p>

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	<p><i>Synthesis</i></p> <p><b>Lorna Israel, Ph.D.</b> President, Philippine International Studies Organization Graduate Program Coordinator, Department of International Studies Miriam College, <i>Philippines</i></p> <p><i>Closing Remarks</i></p> <p><b>Lorenzo “Erin” Tanada</b> Acting President, Liberal Party of the Philippines Former Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives, <i>Philippines</i></p> <p><b>Francis Gerald “Blue” Abaya</b> Secretary General, Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats Former Member of House of Representatives, <i>Philippines</i></p>
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- 18:00 – 19:00      Transfer to Dinner Venue
- 19:00 – 21:00      Dinner  
*Provenciano*  
*110 Maginhawa, Diliman, Quezon City, 1101 Metro Manila*
- 21:00 – 22:00      Transfer back to the Hotel

**04 April 2025 (Friday)**

- 06:00 – 09:00      Breakfast  
*Origine Spanish Cuisine, Level 1, Brittany Hotel BGC*
- 09:00 – 09:30      Registration
- 09:30 – 12:00      **Roundtable Discussion on 2025 Philippine Elections**  
*Acacia Room, 8/F Brittany Hotel - BGC*

*This roundtable discussion aims to provide the international conference delegates with an overview of the key issues, problems and prospects of the Philippine midterm elections on 12 May 2025. In particular, it hopes to discuss the feud between the Marcoses and the Dutertes, the state of the Liberal Party of the Philippines and the political opposition, the realities of Philippine electoral campaign, and the need for political/electoral reform and public education.*

*It will start with the presentation of the three speakers, followed by a moderated discussion and open forum.*

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## *Speakers*

*On the Marcos-Duterte rift and the state of political opposition*

### **Lorenzo “Erin” Tanada**

Acting President, Liberal Party of the Philippines

*On the realities of Philippine politics and elections*

### **Danilo Arao, Ph.D.**

Convenor, *Kontra Daya* (Against Fraud)

Associate Professor of Journalism, University of the Philippines

*On the role and impact of social media on elections*

### **Mara Cepeda**

Philippine Correspondent

The Straits Times

*On the need for political and electoral reform*

### **Luie Tito Guia**

Former Commissioner, Commission on Elections

*On the role of the academe in advancing political education*

### **Francis Joseph A. Dee**

Senior Lecturer, Department of Political Science

University of the Philippines – Diliman, Philippines

## *Moderator*

### **Pia Hontiveros**

Broadcast Journalist

12:00 – 13:30

Lunch

13:30 – 17:00

**Briefing on AI Use in Elections and  
50<sup>th</sup> CALD Executive Committee Meeting**  
*Acacia Room, 8/F Brittany Hotel – BGC*

13:30 – 14:30

*Briefing on AI Use in Elections*

### **Cleve Arguelles**

CEO, WR Numero Research, Inc.

14:30 – 17:00

*50<sup>th</sup> CALD Executive Committee Meeting  
(CALD Members and Partners Only)*

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*Presided by*

**Mardi Seng**

Chairperson, Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats  
Senator, *Cambodia*

Free Night

## **05 April 2025 (Saturday)**

- 06:00 – 09:00      **Breakfast**  
*Origine Spanish Cuisine, Level 1, Brittany Hotel BGC*
- 12:00 – 14:00      **Lunch (CALD Officials and Secretariat only)**  
*Kimpura, Greenbelt 5, Makati City*  
*Hosted by CALD Secretary General*
- 14:30 – 17:00      **CALD Officials and Secretariat Debriefing Session & Meeting**  
*CALD Office*
- 19:00 – 21:00      **Advance Screening of a Women Documentary “Accelerate Action”**  
*Organized by Center for Liberalism and Democracy, Young Thinkers for Freedom with support from Friedrich Naumann Foundation Philippine Office*  
*Sine Pop, Cubao, Quezon City*  
(CALD Officials and Secretariat only)
- Variable              **Departure from Manila to country of origin**  
(All International Participants – except CALD officials)

## **06 April 2025 (Sunday)**

- Variable              **Departure from Manila to country of origin**  
(CALD Officials)

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## Profile of Speakers & Session Chairs

### Masters of Ceremonies



#### **Karry Sison**

Managing Trustee,  
Center for Liberalism and Democracy (CLD)

Karry is the managing trustee of the Center for Liberalism and Democracy. She is a trained facilitator, and tasks include program design and strategizing advocacy campaigns.

Aside from her full-time practice of law, Karry is a consultant/gender legislative specialist at The Asia Foundation. Karry was part of the Liberal Caucus of Congressional Staff (LCCS) in the 16th Congress, and convened the same during the 17th and 18th Congresses. She served as the chief political officer / chief of staff of former Liberal Party Secretary General, f/Rep. Jose Christopher Y. Belmonte during his three consecutive terms in the House of Representatives.

Karry's advocacies include human rights, drug policy reform, and creating safe spaces, which she pursues as an active member of the Free Legal Assistance Group, a co-founder of StreetlawPH, and a co-convenor of the Feminist Legal Network.



#### **Jules Guiang**

Co-Founder, 2030 Youth Force

Jules currently serves as Communications & Events Coordinator at the Asian Development Bank (ADB). A graduate of BA Public Administration and Master in Public Administration from the University of the Philippines-Diliman in 2014 and 2021, respectively, he started as a reporter for PTV-4 from 2012-2014, before serving as a TV Host for the same network from 2014 until 2020.

Jules was a student leader and a fellow of the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative. He founded the National Alliance of Youth Leaders Inc. in 2014, which handles Tatak Botante, a voter education campaign. He also founded and led the 2030 Youth Force in the Philippines Inc. which advocates for the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. He was recognized by the Quezon City Government in 2019 as a Local Outstanding Volunteer Awardee. In 2020, Jules worked with the Asian Development Bank as a Communications and Stakeholder Engagement Coordinator for a mission with the National Economic and Development Authority. In the same year, he served as Youth Empowerment Consultant for the United Nations Development Programme Asia-Pacific.

In 2021, Jules served as Rappler's Head of Community, leading a dynamic team handling digital communications, civic engagement, membership, and partnerships. He also currently leads the Maginhawa Food Community Inc. (MFC) as President. MFC is a collective of restaurants based in the renowned food street in Quezon City.

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## Opening Ceremonies



### **Trixie Marie Sison Ph.D.**

Vice President for Academic Affairs,  
Miriam College

Dr. Trixie is an educator who has been in the field for more than 30 years. For most part of her career, she has been involved in Early Childhood Education and eventually became an invaluable human resource in tertiary and postgraduate levels, all in Miriam College Quezon City. Throughout the years, she was not only into teaching, but broadened her horizons into writing and reviewing books, developing curricula, instructional materials & modules and being a resource speaker for a wide array of topics related to her fields of specialization, both inside and outside of Miriam College.

Dr. Trixie received her Bachelor of Arts in Child Development and Education from Maryknoll College (Cum Laude). She completed her Master of Family Life and Child Development at the University of the Philippines, and earned her PhD in Educational Management at the De La Salle Araneta University with highest distinction. Most notable in the long list of achievements is her stint at the Miriam College Child Study Center where she began her career right after receiving her bachelor's degree. At the CSC, Dr. Trixie, as she is fondly called in the institution, has held various positions from being a Nursery Teacher to Principal. At the Higher Education Unit of Miriam College, she also held positions as Instructor & Lecturer and Chairperson of the Department of Child Development and Education under the College of Education. She was also Program Director of the Child Development DayCare Center. She is currently the Dean of the College of Education of Miriam College.

Outside of Miriam College, Dr. Trixie has been involved or is currently involved with a number of government and private organizations. Among these is being a member of the Technical Committee on Early Childhood Education under the Commission on Higher Education, various Technical Committees of the Early Childhood Care and Development Council, Asia Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood, National Association for the Education of Young Children and the Association for Childhood Education International. Dr. Trixie has authored books for preschool children and has been a book reviewer/consultant. She was also an editor and contributor for the *Saranggola* Magazine.



### **Mardi Seng**

Chairperson, Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats (CALD)  
Senator, Cambodia

Mardi is currently the chairperson of the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats (CALD) and Vice President of the Khmer Will Party. In the February 2024 Cambodian senatorial elections, he was one of the three from the opposition who were elected. He returned to the Senate, where he also previously served as secretary of the Anti-Corruption Commission. He was also formerly the treasurer of the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) and the Candlelight Party (CLP) of Cambodia, and in such capacities, managed four electoral campaigns and elections in different provinces.

He worked in US banks focusing on Compliance, Audit, and Risk Management for 15 years. He finished a bachelor's degree in Economics from Calvin College and a Master of Business Administration from Northeastern University in Boston.

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## Melanie Reyes, Ph.D.

Chairperson, Department of International Studies  
School of Arts, Sciences and Education, Miriam College

Dr. Mel is the Executive Director of the Women and Gender Institute and the Chairperson of the Department of International Studies. She also serves as a part-time faculty member at the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU). Actively involved in various academic and advocacy organizations, she is a member of the National Gender Resource Pool of the Philippine Commission on Women, a board officer of both the Philippine International Studies Organization (PHISO) and the Women and Gender Studies Association of the Philippines (WSAP), and a member of the Asian Association of Women's Studies (AAWS). Dr. Mel holds a Doctor of Social Development from the University of the Philippines Diliman, an M.A. in Public Administration with a major in Public Policy from the same university, and a bachelor's degree in International Studies from Miriam College.



## Victor Gerardo "Gerry" Bulatao

Chairman, Board of Trustees  
Center for Liberalism and Democracy (CLD)

Gerry chairs the Board of Trustees of CLD. He joined the Liberal Party in 1992 and has been serving in its National Executive Council since 2007. Now retired, he also chairs the Boards of *Kaisahan tungo sa Kaunlaran ng Kanayunan at Repormang Pansakahan* set up in 1990 and *Balay Mindanaw Foundation Inc.* established in 1996. Both NGOs work on agrarian reform, participatory local governance, and achieving peace through development.

Gerry has been active in the *Galing Pook Foundation* since the 1990s. He worked with the Federation of Free Farmers in the 1970s and the Department of Agrarian Reform in various capacities, including Undersecretary, in the 1980s-1990s. He served as a member of the Board of the Landbank from 2010-2017. Gerry earned an AB degree from Ateneo de Manila University in 1970 and an MPA from Harvard Kennedy School in 1997.



## Thekla Ebbert

Regional Program Coordinator,  
Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom Southeast & East Asia  
(FNF SEEA)

Thekla started working for FNF in June 2019 in the Berlin State Office and became Head of the FNF Brandenburg State Office in 2022. Previously, she worked as a research assistant at the University of Munich and gained further professional experience at the Canadian Embassy in Berlin. She studied

Political Science, International Relations, and International Law at LMU Munich and Fudan University in Shanghai.

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## Session I: Treading on Dangerous Waters: A Discussion on Recent Developments and Trends Relating to the South China Sea Disputes



**Renato C. De Castro, Ph.D.**  
International Studies Department  
College of Liberal Arts  
De La Salle University Manila

Dr. Renato is a distinguished professor at the Department of International Studies, De La Salle University, Manila. He served as a consultant to the National Security Adviser (NSA), Secretary Caesar Garcia, of the National Security Council (NSC) during the Aquino Administration (2010-2016).

He conducts several professional courses on International Relations, Strategic and Security Studies in the National Defense College (NDCP), Special Intelligence Training School (SITS) of the Intelligence Service of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (ISAFP), General Staff College of the Philippines, and the Foreign Service Institute (FSI). He is a module director managing the graduate course on International Security Studies (ISS) in the NDCP. As a member of the Board of Trustees of the Albert Del Rosario Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ADRI), he writes monthly opinion columns for the Philippine Star and Business World.

He has written over 100 articles on international relations and security that have been published in several scholarly journals and edited works in the Philippines, Japan, South Korea, Canada, Malaysia, France, Singapore, Taiwan, Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Australia, and the United States.

The 2022 AD Scientific Index ranked him 92th among the top 100 scientists in the Philippines and one of the top 50 Social Scientists in the country. AD Scientific Index also ranked him as the number one Filipino Political Scientist in publications and citations. He earned his Ph.D. from the Government and International Studies Department of the University of South Carolina as a Fulbright Scholar in 2001. He obtained his B.A. and two master's degrees from the University of the Philippines.



**Edcel John Ibarra**  
Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science  
University of the Philippines – Diliman

Edcel is an assistant professor at the Department of Political Science, University of the Philippines Diliman, and the managing editor of the Philippine Political Science Journal. He is also Young Leader and US-Philippines Alliance Next-Generation Leader at the Pacific Forum in Honolulu, Hawaii, USA. In 2024, he was awarded the Aileen San Pablo Baviera Prize by the Graduate Research and Development Network on Asian Security, based at the Australian National University in Canberra, for his article "Issue-Based Cooperation on Conflict Resolution in the South China Sea: Roles for ASEAN Beyond the Code of Conduct" in the Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies.

In the same year, he also testified on China's military capabilities and the regional security architecture before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission based in Washington, DC. Edcel was previously a research fellow of the Strategic Studies Program of the Center for Integrative and Development Studies, University of the Philippines, and the officer-in-charge of the Strategic, Territorial, and Maritime Issues Section of the Center for International

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Relations and Strategic Studies, Foreign Service Institute—the think tank of the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs. Edcel obtained his master's degree in international studies and bachelor's degree in political science (magna cum laude) from the University of the Philippines Diliman.



**I-Chung Lai, Ph.D.**  
President,  
Prospect Foundation

Dr. I-Chung is the President of The Prospect Foundation. He served as Director General for the Department of International Affairs (2007-2008) and Director General for the Department of China Affairs (2006-2008) in the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Prior to that, he was Special Assistant for Policy to Taiwan Representative to Japan (2000-2003), Executive Director for the DPP Mission in the United States (1999-2000), and Vice President of the Taiwan Thinktank (2013-2016). He received his Ph.D. degree from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) and was a Visiting Researcher at Cornell University.



**Alva Finn**  
Executive Director,  
European Liberal Forum

Alva is a passionate leader and EU Affairs specialist with diverse experiences at EU, UN and national levels in over 12 years. She is currently the Executive Director of European Liberal Forum, the political foundation of the ALDE Party. She was previously the Secretary General of Social Platform, a large civil society network focused on social and equality issues in Europe. Her work has focused on human rights, social policy, mental health, and refugee and asylum issues.



**Marites Vitug**  
Editor-at-large, Rappler

Marites, a leading Filipino investigative journalist and author, is editor-at-large for Rappler and chair emeritus of the Journalism for Nation Building Foundation. She was editor of Newsbreak magazine, a trailblazer in Philippine investigative journalism. Her books include *Rock Solid: How the Philippines Won its Maritime Case against China*; *Shadow of Doubt: Probing the Supreme Court* (which exposed critical weaknesses in the country's highest court); *Power from the Forest: The Politics of Logging*; *Under the Crescent Moon: Rebellion in Mindanao* (with Glenda M. Gloria); with Criselda Yabes, *Jalan Jalan: A Journey through EAGA*; and *Unrequited Love: Duterte's China Embrace* with Camille Elemia.

Marites has a degree in A.B. Broadcast Communication from the University of the Philippines and pursued postgraduate studies in world politics from the London School of Economics. She was a Harvard Nieman fellow and Asian Public Intellectual and has won awards for her books and reporting on Philippine justice, security, and political affairs, including the Courage in Journalism Award from the US-based International Women's Media Foundation.

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**Fireside Chat****Leila de Lima**

Spokesperson, Liberal Party of the Philippines

ML Partylist Nominee

Former Commissioner, Commission on Human Rights

Former Secretary, Department of Justice, Philippines

Leila is a Filipino lawyer, human rights activist, and politician. She has served as the Chair of the Philippine Commission on Human Rights and the Philippines' Secretary of Justice. In the 2016 general elections, de Lima ran as a senatorial candidate under the Koalisyon ng Daang Matuwid (Coalition of the Straight Road) of the Liberal Party of the Philippines. Garnering over 14 million votes, she secured the 12th spot in the Senate race, marking her transition from a legal luminary to a national policymaker.

In February 2017, for her outspoken criticism of the Duterte government's so-called war on drugs—which led to the extra-judicial killing of tens of thousands—she was incarcerated on politically motivated charges. In June 2024, she was finally cleared of all criminal charges. That same year, she accepted the lead nomination for the Mamamayang Liberal party list of the Liberal Party for the 2025 House elections. Her dedication to the rule of law and fearless stance on accountability have defined her career, cementing her legacy as one of the Philippines' most resilient women leaders.

**Christian Esguerra**

Host, Facts First



Christian is a political journalist and an educator. He hosts “Facts First,” a political talk show streamed live on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. It tackles burning issues in politics and governance and is devoted to combating disinformation. He is the former anchor and managing editor of the hard-hitting political talk program, “After the Fact,” on the ABS-CBN News Channel. He began his career as a reporter with the Philippine Daily Inquirer in 2000 then joined ABS-CBN as a news correspondent and anchor in 2015. He teaches political reporting and journalism ethics at the University of Santo Tomas where he is also a researcher at the Research Center for Culture, Arts, and Humanities. He was awarded the Marshall McLuhan Fellowship in 2020. In 2019, he received the Award of Distinction from the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility, and the Titus Brandsma Award for Emergent Leadership in Journalism.

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## Session II: Understanding the Competing Claims in the South China Sea: A High-Level Panel on the Views of Claimant States



### H.E. Agus Widjojo

Head of Mission

Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Manila

H.E. Ambassador Agus graduated from the Indonesian National Armed Forces' Academy. He holds a Triple Master's Degree: Master of Military Art and Science from the US Army Command and General Staff College; Master of Science in National Security from the US National Defense University; and Master of Public Administration from George Washington University. He served the Indonesian Armed Forces, earning the rank of Lieutenant General. He served in various positions such as the Chief of Territorial Affairs, Commandant of the Armed Forces Staff College, and Deputy Chairman of the People's Consultative Assembly. He also served as a member of the International Commission for Control and Supervision based in Vietnam and the UN Emergency Force II Contingent based in the Sinai Peninsula.

He was a Commissioner in the Indonesia-Timor Leste Commission of Truth and Friendship, and Governor of the National Resilience Institute of the Republic of Indonesia from 2016 to 2022. Currently, he serves as the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Indonesia to the Republic of the Philippines, accredited to the Republic of Marshall Islands and the Republic of Palau.



### Rej Cortez Torrecampo

Senior Lecturer, Department of International Studies  
Miriam College

Rej is a Filipino public servant working in the defense and maritime security space since 2015. He started his career in government as a defense analyst under the Office of Naval Strategic Studies (ONSS) of the Philippine Navy (PN) where his interest in maritime and archipelagic security deepened. Through his involvement in the review of the PN's Active Archipelagic Defense Strategy (AADS), the development of the first naval cooperation plan, and research projects on ASEAN naval cooperation, naval diplomacy, naval modernization, and the South China Sea disputes, he gained perspectives and experience in planning, strategy formulation, and civil-military cooperation.

He recently served as Associate Professor I of the National Defense College of the Philippines and concurrent Director of the Philippine Center of Excellence in Defense, Development, and Security (PC EDS)--an extension service unit of the College. During his stint, he set up the five program areas of the Center, namely, Maritime and Archipelagic Security, Cyber Defense, Smart Power, Gender, Peace, and Security (GPS), and National Security Leadership and Innovation. It was through this leadership opportunity that he was able to hone his program management and human capital management skills.

He is also a Senior Lecturer at the International Studies Department of Miriam College where he teaches graduate and undergraduate classes on social and political philosophies, foreign affairs, international security, strategic communication, GPS, and the contemporary world. He holds a Master in Development Management (MDM) from the Asian Institute of Management (AIM) and a Bachelor of Arts degree in International Studies with a specialization in International Politics minor in Peace Studies from Miriam College.

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## Chong Jia Wearn

Vice Youth Leader (Johor State),  
Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (PGRM)

Born in 1995, Jia Wearn became actively involved in politics during his college years, joining Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (PGRM). He currently serves as the Vice Youth Leader for Johor State, where he advocates for youth engagement and policy reforms. In addition to his political work, he is an entrepreneur, running a successful bubble tea business in Malaysia. Jia Wearn also leverages his expertise in digital media as a former freelance content creator on Instagram and TikTok, using his platform to connect with and inspire young audiences.



## Richard Javad Heydarian

Columnist, Philippine Daily Inquirer  
Senior Lecturer, Asian Centre, University of the Philippines

Richard is an academic, columnist and author. He has delivered lectures and talks at Harvard, Stanford, Johns Hopkins and Columbia universities, while providing advice to top government officials, presidential candidates, civil society groups, as well as investment groups, including Deutsche Bank, JP Morgan, Morgan Stanley, and Goldman Sachs.

His latest books are the "Rise of Duterte" (Palgrave Macmillan), the first internationally-published book on the Filipino president, which was among The Financial Times' "Best of weekend long reads", while The Times Literary Supplement (TLS) describes it as an important work which, "vividly describes the simmering public dissatisfaction with post-Marcos 'elite democracy' that paved the way for Duterte's rapid rise to power..."; and "The Indo-Pacific: Trump, China and the New Struggle for Global Mastery" (Palgrave). His most recent book is "China's New Empire" (Melbourne University Press, 2022).

He was awarded the Ten Outstanding Young Persons in the World (TOYP) by JCI international for his contributions to social sciences, and has been described by Stanford as "most prolific...geopolitical analyst currently writing and speaking not only in the Philippines but arguably in Southeast Asia as well." He has authored close to 2000 Op-Eds and policy papers, and has contributed to leading think tanks such as the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Brookings Institution, Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), and Carnegie Endowment.

## Session III: Finding a Way Forward: Exploring Possible Areas of Cooperation Amidst Competing Claims



## Jay Batongbacal, Ph.D.

Institute for Maritime Affairs and the Law of the Sea  
College of Law, University of the Philippines

Dr. Jay is a lawyer with degrees in Political Science and Law from the University of the Philippines, as well as Master of Marine Management and Doctor in the Science of Law, both from Dalhousie University (Canada). At present, he is a full Professor at the University of the Philippines College of Law and serves as Director of the Institute for Maritime Affairs and Law of the Sea of the U.P. Law Center. He has worked extensively on maritime affairs since 1997, carrying

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out research, consultancy work, and teaching, with numerous national and international publications to his credit.

Dr. Jay was legal advisor to the Philippine delegation that successfully pursued the Philippines' claim to a continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles in the Benham Rise Region before the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and the successful application before the International Maritime Organization for the designation of the Tubbataha Reef Natural Park Particularly Sensitive Sea Area. He has been included among the UNESCO/IOC List of Experts for UNCLOS Annex VIII Special Arbitration on Marine Scientific Research.

In 2022, Dr. Jay completed a Taiwan Fellowship Program at the National Taiwan Normal University in Taipei, Taiwan and a Fulbright Advanced Research and Lecturing Fellowship at the US Naval War College in Rhode Island, USA. He has since returned to continue teaching basic courses in Obligations & Contracts and Property Law, and is conducting "experimental game-based learning" with two elective courses, The Law of the Sea and Natural Resources Law.

**Michael Lee**

Deputy Representative,  
Taipei Economic & Cultural Office in the Philippines

Michael is a distinguished military leader and diplomat from Taiwan with an extensive background in the Air Force. He currently serves as the Deputy Representative of the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office (TECO) in the Philippines.

Prior to his diplomatic role, Michael held several key positions in Taiwan's military, including Deputy Chief of Staff for Military Intelligence (A2), Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Planning (J3) at the Ministry of National Defense (MND), and Vice Chief of the General Staff. He also served as Deputy Chief of the Air Force, Deputy Commander of the Air Combat Command, and Commander of the Education and Doctrine Command, among other leadership roles in strategic planning, operations, and intelligence.

Michael's educational background reflects his expertise in military strategy and leadership. He graduated from the Air Force Academy in 1984 and later attended the U.S. Air Command & Staff College (Class of 1997) and War College (Class of 2005). He furthered his academic credentials with an MBA from National Taiwan University (Class of 2016) and a degree from the university's Graduate Institute of National Development (Class of 2020). Additionally, he completed studies in Strategy at Harvard University's Kennedy School.

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## Andi Wijoyanto

Head of Research Agency, Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle  
Former Cabinet Secretary, Indonesia

Andi currently serves as the Head of Research Agency, of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) and the Governor of the National Resilience Institute. He also served as Senior Advisor at Laboratorium Indonesia 2045 (LAB 45). He began his academic career as a lecturer at the International Relations Department, Universitas Indonesia (2002-2013) and had since held various prominent positions. Previously, he was appointed as a Cabinet Secretary during the leadership of Joko Widodo-Jusuf Kalla (2014-2015), senior advisor to the Indonesian Presidential Chief of Staff (2016-2022), as well as the Governor of National Resilience Institute / Lemhannas RI (2022-2023).

Andi studied International Relations and Defense Studies at the International Relations Department, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, University of Indonesia; the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS); the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE); the National Defense University in Washington, D.C.; and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) in Singapore.



## Dae-Jin Jung

Professor,  
Halla University

Dr. Dae-Jin is a distinguished scholar specializing in International Law and Inter-Korean affairs. He earned his Ph.D. in Korean Unification Studies from Yonsei University and has built a career at the intersection of academia, policy advisory, and media. He currently serves as a Standing Member of the Presidential Peaceful Unification Advisory Council and a Member of the Policy Advisory Committee for the Republic of Korea Navy. He is also a founding member of the Korean Peninsula Climate and Energy Forum in Seoul. Previously, he provided policy expertise as a Member of the Policy Advisory Committee for both the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Unification.

Beyond academia and policy making, Dr. Dae-Jin is an active voice in international media. He is a TV news commentator on foreign affairs and has contributed articles and insights to foreign and local English-language media, including Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (Germany), CCTV (China), Tokyo Newspaper (Japan), and The Korea Herald (South Korea).

Before joining Halla University, he served as a Research Professor at Ajou University in Suwon and as a Research Fellow & International Exchange Team Leader at the Korea Foundation for Advanced Studies, a think tank run by SK Group. With his expertise in diplomacy, security, and unification studies, Dr. Dae-Jin continues to shape discussions on the Korean Peninsula and beyond.

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**Ricky Carandang**  
Journalist  
CEO, Ronin Consultancy

Ricky is the CEO of Ronin Consultants, a firm that advises on policy, strategy, external relations, and government relations. His clients include top international and local corporations, politicians, non-government organizations, and government entities. He is also currently Vice President and Head of the Integrated Corporate Communications of First Philippine Holdings Corporation (FPH), and concurrently the Vice President and External Affairs Head of First Philippine Industrial Park (FPIP). He spent his first years as a professional in the investments industry, working as an analyst and sales executive for various brokerage houses.

In 2000, he helped establish the investigative journalism magazine Newsbreak where he served as Business editor and President. He also joined ABS-CBN, the largest broadcast network in the Philippines, where he worked as a reporter, presenter, and commentator. During his stint in ABS-CBN News Channel (ANC), he hosted his own news commentary shows *The Rundown* and *The Big Picture*. He also worked as field reporter for TV Patrol and *Bandila*, the largest local language news programs, as well as presenter for the current affairs program *The Correspondents*. Citing his expertise in the field of communications and his track record in finance and economics, he was appointed Secretary of Presidential Communications Development and Strategic Planning by President Benigno S. Aquino III in July 2010. He left the government in December 2013.

## Closing Ceremonies



**Didrick de Schaetzen**  
Secretary General  
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) Party

Didrick is the Secretary General of ALDE Party – a network of 72 liberal and democratic political parties in 38 countries across Europe. Prior to his current post, he also served as ALDE Party's deputy secretary general and head of communications and events unit. Moreover, he served as campaign director for the network in the past two elections of the European Parliament. Didrick is a communication and public affairs specialist who can speak four languages fluently.



**Lorna Israel, Ph.D.**  
President, Philippine International Studies Organization  
Graduate Program Coordinator,  
Department of International Studies, Miriam College

Dr. Lorna is an Assistant Professor and the Graduate Program Coordinator of the Department of International Studies at Miriam College. With over two decades of experience, she has taught courses related to international studies, and conducted seminars on gender, feminism, and human rights. She currently serves as the President of the Philippine International Studies Organization (PHISO) and the President of Miriam College's Faculty Association. Beyond academia, Lorna is a self-taught artist with a love for abstract art, blending creativity in both her intellectual and artistic pursuits.

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## Lorenzo "Erin" Tanada

Acting President, Liberal Party of the Philippines  
Former Deputy Speaker, Philippine House of Representatives

Erin, is a Filipino lawyer, broadcaster, and human rights and labor rights advocate who has served as a Deputy Speaker of the Philippine House of Representatives. He was first elected to the House of Representatives in 2004, as the representative of the 4th District of Quezon Province. He is particularly known for being the author of "Anti-Torture Act of 2009" (Republic Act No. 9749), the "Philippine Act on Crimes Against International Humanitarian Law, Genocide, and Other Crimes Against Humanity" (Republic Act No. 9851), and the "Renewable Energy Act of 2008" (RA 9513) as well as for his strong advocacy of the Freedom of Information Bill. He formerly served as the manager for news and public affairs of UNTV-37 and host for several programs of the said station.

Erin hails from the lineage of the Tañada senators "Ka Tany" and "Ka Bobby", all known for their integrity and body of work aiming to protect the marginalized in society. He is currently the Acting President of the Liberal Party of the Philippines.



## Francis Gerald "Blue" Abaya

Secretary General, Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats  
Liberal Party of the Philippines

Francis is the Secretary General of the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats, and a former member of the Philippine House of Representatives representing the 1st District of Cavite. At the House, he was the Chairperson of the Committee on Bases Conversion; Vice Chairperson of the Committees on Science and Technology, Climate Change, and Information and Communications Technology; and a member of the Committees on Housing and Urban Development, Social Services, and Government Enterprises and Privatization. Francis was an Architect prior to his stint in Philippine Congress. He graduated from Wentworth Institute of Technology in Boston, USA in 2002.

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## **Executive Summary**

### **Welcome Session**

- The conference underscored the urgency and importance of addressing issues in the South China Sea, recognizing it not only as a geopolitical flashpoint but also as a critical space for fostering cooperation, diplomacy, and multilateral efforts toward peace and stability.
- Speakers acknowledged the challenges of creating a binding code of conduct for the South China Sea and noted that past ASEAN initiatives have only resulted in non-binding declarations.
- A key concern raised was the uncertain role of U.S. foreign policy, particularly under a potential second Trump presidency, and its implications for existing commitments to allies and the broader regional power balance.
- Several speakers stressed the importance of international law, particularly the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), as the main legal framework for resolving maritime disputes, and cautioned against selective interpretations.
- The discussions drew attention to the human impact of uncertainties and instability in the South China Sea, stressing the importance of peace efforts that are inclusive, sustainable, and rooted in justice while also underscoring the crucial role of women in peacebuilding processes.
- There was a call for strengthening regional cooperation and multilateralism, with suggestions for stronger alliances with countries beyond the U.S. like Japan, South Korea, India, and Australia, to defend sovereignty and foster a rules-based international order.
- The speeches underscored the belief in dialogue, compromise, and peaceful resolution based on liberal principles, stressing that true strength and power are derived from justice and the rule of law, not from force.

### **Session I**

- Taiwan is increasingly seen as a critical flashpoint for Philippine national attention due to its geographical proximity, a significant Filipino worker population, and shared democratic values, alongside the ongoing South China Sea dispute.
- The U.S. foreign policy, particularly under the Trump administration, is characterized by a pivot towards strategic competition with China and a focus on deterrence, rather than solely on alliances. The U.S. military is primarily focused on defending its homeland and preventing China from invading Taiwan.
- The U.S. is strengthening its military alliance with the Philippines and Japan, including advanced weaponry offers to the Philippines (like F-16s) and upgrading U.S. Forces Japan to a Joint Force Headquarters for enhanced operational readiness. This facilitates the Philippines' new "comprehensive archipelagic defense concept."

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- Deepening ties with the U.S. poses risks for the Philippines, including strained relations with China and potential isolation within ASEAN, as many neighboring countries prioritize economic ties over geopolitical tensions.
- The first Trump administration, contrary to initial concerns, proved surprisingly supportive of the Philippines on the South China Sea issue, explicitly abandoning neutrality, endorsing the 2016 arbitral ruling, and increasing freedom of navigation operations.
- A potential second Trump administration is expected to maintain stable engagement with the Indo-Pacific while potentially disengaging from the Atlantic/NATO, indicating a shift in U.S. foreign policy focus.
- China's actions in the South China Sea are viewed as "one against five" (China against other claimant states), involving aggressive construction of militarily equipped artificial islands for Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) purposes. This is part of a broader strategic ambition to exclude the U.S. from the Asia-Pacific and assert dominance, extending to the Indian Ocean and Pacific through the "String of Pearls" strategy. China's behavior towards the Philippines is characterized as "illegal, coercive, aggressive, and destructive (ICAD)."
- Taiwan does not share China's expansive claims, objecting to the 2016 tribunal ruling due to exclusion from the process and misrepresentation. Taiwan rejects China's 9-dash line and does not accept the 11-dash line as a national boundary.
- China employs divide-and-conquer tactics within ASEAN, preferring bilateral negotiations with smaller claimant states and leveraging allies to obstruct unified ASEAN positions, especially on the Code of Conduct.
- The European Union, while traditionally focused on trade, is increasing its strategic and commercial support in the Indo-Pacific through policies like Coordinated Maritime Presence and the Indo-Pacific Strategy. The EU, guided by liberal values, aims to uphold the international rules-based order and foster strategic autonomy to reduce reliance on external powers like China and the U.S.
- There is a critical need for ASEAN unity and regional cooperation, particularly within the First Island Chain (Philippines, Taiwan, Japan), to counter China's assertive behaviors and safeguard peace and security.
- The prospect of a "Trump 2.0" era adds uncertainty to global and regional dynamics, prompting entities like the EU to strengthen and diversify partnerships. The Philippines must prepare for scenarios ranging from continued U.S. military assistance to potential U.S. disengagement.

## **Fireside Chat**

- The South China Sea dispute extends beyond geopolitical tensions, profoundly affecting Filipino fisherfolk and indigenous communities through harassment, restricted access to traditional fishing grounds, and displacement, threatening livelihoods, food security, and cultural heritage.

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- Environmental degradation, including the destruction of coral reefs by China's land reclamation projects, illegal fishing practices, and pollution from increased naval and fishing activities, constitutes ecological injustice and violates the fundamental human right to a clean and balanced ecology.
- The 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling clearly stated China's activities caused irreparable harm to the marine environment, yet enforcement remains a significant challenge, highlighting the need for a more holistic approach that integrates geopolitical, legal, environmental, and human rights dimensions.
- China's actions in the South China Sea directly violate specific constitutional rights of Filipinos, particularly their right to a clean and balanced environment, and their exclusive right to develop and exploit natural resources within the Philippines' 200-nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).
- The Philippines has legal avenues, such as enforcing domestic laws like the Wildlife Resources Conservation and Protection Act (RA 9147) against foreign vessels within its EEZ, and pursuing international legal actions through tribunals under UNCLOS.
- There is an urgent need to strengthen the powers of the Philippine Commission on Human Rights (CHR) through legislation, such as a CHR charter or a special law, to effectively address environmental degradation as a human rights issue in the West Philippine Sea, and to leverage ASEAN human rights mechanisms for regional cooperation.

## **Session II**

- Indonesia, as a non-claimant state, asserts its claims are based solely on the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) around the Natuna Islands, rejecting China's "nine-dash line" as baseless under international law. Indonesia actively supports a comprehensive and enforceable Code of Conduct (COC) for the South China Sea.
- Indonesia has consistently and officially objected to China's nine-dash line claim through diplomatic notes to the United Nations Secretary-General, asserting that it lacks basis in international law and contradicts UNCLOS.
- Indonesia prioritizes peaceful negotiation and adherence to international law for resolving maritime disputes, as evidenced by its concluded negotiations with Vietnam on continental shelf and EEZ boundaries, and ongoing discussions with Malaysia.
- Malaysia highlights the immense economic and strategic importance of the South China Sea due to its rich mineral, oil, and gas resources. They also point out that China remains the most prominent and assertive claimant in the region.
- Malaysia suggests that Southeast Asian nations must take greater responsibility for managing disputes in the South China Sea, as they can no longer solely rely on American intervention for regional stability due to a shift in US global policy.

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- Malaysia encourages youth to engage in digital activism, using social media to raise awareness and advocate for their rights concerning the South China Sea dispute, citing a successful boycott in Vietnam as an example of public pressure.
- The Philippines consistently asserts its claims over the Kalayaan Island Group (Spratlys) as both legally and historically strong, supported by domestic laws and compliance with UNCLOS. The 2016 arbitral ruling, which invalidated China's nine-dash line claim, was a landmark step in asserting Philippine rights under UNCLOS.
- The role of international law, particularly the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), is consistently emphasized as the primary legal framework for resolving maritime disputes, with calls against selective interpretations.
- A potential second Trump presidency introduces uncertainties regarding U.S. foreign policy and its commitments to allies, prompting a need for Southeast Asian nations to take more responsibility for dispute management.
- Regional cooperation and multilateralism are crucial for addressing the South China Sea dispute. Speakers called for stronger alliances with countries like Japan, South Korea, India, and Australia to defend sovereignty and foster a rules-based international order, emphasizing dialogue and peaceful resolution based on liberal principles.

### **Session III**

- There is an urgent need for regional cooperation in the South China Sea, especially in light of China's recent aggressive military drills near Taiwan and Luzon, which pose a serious concern for stability across the broader Indo-Pacific region.
- China's naval modernization centers around its aircraft carriers, the Shandong and Liaoning, which form the core of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). Meanwhile, the PRC Coast Guard's tactics—verification, warning, and interception—could readily be applied against Philippine vessels.
- The undersea submarine cables linking Taiwan with Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines are critical to global internet and communication networks, yet remain highly vulnerable to China's cognitive warfare tactics, including cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns.
- The A2AD (Anti-Access/Area Denial) strategy is designed to isolate Taiwan from external support, with Taiwan's close proximity to the Philippines adding to regional risks. This raises the likelihood of escalating physical confrontations, such as the use of water cannons and hazardous helicopter maneuvers targeting Filipino vessels.

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- Practical measures—such as halting military activities, setting up direct communication hotlines, and initiating informal talks led by a neutral ASEAN nation centered on common interests like environmental protection and resource management—could help build trust and encourage cooperation.
- There are similarities between the South China Sea dispute and maritime tensions on the Korean Peninsula, as both have seen numerous dialogues and agreements fail to achieve lasting peace. This is largely due to the unpredictability of political positions, which has undermined efforts at functionalist cooperation.
- To ease tensions in maritime conflicts, a new approach could involve combining gradual legal and conditional frameworks with periodic political and economic dialogue, highlighting the need to balance both bilateral and multilateral cooperation.
- China's expansion is the root source of tension, arguing that the manner of its expansion demands other nations abdicate their interests.
- The Philippines' struggle is about asserting its rights under international law, where all nations are treated as equals, contrasting this with China's current stance as a regional superpower that believes it doesn't have to be equal to others.
- Taiwan's situation is a critical flashpoint with significant implications for the Philippines, including the humanitarian task of evacuating 150,000 Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) and potential impacts on energy security.
- ASEAN has proven "incapable" of effectively playing a role in the South China Sea due to internal divisions and geopolitical complexities among its members, despite its historical principles of non-interference.

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## Opening Ceremonies

### Welcome Remarks



#### **Trixie Marie Sison, Ph. D.**

Vice President for Academic Affairs,  
Miriam College, *Philippines*

Dr. Trixie Marie Sison, Vice President for Academic Affairs at Miriam College, delivered the welcome remarks on behalf of the host institution. She highlighted the significance of the conference, noting that in a time of shifting regional security dynamics, such a gathering is both timely and essential. Dr. Sison pointed out that while the South China Sea continues to be a hotspot for geopolitical tensions, it also presents valuable opportunities for cooperation, diplomacy, and multilateral engagement aimed at fostering peace and stability.

She warmly welcomed distinguished delegates from claimant states, regional partners, and prominent scholars, recognizing their critical role in shaping the policies and frameworks that will define Asia's security landscape. Dr. Sison underscored the importance of thoughtful and rigorous dialogue in building mutual understanding, finding common ground, and crafting strategies to prevent conflict and encourage regional harmony.

Reaffirming Miriam College's commitment to academic excellence and civic engagement, Dr. Sison expressed pride in hosting the event. She conveyed her hope that the conference would inspire meaningful discourse, generate innovative solutions, and strengthen collaboration among regional stakeholders.

### Opening Remarks



#### **Mardi Seng**

Chairperson, Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats  
Senator, *Cambodia*

Senator Mardi Seng of Cambodia, Chairperson of the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats (CALD), opened the conference by welcoming participants on behalf of CALD, a regional alliance of liberal and democratic political parties in Asia. He expressed his gratitude to attendees and acknowledged the invaluable support of the event's partners including the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, the Center of Liberalism and Democracy, Miriam College's Department of International Studies, the Philippines International Studies Organization, and the volunteers who made the conference possible.

Addressing the central issue of the South China Sea dispute, Senator Seng emphasized the importance and the challenges of creating a binding code of conduct among claimant states.

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“Efforts to come up with a binding code of conduct can prevent further escalation of the dispute,” he said, however, this remains unsuccessful. Despite decades of regional initiatives, he noted that the most that ASEAN could achieve are two non-binding declarations—the Declaration on the South China Sea in 1992 and the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in 2002.”

Senator Seng argued that the dispute is deeply entangled with broader global dynamics, particularly the strategic rivalry between China and the United States. “Even as ASEAN and China strive to find common ground to craft a code of conduct, it would be foolhardy to drive out the United States and other extra-regional stakeholders because they have their own strategic stake in the South China Sea,” he stated. He also noted the uncertain role of U.S. foreign policy during the Trump administration, raising concerns about “whether U.S. existing commitment to the allies in the Asia-Pacific region would remain and what could be its implication.” Without a U.S. counterbalance, he warned, China could act more aggressively—not only in the South China Sea but also toward Taiwan.

Framing the conference as a response to these uncertainties, Senator Seng remarked, “It was in this light that we thought that a conference that brings together all the claimant states and other stakeholders at a time when we are still grappling with the second Trump presidency would be worth a shot.” He called for a foundation of trust and understanding in addressing the dispute: “Perhaps it was the liberal in us which made us believe that we can contribute in our little way to better understanding of the basis of competing claims and to finding a way forward amidst differences.”

Reaffirming CALD’s ideological principles, Seng reminded the audience that liberalism is grounded in the “belief in dialogue, compromise, and peace,” and that “at the very root of liberalism is the fundamental belief that every individual is reasonable.” While recognizing the realist nature of international relations where “every state is only after their own interest and survival,” he stressed that liberals maintain the conviction that “right is might,” not the other way around. “True strength and power,” he added, “are derived from justice and the rule of law, not from force or dominance.”

Asserting the importance of international law, Senator Seng referred to the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) as the main legal framework for resolving maritime disputes. He cautioned against selective interpretations, stating that the UNCLOS should not be ignored and “cherry-pick provisions to serve a certain interest.”

In closing, Senator Seng reiterated CALD’s commitment to peaceful resolution through legal and cooperative means. “Our hope is to contribute to finding a way forward based on justice and the rule of law,” he said. “In this regard, we extend the invitation to all claimant states in the spirit of dialogue and mutual understanding.”

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## **Melanie Reyes, Ph.D.**

Department of International Studies  
School of Arts, Sciences and Education  
Miriam College, *Philippines*

In her welcome remarks, Dr. Melanie Reyes, chairperson of the International Studies Department of Miriam College, highlighted the urgency of addressing the escalating volatility in the South China Sea, especially amid the evolving foreign policy stance of the U.S. under the second term of President Donald Trump. She warned that this “adds another layer of complexity to an already tense situation” and raised key questions about whether the U.S. will uphold its regional commitments or retreat, potentially leaving a “power vacuum that further fuels regional tensions.”

Dr. Reyes emphasized that the security issue in the South China Sea goes beyond “military strategies, economic interests or territorial disputes or claims,” pointing instead to the human cost—“the people and communities affected by instability,” and the need for peace efforts that are “inclusive, sustainable and grounded in justice.”

She also underscored the vital role of women in peacebuilding: “Women have long been underrepresented in peace negotiations, yet history has shown that when women are actively involved in conflict resolution, peace agreements are more likely to be sustained.” She insisted that diplomacy must include women’s voices to “define having a common ground,” advocating for “strategic but also human-centered” approaches.

Dr. Reyes concluded by advocating for a shift from power struggles to cooperative, people-first strategies, emphasizing that “the heart of this issue is the protection of human lives and dignity,” particularly for fisherfolk facing harassment and restricted access. The path forward, she said, lies in exploring “inclusive democracy or diplomacy, people-centered security and gender-responsive conflict resolution” to achieve lasting solutions.

## **Gerry Bulatao**

Chairperson  
Center for Liberalism and Democracy, *Philippines*

In his welcome remarks, Gerry Bulatao, chairperson of the Center for Liberalism and Democracy (CLD), outlined contrasting foreign policy approaches toward the South China Sea taken by former President Duterte and current President Marcos Jr. He noted that while Duterte “pivoted towards China,” he still allowed then Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana and Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin to communicate the right things regarding the West Philippine Sea. However, Duterte downplayed the 2016 arbitral ruling that invalidated China’s nine-dash line claim, a move that Bulatao implied undermined Philippine sovereignty.



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In contrast, Bulatao complimented President Marcos Jr. for his firmer stance, emphasizing the protection of Filipino fishermen's rights and marine resources. He noted that Marcos is reorienting the Philippine military from internal insurgency toward external defense, supported by expanded U.S. access to nine military bases, including the one in Laoag. This move, he said, strategically positions the Philippines to protect the 250,000 Filipinos working in Taiwan should war break out. Bulatao stressed the risks, stating: "Any development in the West Philippine Sea will affect Taiwan as also we will be affected if China makes a mistake of trying to change the present rules-based international order and trying to seize Taiwan."

On the U.S. front, Bulatao expressed uncertainty over Donald Trump's potential foreign policy in a second term. While Trump reversed U.S. support for Ukraine, Bulatao said Trump views Xi Jinping as a "competitor" and Vladimir Putin as "an ally," suggesting Trump may sustain multilateral alliances in the Indo-Pacific. He mentioned the ongoing joint military exercises and international support: "More than 70 countries have expressed support for the Philippines' position on the Arbitral Award and UNCLOS."

Bulatao concluded with a call for regional solidarity: "We really need to go for multilateralism," warning that the Philippines cannot rely solely on the U.S., particularly with Trump being "an unreliable ally." Instead, he urged stronger cooperation with countries like Japan, South Korea, India, and Australia to defend Philippine sovereignty.



### **Thekla Ebbert**

Regional Programme Coordinator, Friedrich Naumann Foundation  
Southeast and East Asia Office, *Germany/Thailand*

On behalf of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNF) for Freedom, Thekla Ebbert, FNF Regional Programme Coordinator for Southeast and East Asia, delivered her welcome address emphasizing the importance of the conference, noting, "It's hard to like the world at the moment because we are in the bullying phase of the international order." She stressed that this event is crucial "not just for regional security, but also for international cooperation."

Ebbert reaffirmed FNF's commitment to liberal democratic values in resolving disputes: "We believe firmly in the liberal principles that should guide the resolutions to these disputes,"

including respect for international law, peaceful dialogue, and multilateral cooperation. These, she said, align closely with the conference's goals.

Addressing global uncertainties, particularly the implications of a possible second Trump presidency, Ebbert said such developments should "motivate us to strengthen regional cooperation and find innovative diplomatic solutions."

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Despite the challenges, she remains optimistic, pointing to the “unprecedented levels of regional and international cooperation among democratic actors,” including those in CALD. “Liberal democracy depends on a rule-based international order,” she affirmed, and while military strength matters, “sustainable security can only be achieved through adherence to international law and through honest dialogue and respecting the sovereignty and interests of all states involved.”

She closed by thanking the conference partners: the Center for Liberalism and Democracy, the Philippine International Studies Organization, and Miriam College’s Department for International Studies, as well as the CALD Secretariat for continuing to work “to make the world a little bit more democratic and liberal again.”

## Session I

### Treading on Dangerous Waters: A Discussion on Recent Developments and Trends Relating to the South China Sea Disputes



In the past decades, tensions in the South China Sea have periodically flared among the claimant states. Most recently, however, the tensions have been the greatest between China and other claimant states like the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam. China also had skirmishes with Japan in the past years concerning territorial sovereignty over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. In this panel moderated by Marites Vitug, Editor-at-large of Rappler, Philippines, and Author of “Rock Solid: How the Philippines Won its Maritime Case Against China,” recent trends and developments pertaining to the disputed waters in the South China Sea were discussed. In particular, the following questions stirred the discussion:

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1. What is the direction US foreign policy under Trump regarding the South China Sea disputes, and what are its potential impacts?
2. What do recent events on disputed waters tell us about possibilities for escalation?
3. What role can the EU (and other allies) play in the South China Sea disputes in the event the US reneges on its commitments to the region?



## **Renato C. De Castro, Ph.D.**

Full Professor, International Studies Department  
College of Liberal Arts  
De La Salle University Manila, *Philippines*

De Castro delivered a thought-provoking presentation about the current developments in the South China Sea dispute linking it to the changes in foreign policy of the United States. He opened his remarks with personal reflections from his days as a student activist during the Martial Law era, connecting it to today's struggle for democracy and sovereignty.

A key theme of his talk was the rising strategic importance of Taiwan, especially for the Philippines. De Castro emphasized Taiwan's geographical proximity, the presence of approximately 250,000 Filipino workers, and the shared democratic values between the two countries. While the South

China Sea and West Philippine Sea remain central to Philippine foreign policy, he highlighted Taiwan as an emerging flashpoint that demands national attention.

De Castro analyzed the shift in U.S. foreign policy under the Trump administration, noting its pivot toward strategic competition with China and a policy of deterrence over reliance on alliances. "What we're seeing now," he explained, "is a continuation of the Trump administration's free and open Indo-Pacific policy, marked by a commitment to strategic competition with China."

He further discussed U.S. internal military planning and a focus on prioritization of threats, where he stated that "The U.S. military is designed to fight and win only one major conflict. The U.S. can only focus its armed forces on defending the homeland, denying China's imperial ambition—that is, preventing China from invading Taiwan."

De Castro also mentioned the inaugural visit of U.S. Defense Secretary Hegseth to the Philippines where he met with President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. and Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro, Jr. The visit, based on the United States–Philippines Joint Statement the two countries, reaffirmed the importance of upholding a free and open Indo-Pacific region and reiterated the shared commitment to the 1951 U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) to achieve "Peace through Strength," a policy also enforced by then U.S. President Ronald Raegan maintaining a strong military to deter aggression.

He also noted the recent announcement of U.S. offers for advanced weaponry to the Philippines: "It was announced that the United States is already offering to the Philippines at least top of fifth generation fighter planes, F-16s."

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Following his visit in the Philippines, Secretary Hegseth traveled to Japan to discuss deeper integration of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces with the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. This move effectively upgrades U.S. Forces Japan to a Joint Force Headquarters, enhancing operational readiness for potential crises. This essentially transforms “the U.S. forces in Japan from being an administrative office to one that would cover operational matters such as actual combat operation,” De Castro said,

He highlighted that the strengthening of the U.S.-Philippine-Japan military alliance includes joint exercises, and advanced weapons systems. “A more intense, closer Philippine-U.S.-Japan alliance will facilitate the implementation of the comprehensive archipelagic defense concept. This is the first grand strategy that the Philippines has come out with.”

In conclusion, De Castro acknowledged that while the U.S. will support the Philippines in strengthening its deterrence capabilities, such alignment comes with trade-offs. He cautioned that deepening ties with the U.S. poses risks, including strained relations with China and possible isolation within ASEAN. “Most ASEAN countries, except perhaps Vietnam and the Philippines, maintain cordial ties with China,” he said. “Our alignment with the U.S. risks making us an outlier in the region, as many of our neighbors prioritize economic ties over geopolitical tensions.”

## Edcel Ibarra

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science  
College of Social Sciences and Philosophy  
University of the Philippines – Diliman, *Philippines*

Ibarra provided a comprehensive overview of the evolving dynamics of Philippines-U.S. relations under the Trump administration rather than a specific view of the South China Sea issue. His presentation emphasized the possible effects of these developments, particularly under a second Trump term, organized into six key points focusing on strategic, economic, and diplomatic considerations.

The first key point Ibarra discussed involved reassessing the first Trump administration. Despite initial concerns, the administration proved surprisingly supportive of the Philippines, particularly on the South China Sea issue. Unlike the Obama administration, Trump’s first term provided stronger assurances under the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) – that military and paramilitary attacks in the South China Sea are covered by the MDT. “The United States also explicitly abandoned its position on neutrality on the maritime aspects of the South China Sea dispute and explicitly sided with the Philippines and endorsed even the South China Sea arbitration ruling,” Ibarra emphasized. The U.S. endorsed the 2016 arbitral ruling favoring the Philippines, increased freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, and imposed economic sanctions on Chinese individuals and companies involved in the militarization of the area.

Ibarra then highlighted regional resilience. He noted that it was a positive outcome that the Philippines did not benefit from friendshoring during the first Trump administration, as the country was not significantly affected by the U.S.-China trade war. While Vietnam and Malaysia faced higher tariffs, the Philippines remained relatively unaffected. Despite President Duterte’s attempts



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to pivot toward China, the U.S.-Philippines alliance remained intact. Strategic partners such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia also provided economic and military support to counterbalance China's growing influence.

Ibarra's third point addressed the uneven global impact of a second Trump administration. While it could harm U.S. domestic standing and relations with NATO and Europe, its engagement with the Indo-Pacific is expected to remain stable. This suggested a bifurcation in U.S. foreign policy, with disengagement from the Atlantic but continued commitment to the Indo-Pacific. He explained that the visit of Secretary Hagseth "was to reassure everyone in the region that the United States will maintain its presence here...a reassurance that it is not making in NATO and in the Atlantic side."

In discussing the shifting nature of U.S.-China rivalry, Ibarra explained that competition is no longer primarily about influencing third countries. He observed that the rivalry is evolving into direct military confrontation, with the U.S. reducing its focus on developmental assistance, a traditional tool for securing influence in Southeast Asia. This shift risks weakening U.S. influence, as developmental assistance has been an important factor in maintaining relationships with countries like the Philippines. According to Ibarra, the U.S. is currently directly engaging and confronting China and the rivalry will probably be focused on the military dimension due to the pullout of international development assistance.

Ibarra's fifth point focused on the end of offshoring and the rise of onshoring in U.S. economic policy. Under the first Trump administration, U.S. companies shifted operations to friendlier countries, but the second administration is likely to emphasize bringing manufacturing back to U.S. soil. "There is no incentive to promote U.S. investments in other countries, including the Philippines, if you are saying to U.S. companies that you should invest in America instead," Ibarra noted. He warned that this shift would limit U.S. foreign direct investment and contribute to trade imbalances. With the U.S. promoting domestic manufacturing and increasing exports, countries like the Philippines might experience larger trade deficits, especially since the U.S. has long been the country's top export destination.

Lastly, Ibarra offered two possible outlooks for the Philippines. The least optimistic outlook suggests the U.S. might abandon the Philippines in favor of a favorable economic deal with China, similar to the perceived U.S. withdrawal from Ukraine. However, the more optimistic outlook envisions continued U.S. military assistance and relatively stable Philippines-U.S. relations, even as ties with other ASEAN countries might strain if they pivot toward China. The defining factor for future relations will be whether maritime security remains central or if economic issues like tariffs become dominant. Ibarra concluded that the Philippines must prepare for both scenarios, recognizing the risks and strategic opportunities involved.

### **Lai I-Chung, Ph.D.**

President, Prospect Foundation, *Taiwan*

Lai opened his presentation by expressing his gratitude to CALD, especially to esteemed CALD Chairman, Senator Mardi Seng, for extending him an invitation despite potential conflict and political consequences from China. He highlighted that both CALD and the Prospect Foundation share a unique distinction: as of April 23, both organizations have been publicly sanctioned by China, a fate he considers a badge of honor.

The core of Lai's presentation focused on China's growing maritime aggression, particularly in the South China Sea. He emphasized that the tension in this region is not a multiparty dispute

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among all six claimant states but is primarily a confrontation of “one against five – China against the rest of the five countries.” He highlighted China’s aggressive construction of artificial islands equipped with military installations designed for Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) purposes. He explained that this military buildup goes beyond historical disputes and territorial claims, forming a broader strategic ambition to exclude the United States from the Asia-Pacific region and assert China’s dominance.



Beyond the South China Sea, Lai described China’s expanding influence into the Indian Ocean and the Pacific through what Indian strategists call the “String of Pearls” strategy. He detailed China’s efforts in developing ports and establishing military or security bases in countries such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Myanmar, Cambodia, and more recently in Pacific nations like the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. He pointed out that “those red dots basically are a Chinese effort in the ports around the Indian Ocean,” and these moves serve to challenge U.S. and allied power balances on a wider scale. Lai said that the overseas bases or the security cooperation in other countries is China’s way to “attack or disrupt the U.S. alliance system.”

A significant portion of Lai’s presentation dealt with China’s military activities around Taiwan. He cited China’s simultaneous two live-fire drills—one between Australia and New Zealand and another near Taiwan—as serious preparations for a military attack against Taiwan. He also described the increasing frequency and scale of Chinese naval incursions around Japan’s Senkaku Islands, highlighting that after 2022, the number of intrusions grew from three times per month to four or five times per month, with an increase in the number of participating ships. “The scale of the ship participating in those sections also got bigger,” Lai noted.

Lai commended the Philippine Coast Guard and military for their resilience, stating, “The Philippine Coast Guard and military are still very bravely marching forward to safeguard their country’s sovereignty and safety,” despite pressure from larger Chinese Coast Guard vessels. The behavior being shown by China towards the Philippines, Lai stressed, can be described as “ICAD – illegal, coercive, aggressive, and destructive.”

On the sensitive issue of Taiwan’s position regarding the South China Sea, Lai clarified that Taiwan does not share China’s expansive claims. He explained Taiwan’s objections to the 2016 tribunal ruling were based on procedural and substantive grounds: Taiwan was excluded from the process, was misrepresented as “Taiwan authority of China,” and disagreed with the classification of Itu Aba Island as a rock rather than an island. Furthermore, Taiwan does not accept the so-called 11-dash line as a national boundary line, rejecting China’s 9-dash line claim.

Regarding China’s diplomacy within ASEAN, Lai warned of China’s divide-and-conquer tactics. He explained that China prefers bilateral negotiations with smaller claimant states, such as the Philippines and Malaysia, to exert pressure individually, and leverages allies like Cambodia to obstruct ASEAN’s efforts to develop a unified position, especially concerning the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. China’s approach was to ally with select ASEAN countries “to disrupt and prevent ASEAN from reaching the same positions that could be harmful toward China.” He

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emphasized the critical need for ASEAN unity, stating, “How will ASEAN be able to form a unified position vis-à-vis China? That’ll be very, very critical.”

In conclusion, Lai called for regional cooperation to counter Chinese actions. He emphasized the importance of forming a common position within the First Island Chain—including the Philippines, Taiwan, and Japan—against China’s assertive behaviors. He also highlighted the role of international parliamentary actions, such as IPAC (International Parliamentary Action on China) and the potential for greater liberal international engagement. Finally, he noted the opportunity for the Philippines, as the upcoming ASEAN chair in 2026, to take decisive action to strengthen ASEAN unity and address the challenges posed by China.

## Alva Finn

Executive Director

European Liberal Forum, *Ireland*

Finn’s opening statement primarily focused on presenting the role of the European Union (EU) in the Indo-Pacific region. Her insights evolved as she addressed the situation in the South China Sea and regional security dynamics. She also emphasized the EU’s strategic concerns and the liberal values guiding its actions amid changing global power structures.

Finn introduced the European Liberal Forum (ELF), the official think tank of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party (ALDE Party). She highlighted their mission, stating, “Our motto is own the future, and we work on owning the future in a few different ways.” Finn explained that ELF’s work focuses on technopolitics, geopolitics, and liberal social policy. She emphasized the Forum’s commitment to empowering women in politics through initiatives such as the Alliance of Her, “Europe’s leading platform dedicated to ensuring women in political life lead, succeed, survive and thrive” reflecting liberal values of individual rights, inclusivity, and gender equality.



Regarding the South China Sea dispute, Finn acknowledged that although the EU’s primary focus is not on territorial conflicts, it provides essential strategic and commercial support in the region. “We have very strong trade links with ASEAN. We also have new trade agreements with Japan and South Korea,” but she admitted, “Maybe we focus too much on trade and not enough on security in the region as the European Union.” This highlighted the need to reassess the EU’s approach. She mentioned the EU’s adoption of the Coordinated Maritime Presence policy and the Indo-Pacific Strategy, which include cooperation in bilateral naval deployments in the region, underscoring the EU’s commitment beyond trade.

A major theme in Finn’s presentation was the threat of a divide-and-rule scenario imposed by China and the United States. She emphasized that liberals must “insist on the international rule-based order” to avoid being caught between powerful and aggressive actors. Finn echoed French President Emmanuel Macron’s concept of strategic autonomy, which encourages the EU to reduce reliance on external powers like China and the US. She referred to Macron’s view: “Don’t rely so much on Trump and China or find the places where you don’t need to be reliant and build

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up your own dependence.” This approach reflects the EU's efforts to secure control over critical areas such as port ownership and supply chains for electric vehicles.

Finn introduced the Hans van Baalen Scholarship, an ELF initiative aimed at fostering EU-Taiwan relations and addressing challenges in the South China Sea. “Hans van Baalen, the late president of ALDE party and a historical figure for the liberal movement, left a legacy of building up EU-Taiwan economic and diplomatic relations.” Finn thinks that the “liberals in Europe have always been supportive of the role of Taiwan in the region” and hopefully, that will continue, she added.

She described ASEAN as similar to the EU because of its consensus-based decision-making model. This scholarship recognizes Taiwan as a key partner in promoting democracy and upholding the rules-based order, aligning with the liberal values that ELF promotes.

Finn also acknowledged internal challenges facing the EU, including the war in Ukraine, political instability in France and other member states, and a lack of consensus on security matters like the South China Sea and North Korea. She admitted that “we have, I think, let some of our other relationships globally slide,” but emphasized that the prospect of a potential “Trump 2.0” era is prompting the EU to strengthen and diversify its partnerships in different regions.

In closing, Finn highlighted the need for the EU to expand its partnerships and to fortify its relationship with ASEAN – a strategy she described as consensus building. She called on regional actors to maintain unity, resist external manipulation, and work with liberal democracies to safeguard peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region.

## *Open Forum*



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The open forum brought together distinguished experts and commentators to explore the possible implications of a second Trump administration on global and regional security, particularly in relation to the Philippines, Taiwan, China, and the broader ASEAN community.

## **Skepticism Over Stable U.S.-Philippines Relations Under Trump**

Vitug raised concern about Trump 2.0's unpredictability and De Castro's response emphasizing U.S. strategic necessity despite the erratic nature of Trump. Vitug asked, "Why are you confident that it will be okay when Trump is so unpredictable and, as you said, transactional?"

De Castro noted that "Based on the first Trump administration, that's unpredictability. It actually leads to something else." He acknowledged Trump's erratic nature but emphasized the dilemma of the U.S. in geopolitical realities. The growing threats from China and Russia leave the U.S. to maintain its relations and strategic commitments in the Indo-Pacific."

## **Evidence-Based Optimism and Policy Continuities**

Vitug asked Ibarra for his perspective regarding the evolving U.S. approach to China, noting that he had previously outlined a plan and two outlooks regarding the issue. Ibarra expressed the idea that "all the analysis I've made today is based on the evidence from Trump's inauguration up to today. Maybe ask me again in four years' time after Trump, maybe I'd have a different assessment." He urged the need to keep assessing the evolving data globally and remain optimistic and hopeful that conclusions must be based on factual and observable data. In terms of continued interest, he said that "all the analysis I've made today is based on the evidence from Trump's inauguration up to today." He pointed out that across U.S. political lines tend to take tough positions against China and support protecting American industries. It happens no matter which party is in power, showing that these ideals and views are part of long-term U.S. policy trends.

## **Taiwan's Strategic Preparation**

Regarding uncertainties in U.S. foreign policy, Vitug posed a question to Lai: "Do you expect Trump's America to come to your aid, should there be any more aggressive behavior from China?" On Taiwan's self-reliance, Lai stated that "Trump himself is so uncertain that no one can predict his reaction at that time." It shows that Taiwan needs to focus its strategy on strengthening its national defense and building relationships with regional alliances rather than depending solely on U.S. leadership.

On working with regional partners, Lai suggested that "So, basically, instead of relying on Trump himself, I think the first thing Taiwan needs to do is to strengthen our defense, definitely, and work with our friends here in this region, including the Philippines, Japan, and Korea and others who share the same concern." He stressed the need for Taiwan to have cooperation among Indo-Pacific democracies, where regional alliances will be formulated which will serve as a foundation and response to Chinese aggression.

## **European Union's Role in Regional Security**

Vitug expressed her expectation for the EU to be actively involved in supporting Taiwan, particularly through aid and security cooperation. This led her to ask: "What's your reading of the

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EU? Will it step up its security role and participation in this part of the world, especially in the South China Sea?”

Finn addressed the need for the EU to evolve its defense role, which mirrored her statement: “We have been taking these steps into providing some naval capacity here, including through France. And given that France is really, I would say, leading along with Germany in this new defense and security approach in the EU, yes, we probably will see more engagement in this region going forward.” It shows that Europe is developing and increasing its security presence in the Indo-Pacific region amid concerns about how uncertain Trump 2.0 is.

On the value of strategic autonomy, Finn said, “Don’t be so reliant on them. Do build some autonomy into your system.” It pointed out the importance of Europe increasing its forces in defense security and reducing its dependence on the U.S., particularly through initiatives led by France and Germany. She concluded by warning Indo-Pacific countries not to follow Europe’s mistake of over-reliance on the U.S., which encouraged the development of regional strategic autonomy.

## **Linking Security in Europe and Asia**

The discussion highlighted the growing interconnection between Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security, emphasizing the importance of unified strategic responses to rising threats.

De Castro urged closer coordination between Europe and Asia in influencing U.S. foreign policy. As he stated, “We have to talk with each other. We have to impress upon the Americans that it’s actually linked to Ukraine and Taiwan. You know, if Russia were to win in Taiwan, this would give China greater, in a way, motivation. They could do it because this is something that we have to impress upon Washington. The security of the Euro-Atlantic region cannot be separated from the security of the Indo-Pacific region.”

Finn warned against placing too much confidence in U.S. consistency, especially under a potential second Trump administration. She said, “You don’t know what kind of crazy stuff he’s going to come up with... So, I wouldn’t have a very optimistic, rosy view of the relationship with the U.S. right now.”

Vitug shared recent developments in the Philippines’ defense partnerships beyond the U.S.: “The Philippines and France will now start their negotiations for a visiting forces agreement. We’ve just finished with Canada and New Zealand.” These statements underscore the need for greater regional cooperation and caution in relying solely on U.S. strategic direction.

## **Reassessing U.S.-Philippine Relations: Strategic Dependence vs. Economic Vulnerability**

Reyes was one of the audience members at the conference and she shared her views on the U.S. as an unreliable ally, particularly under Trump’s leadership.

On the U.S. as an unreliable ally, she said, “The U.S. is an unreliable ally. Historically, it has been proven. The Mutual Defense Pact serves as an agreement where the U.S. promised the Philippines to aid them when they are under aggression from other countries, however, it will never come true. Second, whether it is under both terms of the Trump administration, he still applied what a businessman is, where he looks at every deal in terms of business.”

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This was reflected in his interest in tariffs, which generated a tariff war, and it behooves us to shift the discussion on how it will affect the Philippines, because it will. Furthermore, Reyes stated that “Trump imposed a 17% tariff on the Philippines, which will affect our exporters and remittances.” Economic fallout from Trump’s trade policies may harm the Philippine economy, particularly the export and OFW sectors.

## Fireside Chat

This fireside chat will focus on the human rights and social justice implications of the South China Sea disputes, from the perspective of a former Commission on Human Rights Chair and Secretary of Justice.



Christian Esguerra, a journalist and host of the political podcast Fact First, introduced former Senator, former Human Rights Commission Chair, and former Justice Secretary, Leila de Lima. Esguerra noted that the topic is very timely, and this will give us an opportunity to look at the issue regarding the South China Sea and the West Philippine Sea from a similarly important or equally important lens, which is that of human rights. As a former Human Rights Commission Chair, it’s an opportunity to discuss this topic and connect it to human rights, since China remained aggressive in the South China Sea which affected the individual rights of ordinary Filipinos.

The South China Sea dispute extends beyond geopolitical tensions to deeply affected Filipino fisherfolk and the region’s fragile marine environment. It threatens both local livelihoods and national food security due to harassment and restricted access to traditional fishing. However, environmental degradation and human rights concerns often receive less focus in the broader conversation. It is essential for discussing and formulating a holistic approach to tackle the challenges that the Filipinos are currently facing in this dispute. On the other hand, it also addressed the importance of the Philippines’ status and available options for holding China accountable for its aggression and violations in the South China Sea.

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## Transcending Boundaries: Prioritizing Environmental and Human Rights in the South China Sea Dialogue

De Lima noted that issues in the South China Sea are normally linked to sovereignty issues, encroachment, militarization, and the security aspect of this dispute. However, it is rarely discussed or tackled from the aspect of human rights. Filipino fishing and indigenous communities in the provinces of Pangasinan, Zambales, and Palawan—who depend on traditional fishing grounds such as Scarborough Shoal and the Spratly Islands—have been directly affected by the dispute, particularly in terms of their livelihood, right to food, health, and an adequate standard of living. De Lima noticed that “we occasionally hear about those reports about China, coast guard vessels, and maritime militia occasionally harassing these Filipino fishermen, blocking their access to rich marine waters.” It resulted in a decline in fish catches, reducing incomes, and food security for affected families. Furthermore, its long-term impact includes economic displacement. De Lima stated that “these fisher folks would be forced now to seek alternative work on land or in urban centers, leading to increased poverty and economic instability.”

In terms of indigenous groups, De Lima said that the Sama-Bajau, indigenous groups living in coastal areas, are particularly vulnerable. The militarization and restrictions of China disrupt their cultural and economic practices and force them to relocate. It was disheartening, as they were threatened with their way of life and connections to ancestral waters. Furthermore, it led to the loss of access to marine resources and traditional fishing, which diminished their indigenous cultural heritage and knowledge systems. Human rights were severely affected, especially the right to food, the right to health, the right to sustainable living standards, and the right to the cultural heritage of the indigenous fishing communities.

Ecological injustice is considered a violation of rights as it results in environmental degradation, De Lima stated. The right to a clean and balanced ecology is a basic human right. Another big challenge that the Philippines faces is China’s land reclamation projects in the South China Sea, which have led to the destruction of coral reefs. De Lima highlighted that “the construction of artificial islands, military outposts, airstrips, has damaged fragile marine ecosystems, reducing fish populations and biodiversity.” Furthermore, illegal and unregulated fishing, where the Chinese used dynamite and cyanide fishing, devastated marine habitats, impacting the broader marine food chain. In addition, the dumping of waste and oil spills from increased naval and fishing activities polluted the water.

De Lima shared that “environmental degradation disproportionately affects the Philippines, which primarily relies on marine resources for its economy. Indigenous and local communities who have historically been responsible stewards of these waters are now facing environmental injustice, as their traditional fishing waters are either militarized or destroyed.”

As a human rights and social justice advocate, De Lima highlighted the often-overlooked dimensions of the South China Sea dispute, emphasizing that while the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague has clearly ruled that China’s activities have caused irreparable harm to the marine environment, enforcement of this ruling remains a major challenge. De Lima pointed out that discussions on the issue frequently center on sovereignty, militarization, and violations of international law, yet fail to give equal attention to the environmental damage and human rights implications involved. From her perspective, these issues are equally critical and warrant meaningful discourse, calling on the international community to adopt a more holistic approach—one that considers not only geopolitical and legal dimensions but also the broader impacts on local communities and ecosystems in the region.

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### ***Fishing and Food Security: How the South China Sea Dispute Affects Filipino Fisherfolk***

De Lima highlighted the significant impact of harassment against small Filipino fisherfolk in regions such as Zambales, Pangasinan, and Palawan, noting how their access to traditional fishing grounds is often blocked. This restriction threatens their livelihood and poses a serious risk to food security since the fishing industry was severely affected, which caused a lesser supply of marine resources due to illegal and unregulated fishing in traditional fishing grounds. De Lima emphasized that coral reefs are crucial in maintaining the population in fishing grounds, which are vital for providing marine resources needed for the daily sustenance and health of many Filipinos.

Esguerra posed a question: "Can you also elaborate on the specific constitutional violation of these activities when you talk about our sovereign rights over the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) when it comes to Filipinos having exclusive enjoyment of those resources available in those areas?"

De Lima provided a clear statement that what was written in the Constitution provides support that Filipinos have the right to a clean and balanced environment or ecology, and the right to develop and exploit our own natural resources, including the marine resources.

"And it's very clear since we have a 200 nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), which is actually for exclusive use, exclusive exploitation." It serves as a reminder that China has severe violations. "These are clear in the articles concerning patrimony and the articles concerning natural resources and the wealth of our country," De Lima added. These fundamental constitutional rights are being violated as a result of China's unlawful activities.

### ***Defending Sovereignty: Exploring the Philippines' Options for Accountability in the South China Sea***

De Lima asserted that we have our own domestic laws against poaching, and it is the Republic Act 9147 or the Wildlife Resources Conservation and Protection Act. It is essential that it should be enforced on the Chinese militia vessels, Chinese Coast Guard vessels, and Chinese fishermen right within our EEZ. Internationally, De Lima stated that we have the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). It's also very clear about the delineation of EEZs of coastal countries.

De Lima emphasized that the South China Sea dispute extends beyond geopolitical issues, as it encompasses significant social, economic, and environmental implications. She underscores that this dispute threatens local livelihoods and ecosystems. De Lima advocated for a multifaceted approach in resolving the dispute by integrating legal, diplomatic, and environmental solutions alongside strengthening regional cooperation and adherence to international law.

Furthermore, De Lima raised how it affects marine ecology, which will result in the species becoming endangered. It also has negative effects: aside from undermining international law, it escalates militarization. In addition, it displaces vulnerable communities and brings negative impacts that threaten the economic stability of the country. These are the integrated consequences and challenges from China's illegal actions and continued actions in the West Philippine Sea.

De Lima emphasized the importance of collective action to formulate a solution that will solve this dispute, either legally or diplomatically. In terms of legal actions, she stated that the Philippines has the right to file a new case with a proper tribunal. On the other hand, in diplomatic actions, it

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is essential that the Philippines fosters its connections with its allies, especially through multilateral talks with countries in similar situations or similarly affected by China's aggressive actions.

Esguerra shared his knowledge about that landmark case filed before the Philippine Commission on Human Rights (CHR) against countries considered as big polluters or the carbon majors. It was known as the Carbon Major Petition, a case filed with CHR by organizations and individuals against the so-called "carbon majors" or major multinational and state-owned companies that produce large amounts of natural gas, crude oil, coal, and cement. The petitioners argued that these companies are responsible for a significant share of global greenhouse gas emissions, based on scientific research. However, Esguerra was not sure about how effective it is in holding them accountable, which led him to ask, "Is there something similar to that sort, specific to this environmental degradation, that can be resorted to by the Philippines to push for accountability, mainly using the lens of human rights?"

De Lima responded and said, "Yes, we can always come up with legislative solutions and also with economic and executive policies. Unfortunately, CHR has no teeth and until now, CHR still does not have its own charter." In this case, CHR functions and its duties were strictly limited or confined to those enumerated in the Constitution, which is very limited. There is an urgent need to strengthen the powers of the CHR to address environmental degradation as a human rights issue, particularly in the West Philippine Sea. This can be pursued through legislation by passing a CHR charter, enacting a special law, or creating a new mechanism to effectively respond to serious ecological concerns.

De Lima stressed that the issues in the West Philippine Sea (WPS) go beyond civil and political rights—they also involve social, economic, and cultural rights. She emphasized the need for greater public education and awareness, including within government agencies. Esguerra raised the potential of leveraging ASEAN human rights mechanisms to frame the WPS issue from a less contentious, human rights-based angle. De Lima agreed, stressing that this approach is both possible and desirable, as it offers a constructive path to regional cooperation and mainstreaming human rights discourse in relation to territorial and environmental concerns in the South China Sea.

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## Open Forum



The open forum welcomed esteemed experts and human rights advocates and examined the interrelation of representation, reform, and regional stability within the Philippine context. The dialogue shed light on the ongoing struggles faced by marginalized groups—particularly fisherfolk, farmers, laborers, and indigenous peoples—while also addressing the broader impact of global authoritarianism and maritime disputes on democracy and social justice. Participants underscored the urgent need for genuine representation in the legislative system, highlighted the critical role of youth engagement and education in countering authoritarianism, and stressed the importance of legal and diplomatic efforts to defend Philippine sovereignty in the West Philippine Sea.

### ***Representation and Reform: Amplifying Marginalized Voices in Philippine Democracy***

During the open forum of the Fireside Chat session, De Lima responded to a question raised by Reyes regarding how she plans to convince voters in the upcoming elections, especially fisherfolk and other marginalized groups, to support her party-list named as Mamamayang Liberal (ML).

De Lima emphasized that ML is a multi-sectoral party-list committed to giving voice to fisherfolk, farmers, laborers, and indigenous peoples. She shared that they have been actively engaging with these communities through consultations and dialogues. In addition, she shared that they are aiming to offer genuine representation in Congress. She also highlighted the need to reform the party-list system because it has been exploited over the years. Furthermore, she reiterated the mission of the ML partylist to serve as the voice of the marginalized sectors in the country.

### ***Advancing Human Rights and Social Justice through Genuine Representation***

De Lima responded to a question on how to engage voters not only on the South China Sea issue but also on its human rights dimension, where she asserted her long-standing advocacy for social justice. As the first nominee of the ML partylist, she noted that their legislative agenda will focus on marginalized sectors. Through the years of pursuing human rights legislation, she is still committed to writing or implementing bills against extrajudicial killings (EJK), the CHR charter,

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and mechanisms to protect refugees and stateless persons. De Lima reflected on the experiences of Filipinos and underscored the critical role of human rights education in fostering public awareness. She emphasized that such education is essential for protecting vulnerable communities, especially the youth, who are often subjected to human rights violations as a result of their marginalization and lack of power.

## ***Building Resilience Against Global Authoritarianism: Education, Youth Engagement, and Alternatives to Militarization***

The open forum also addressed the pressing challenges posed by the rise and spread of authoritarianism, which continues to threaten democracy and human rights on a global scale. Tatcee Macabuag of Migrant Forum Asia offered thoughtful insights on the broader international landscape beyond the idea of a "Trump 2.0" era, drawing attention to the ongoing struggles in countries like Myanmar, South Korea, and Indonesia. She stressed the importance of critically examining the global reliance on traditional superpowers such as the United States, highlighting the need for human rights advocates and stakeholders to explore and advance meaningful alternatives to militarization and persistent conflict.

In response, De Lima acknowledged the resilience of the Filipino people but emphasized that education is the most powerful tool in countering authoritarianism. She stressed the need to educate and engage Filipinos—especially the global youth—so they can become more critically aware of the political realities shaping their lives. By integrating these ideas into education, young people are empowered to distinguish truth from lies and disinformation and are inspired to take active roles in confronting urgent political and social challenges. De Lima also described authoritarianism as a deeply alarming phenomenon. Reflecting on the global context, she remarked, “Can you imagine the number one superpower in the world slowly getting isolated because of those policies, of those executive orders of Mr. Trump?” In light of this, she underscored the vital importance of nurturing and guiding the younger generation.

Esguerra then highlighted the legislative angle, expressing hope for upcoming bills that could help protect future Filipino generations from demagogues, populists, and authoritarian leaders. This points to the necessity of combining grassroots education with institutional and legal measures to build long-term resilience.

## ***Why does the West Philippine Sea matter to every Filipino?***

In a key exchange during the session, Joseph Marzan, senior reporter for the Daily Guardian (Iloilo City) asked, “Why should Filipinos who do not live along the coasts or near the West Philippine Sea care about the territorial disputes?” The panelists responded about maritime conflict, where they highlighted how connected national interest, economic survival, and regional peace are in this dispute.

De Lima emphasized the far-reaching impacts of the territorial dispute on a country's social and economic landscape. She highlighted the damage it has caused to fishing communities and the marine environment, noting its serious implications for food security and economic stability in the Philippines. Furthermore, she warned that China's aggressive actions undermine international law and threaten the global order, escalating tensions across the Indo-Pacific region.

Reyes, another panelist, pointed out a concrete consequence of the ongoing disputes: their impact on economic security. “We rely heavily on seafood and fish,” she noted, “so it's crucial that we protect the safety and rights of our fishing communities, including the women who also depend

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on these waters for their livelihoods.” She emphasized that the effects of these disputes extend beyond coastal areas, posing a threat to the economic security of the entire country.

Bulatao provided a broader ecological and geographic context, reminding the audience that the Philippines is predominantly a maritime nation, with seven times more water than land. He highlighted that the West Philippine Sea serves as a spawning ground for many species, and if it is damaged by China’s illegal actions, these species may die or migrate, affecting fisheries across the country. This could eventually lead to their extinction or classification as an endangered species.

When Marzan followed up, asking what collective actions could be taken to resolve the dispute in favor of the public interest, Bulatao responded by urging realism in ASEAN diplomacy. He noted the limitations of ASEAN’s consensus-based approach. However, he still emphasized the importance of dialogue, mutual understanding, and strategic partnership, not just with ASEAN members, but also with other regional stakeholders like Taiwan, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia. These countries share overlapping claims or regional interests and must be included in efforts to reduce tensions and collaboratively work together.

## ***Strengthening Maritime Laws and Civil Participation for Sovereignty and Human Rights in the West Philippine Sea***

Regarding maritime rights and regional stability, Rhoanne De Guzman, reporter for Vera Files, raised questions regarding the Twin Maritime Laws that were recently passed by the Philippine government. These laws aim to assert the maritime rights and entitlements of the Philippines, particularly in the West Philippine Sea.

De Lima asserted that laws make a great foundation moving forward, however, it questions their longevity in terms of effectiveness. In response to China’s continuing encroachment, enforcement mechanisms and international legal actions will serve as the key in evaluating the impact of implemented laws. Moreover, she also advocated for renewed legal strategies in asserting the Philippines’ sovereign rights through another international case.

Reyes, on the other hand, emphasized the importance of inclusive lawmaking, stressing that legislative and policy decisions should be grounded in the voices of affected communities—particularly fisherfolk and women impacted by the maritime dispute.

Bulatao reminded the audience of the dual role of Congress, which is to legislate and to conduct oversight. He cited the importance of civil society initiatives, such as Atin Ito, which aim to defend national sovereignty through citizen participation. He urged that these initiatives be included in the dialogue to enhance law implementation and accountability.

On a follow-up question by De Guzman about the South China Sea Code of Conduct and the possible return of Donald Trump as U.S. president, De Lima warned that global political shifts could have serious implications. While there is no current indication of a U.S.-China alliance under Trump, the risk of shifting alliances remains.

Bulatao concluded with a reminder: “It’s always better to talk than to fight, and fighting starts when talking stops.” This line needs to be embraced as the foundation of peaceful resolution.

Navigating the Tensions in Scarborough Shoal: Legal, Diplomatic, and Security Perspectives  
Vitug observed that Chinese maritime activity has increasingly concentrated around Scarborough Shoal, while tensions in Ayungin Shoal (Second Thomas Shoal) have somewhat eased following recent diplomatic engagements. Despite this, China has intensified its patrols in the region, acting

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with greater assertiveness—widely seen as an attempt to undermine the Philippines’ newly enacted maritime boundary laws through pressure and control.

In response to these developments, De Lima underscored the importance of pursuing legal avenues, particularly through international tribunals, to hold China accountable for its aggressive actions. She acknowledged the limitations in enforcing such rulings, citing the 2016 arbitral decision that favored the Philippines, yet emphasized that legal actions remain essential. De Lima also commended the current administration’s transparency policy, which involves publicly reporting incidents in the West Philippine Sea—an approach that helps garner international awareness and support.

Building on the legal and diplomatic dimensions, Reyes stressed the government’s obligation to protect Filipino fishermen, especially those operating in disputed waters. Bulatao echoed this concern by advocating for the provision of larger fishing vessels equipped with GPS technology to ensure better tracking and safety. He noted that, at present, many fishermen are restricted to the outer edges of Scarborough Shoal due to security risks.

The panel also welcomed the Armed Forces of the Philippines’ (AFP) strategic shift from internal counterinsurgency operations toward a focus on external defense. Bulatao highlighted that the Philippine National Police (PNP) is increasingly assuming responsibility for internal security, enabling the military to redirect its attention and resources to safeguarding the nation’s territorial integrity. He further suggested that peace negotiations with armed communist groups such as the National Democratic Front (NDF), the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), and the New People’s Army (NPA) could promote national unity and bolster collective efforts to defend Philippine sovereignty. To support this, Bulatao proposed the enactment of legislation that advances peace and development, emphasizing that unity is critical in confronting external threats.

## ***Justice for the Fisherfolk: Legal Remedies and Regional Solidarity in the South China Sea Dispute***

Dan Hoang, executive director of the Vietnamese political organization Viet Tan, opened the discussion by drawing attention to the shared struggles of Filipino and Vietnamese fisherfolk, who routinely face harassment and violence in the South China Sea. He proposed pursuing legal claims for damages—both in Philippine courts and through international tribunals—on behalf of affected fisherfolk whose livelihoods and safety are under continuous threat. Hoang noted that while many Vietnamese fisherfolk are reluctant to speak out due to fear of state-imposed consequences, the Philippines’ relatively open civic space offers a more viable environment for legal action and international advocacy.

In response, De Lima strongly endorsed the pursuit of legal remedies, describing it as both an ideal and necessary course of action. She pointed to existing Philippine laws addressing illegal poaching but emphasized the urgent need for legislation specifically targeting acts of harassment and violence against fisherfolk. De Lima cited serious incidents—including ramming fishing boats, using lasers to blind crews, and inflicting physical harm—as clear violations of Philippine criminal law. She argued that such acts could also form the basis for international human rights or maritime law cases. To that end, she called for strengthening the domestic legal system to better protect vulnerable maritime communities and hold aggressors accountable.

Offering a broader philosophical lens, Seng reflected on the regional and moral dimensions of the issue. Although Cambodia is not a claimant in the South China Sea dispute, he emphasized that

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the conflict touches on universal values. He challenged the notion that “might makes right,” asserting instead that “right is might”—a core tenet of liberal democratic ideals. Seng advocated for the fundamental rights of states and individuals to property, territory, and security. While acknowledging ASEAN’s limited progress through non-binding agreements, he stressed that sustained dialogue and peaceful dispute resolution remain essential. For Seng, dialogue is not merely a diplomatic tool—it is the cornerstone of any lasting and just solution.

## Session II

### Understanding the Competing Claims in the South China Sea: A High-Level Panel on the Views of Claimant States



In this high-level panel, the views of different claimant states on the South China Sea disputes were discussed. Apart from China and Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam have competing claims in the South China Sea. Indonesia is not a claimant state officially, but insists that the waters around Natuna islands (which overlap with China’s nine-dash line) are part of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

The discussion in this high-level panel were be guided by the following questions:

1. What are the key elements of the South China Sea claims of the country you are representing?
2. Are there legal, historical or geographic bases for those claims? What are they and how do these overlap with those of other claimant states?
3. Are there so-called “redlines” in your country’s dealings with other claimant states in the South China Sea disputes?

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The South China Sea is an important and contested maritime region, with overlapping claims from several Southeast Asian countries and major world powers. This session explored the complex issues behind these disputes, including the perspectives of countries that are not directly making claims.

It also highlighted how digital activism and civic engagement are playing a growing role in shaping public opinion and regional responses. A key part of the discussion focused on how one claimant country's position has changed over time, based on legal rulings, historical background, and efforts to build peaceful relationships and international partnerships.

Understanding these different factors is crucial to promoting peace, cooperation, and stability in this important region.

## **Agus Widjojo**

Head of Mission

Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in the Philippines, *Indonesia*

Widjojo opened his remarks by clarifying the purpose of the session, which is not to find immediate solutions, but to foster mutual understanding. He began by outlining Indonesia's geographical position in relation to key areas in the South China Sea, including the Natuna Islands, Brunei, the Philippines, and Taiwan. While emphasizing Indonesia's status as a non-claimant state, with no sovereignty claims over maritime features in the South China Sea, Widjojo pointed out that China's "nine-dash line" does not encroach upon Indonesia's sovereign territory. However, it does overlap with Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), particularly near the Natuna Islands.



Widjojo stressed that Indonesia's claims are rooted solely in the EEZ surrounding the Natuna Islands, which are recognized under international law. Unlike other regional states, Indonesia does not have overlapping claims over islands or maritime features. He contrasted this with situations involving other Southeast Asian nations, noting that overlapping maritime claims with Malaysia and Vietnam have been handled through bilateral negotiations grounded in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) of 1982.

Progress has already been made with some neighbors according to Widjojo. Indonesia has concluded negotiations with Vietnam regarding both the continental shelf and EEZ. With Malaysia, the continental shelf boundary was agreed upon in 1969, while discussions on the EEZ boundary remain ongoing. These diplomatic efforts, Widjojo explained, reflect Indonesia's commitment to maintaining regional stability through peaceful negotiation and adherence to international law.

Indonesia has also taken a firm legal and diplomatic stance against China's expansive maritime claims. Widjojo stated that the nine-dash line lacks any basis in international law and directly contradicts UNCLOS. In protest, Indonesia has submitted formal diplomatic notes to the United Nations Secretary-General on three occasions: July 8, 2010; May 26, 2020; and June 12, 2020, registering its consistent and official objection to the Chinese claim.

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He further elaborated on Indonesia's legal framework, citing UNCLOS Articles 57 and 76(1) as the basis for its EEZ and continental shelf claims, which extend up to 200 nautical miles from the country's baselines. As an archipelagic state, Indonesia defines its maritime zones based on Article 48 of UNCLOS, which governs the drawing of archipelagic baselines. Indonesia's maritime boundary agreements with Vietnam (signed in 2003 and 2022) and earlier with Malaysia (in 1969) are based on Articles 74 and 83 of UNCLOS, which address the delimitation of EEZs and continental shelves between states with opposite or adjacent coasts.

The 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling further reinforced Indonesia's legal position. Although Indonesia was not a direct party to the case, the tribunal invalidated China's nine-dash line claim, affirming that it lacked legal standing under UNCLOS. Notably, China is a signatory to UNCLOS—unlike the United States—yet Indonesia's interests on this matter align more closely with the U.S., particularly in upholding international law and freedom of navigation.

Addressing Indonesia's broader approach, Widjojo outlined the country's "red lines" in dealing with claimant states. Indonesia remains firmly non-claimant and has never laid claim to any features within the South China Sea. Its rejection of the nine-dash line is unwavering, grounded in both legal principle and geopolitical stability. He reiterated that Indonesia's primary objective is to contribute to peace and order in the region through diplomatic engagement.

Central to this diplomatic effort is Indonesia's active support for the development of a binding Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea. Widjojo reaffirmed Indonesia's commitment to ASEAN centrality in managing the dispute and promoting peaceful resolution. During its 2023 ASEAN chairmanship, Indonesia facilitated the adoption of guidelines aimed at completing the COC by 2026. The envisioned COC is intended to be comprehensive, practical, and enforceable—offering a framework for conduct among ASEAN member states and China in the disputed waters.



## Chong Jia Wearn

Vice Leader for the Youth (Johor State)  
Parti Gerakan Rakyat, *Malaysia*

Wearn emphasized that the South China Sea has long been a central focus of regional attention in Southeast Asia. Rich in minerals, oil, and gas, the area holds immense economic and strategic importance. He noted that China remains the most prominent and assertive claimant, maintaining a strong presence in the region.

Wearn also highlighted how recent political changes in the United States have introduced new uncertainties. Traditionally, countries like Malaysia, and many others in Asia, have relied on the U.S. to counterbalance the influence of major powers like China. However, with the U.S. signaling a shift toward a more limited global role, he urged a recognition of a new

geopolitical reality: Southeast Asian nations can no longer depend solely on American intervention to maintain regional stability. In this evolving landscape, ASEAN countries must take greater responsibility for managing disputes such as those in the South China Sea.

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Rather than merely discussing or expressing frustration over the issue, Wearn encouraged young people to take proactive steps. He cited a recent example from Vietnam, where a local company's ordering app featured the controversial nine-dash line on its map. In response, Vietnamese citizens launched a boycott of the brand's online platforms, eventually compelling the company to abandon its plans. This grassroots action, he said, underscores the power of public pressure—especially when amplified through the internet and social media.

Wearn went on to stress that social media can be a potent tool in addressing the South China Sea dispute. By creating reels, videos, and other engaging content, young people—regardless of their position outside formal institutions—can raise awareness, mobilize support, and advocate for their rights. He concluded that digital activism offers a meaningful path for youth to influence change and contribute to regional discourse.

## Rej Cortez Torrecampo

Senior Lecturer, Department of International Studies,  
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Torrecampo explored the diverse and evolving perspectives of Filipinos on the South China Sea issue. He emphasized that Filipinos perceive the situation differently—shaped by their roles, locations, and lived experiences. Policymakers in foreign affairs and defense see the South China Sea through a strategic lens, warning of the risks posed by unchecked and unilateral actions. Meanwhile, residents of Kalayaan and local fisherfolk focus on immediate concerns—limited development and the challenges of daily livelihood. Filipino scientists and environmental advocates draw attention to the ecological dangers of unsustainable activity in the region. Torrecampo noted that these perspectives are not fixed. They evolve with time, context, and the country's own journey of growth. The inconsistencies in national policy, he argues, are not simply errors but reflections of the Philippines' ongoing development as a sovereign and independent nation. Torrecampo's presentation delved deeper into these viewpoints and explored the path forward in navigating this critical maritime issue.



Moving into a more structured analysis, Torrecampo explained that the South China Sea issue can be understood by breaking it down into three interconnected aspects: territorial claims, maritime rights, and conflict management. While each element has its own legal and historical basis—both internationally and domestically—they often overlap, creating confusion and policy challenges. He emphasized that in order to navigate the complexities of the dispute, there must be a clear understanding of the nature and extent of the Philippines' claims.

On the issue of territorial claims, Torrecampo explained that the islands within the Kalayaan Island Group—or the Spratlys—did not legally belong to any state following Japan's renunciation of sovereignty over them in the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty. As a result, the Spratlys were considered *terra nullius*, or "nobody's land," opening the possibility for other states to establish valid claims.

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Torrecampo argued that the Philippines' claim over the Spratlys is both legal and historically stronger than those of other claimant states. He pointed to a key moment in 1978, when, under the authority of the 1973 Constitution, the Philippine government issued Presidential Decree 1596. This decree formally declared the Kalayaan Island Group as part of Philippine territory and established what is now known as the Municipality of Kalayaan, placing it under the jurisdiction of the province of Palawan. This act was more than symbolic—it was supported by a physical presence through local governance and military deployment. The 1987 Constitution later reaffirmed this territorial claim, further institutionalizing it in the country's legal framework.

However, Torrecampo acknowledged that asserting territorial claims is only one part of the picture. Equally important is ensuring these claims comply with international law. He noted that the Philippines ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1984. This marked a turning point in the country's maritime policy, prompting efforts to align domestic laws with international maritime norms. To lead this process, the government formed the Cabinet Committee on Maritime and Ocean Affairs, tasked with crafting a national marine policy that would address sovereignty, security, and maritime integrity in line with UNCLOS provisions.

One of the most significant outcomes of the Philippines' efforts to align with international maritime law was the enactment of the Philippine Archipelagic Baselines Law in 2009. This legislation formally adopted the archipelagic baseline system in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). It redefined how the Philippines measures and asserts its maritime zones, including its territorial sea, exclusive economic zone (EEZ), and continental shelf. Torrecampo emphasized that this law was not merely a technical adjustment—it was a crucial step that clarified the country's maritime boundaries and solidified its legal standing as an archipelagic state under international law.

In advancing this legal framework, the Philippines did not act alone. Torrecampo noted that the country actively collaborated with other archipelagic states, including Indonesia and Mauritius, to advocate for the recognition and application of the archipelagic doctrine within UNCLOS. This cooperation underscored the shared political, economic, and geographic realities of archipelagic nations, and reflected the Philippines' proactive and constructive role in shaping global maritime norms.

However, Torrecampo also acknowledged the challenges in reconciling earlier national policies with international standards. He referenced a statement made by Justice Antonio Carpio regarding Presidential Decree 1596, the 1978 proclamation that officially declared the Kalayaan Island Group as part of Philippine territory. According to Carpio, PD 1596 extended the Philippines' territorial claims beyond what is permitted under UNCLOS—specifically, beyond the 12-nautical-mile limit for territorial seas. This inconsistency highlighted the need to bring earlier domestic declarations into alignment with international law, reinforcing the importance of the 2009 Baselines Law as a corrective and harmonizing measure in the Philippines' maritime legal framework.

To address this discrepancy, the Philippines took corrective action. In 2009, it enacted the Philippine Archipelagic Baselines Law. This legislation marked a significant step in aligning domestic laws with UNCLOS by formally defining the baselines from which the country measures its maritime zones. More importantly, it established the legal foundation for the Philippines' status as an archipelagic state under international law, Torrecampo further explained. Through this law, the Philippines clarified its maritime boundaries in a manner consistent with UNCLOS, thereby

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strengthening the legitimacy of its claims—especially in the Spratly Islands—and ensuring they were more likely to be respected and recognized by the international community.

Torrecampo built on Justice Carpio's technical arguments by adding historical context and a broader narrative to support the Philippines' claim over the Spratly Islands. He highlighted several key historical foundations: old maps such as the 1734 Murillo-Velarde map, which the Philippines considers the oldest cartographic evidence of ownership in the region; the 1898 Treaty of Paris and the 1900 Treaty of Washington, which transferred the Philippines from Spain to the United States and, according to Torrecampo, included the Spratlys; and even earlier French maps from 1657 showing the islands as part of the Philippines. He also invoked the principle in international law that countries retain their territorial boundaries upon gaining independence, further reinforcing the Philippine claim.

Torrecampo emphasized that the Philippines has been aligning its maritime laws with international norms since the late 1970s, including the declaration of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). He noted that the term "West Philippine Sea," adopted in 2012, reflects this formal claim over maritime areas within the EEZ.

Lastly, regarding conflict resolution, Torrecampo acknowledged the Philippines' consistent preference for peaceful and legal approaches, though progress has been slow. While initiatives like negotiations with China and the Declaration on the Code of Conduct (DOC) have yet to yield binding agreements, he pointed to the 2013 arbitral case against China as a landmark step in asserting Philippine rights under UNCLOS.

He concluded by reaffirming the Philippines' commitment to international law, underscoring its efforts to assert sovereignty and protect its maritime rights while pursuing peaceful and diplomatic solutions amid ongoing challenges.

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*Open Forum*

The open forum brought together experts, policymakers, and members of the academe to discuss ASEAN's role in navigating great power rivalries, particularly amid rising tensions in the South China Sea and broader regional security challenges. The conversation focused on ASEAN's strategies for maintaining unity, managing maritime disputes, and balancing relations with major powers such as the U.S., China, and Russia. Highlighting national perspectives and historical contexts, the session underscored the need for greater regional understanding, strategic empathy, and practical cooperation to uphold ASEAN's relevance and centrality in an increasingly complex geopolitical landscape.

### ***ASEAN Cooperation and Strategic Balancing***

Heydarian, the moderator for the session, shared compelling reflections on ASEAN unity, maritime issues, and the influence of global superpowers on regional understanding. Recalling his own experience in Philippine policymaking, he said, "In 2011, I had the pleasure and privilege of working with Professor Congressman Walden Bello. We passed the resolution renaming our exclusive economic zone in the West Philippine Sea," which was officially recognized in 2012.

Heydarian then discussed Indonesia's position, acknowledging it as a non-claimant in the South China Sea but noting that the "nine-dash line is so vague and expansive that some of it is eating into your Natuna Sea area." This shows how China's maritime claims affect even non-claimant states like Indonesia.

He also criticized the inconsistent behavior of global powers toward international law, calling it ironic that China, despite ratifying UNCLOS, "so easily take[s] exceptions whenever things don't

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go their way.” Quoting Indian scholar Raja Mohan, he added, “They’re all exceptional. They take exception when international law doesn’t work for them,” applying this not only to China, but also to the United States and Russia.

On a deeper note, Heydarian cited Edward Said, highlighting how Southeast Asians often understand each other “through the eyes of the colonizer.” He questioned why ASEAN people rely on foreign media like CNN or The New York Times instead of local outlets like Tempo or the Philippine Daily Inquirer, which leads to mutual misunderstanding.

To spark reflection, Heydarian posed this key question to the panel: “Do you think we, fellow ASEAN countries, are doing enough to understand each other on each other’s terms, rather than through great power rivalry?” This was a call for ASEAN members to move beyond superpower narratives and build regional solidarity rooted in their own voices and shared identity.

Widjojo explained that Southeast Asia’s diversity in history and culture makes integration different from Europe or Africa. He said the region’s different colonial pasts shaped distinct national identities and policies. For Indonesia, he noted its historical role as a “black swan,” fighting for independence and adopting a non-alignment and independent foreign policy after the Cold War, avoiding alignment with military alliances like the Five Powers Defense Agreement.

Widjojo emphasized that ASEAN was deliberately not designed as a military alliance because the region lacks a common enemy and shared capabilities. Instead, ASEAN fosters a unique form of unity and common understanding that respects each country’s historical and strategic differences.

Heydarian responded by asking whether Indonesians are making enough effort to understand why the Philippines relies on the U.S. for balance, addressing the common perception of the Philippines as a “U.S. lackey.” He pointed out the importance of appreciating each country’s unique strategic culture and history within ASEAN.

Widjojo concluded that ASEAN’s strength lies in respecting each country’s context and internal affairs, calling this the “beauty of ASEAN.”

## ***Need for Strategic Sympathy within ASEAN***

Heydarian opened the discussion by asking if ASEAN countries are cultivating enough strategic sympathy for one another or if this is lacking. He stressed the importance of appreciating each nation’s unique historical and strategic context.

Torrecampo emphasized that the pro-U.S. or China lackey labels often stem from great power narratives, which can be counterproductive. He agreed with the need for more strategic sympathy and highlighted language barriers as a major obstacle to mutual understanding. With Indonesia using Bahasa Indonesia and only the Philippines and Singapore officially using English, language limits access to policies and ideas across countries. Torrecampo advocated for enhanced education and student exchanges to build expertise within governments and societies.

Wearn echoed the view that understanding ASEAN countries is not inherently difficult, but initiating that understanding is challenging, especially due to language. Wearn also noted that governments alone may not drive connections among ASEAN peoples, so ordinary citizens should take initiative through cultural activities, visits, and social media to build people-to-people links.

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***Balancing Relations with Great Powers***

Heydarian described ASEAN countries as engaged in a complex “dance” of balancing ties between the United States and China, aiming to preserve strategic autonomy. No country has fully aligned exclusively with one superpower, demonstrating a nuanced hedging strategy.

He invited Widjojo to comment on Indonesia’s leadership in promoting intra-ASEAN naval drills and interoperability. Widjojo stressed ASEAN’s original design as a “spider’s web” of bilateral relations rather than a unified military alliance. He welcomed bilateral exercises progressing into trilateral or quadrilateral formats but cautioned against unintentionally forming a military alliance. Respect for ASEAN’s founding principles remains crucial.

Heydarian proposed the idea of minilateralism, where smaller groups of ASEAN countries could coordinate on naval exercises and diplomatic cooperation as a pragmatic way forward, potentially gaining more traction and attracting superpower attention.

***Functional Cooperation and ASEAN’s Role in Regional Security***

Torrecampo noted existing functional cooperation efforts, including humanitarian assistance and disaster relief exercises, which focus on non-combative scenarios. He highlighted the need for more resources and coordination to strengthen these mechanisms.

Regarding Myanmar, Torrecampo observed ASEAN’s attempts to coordinate relief efforts despite limited mechanisms, such as a dedicated ASEAN military medicine or humanitarian coordination center.

He further discussed how the South China Sea dispute has prompted ASEAN to develop cooperative management approaches, although resolution efforts remain restricted to claimant states. ASEAN’s ability to enhance cooperation depends on member states recommitting to ASEAN as the core of their foreign policy. Torrecampo pointed out that renewed great power rivalry has challenged ASEAN’s centrality but also creates an opportunity to revitalize its functional role.

***Malaysia’s ASEAN Chairmanship and Regional Outlook***

Heydarian asked Wearn about what to expect from Malaysia’s Prime Minister, noting his interesting background and whether Malaysia will push the South China Sea agenda forward or take a more cautious approach.

Wearn responded candidly, suggesting there may not be any major changes or breakthroughs on the issue. When prompted about his hopes for Malaysia as ASEAN chair, Wearn emphasized the need for Malaysia to be more open-minded. He admitted that Malaysia has some internal challenges with openness, and for the country to succeed both regionally and internationally, adopting a more open and flexible mindset is essential.

Heydarian appreciated this honest and straightforward response, encouraging open dialogue in the conference space. He acknowledged the importance of openness for effective regional cooperation and moved to wrap up the session.

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### ***Political Will and Maritime Security in the Philippines***

During the discussion, a member of the audience expressed concerns about how political will affects maritime security in the West Philippine Sea. They noted that under the Aquino administration, the Coast Guard actively prevented Chinese fishing vessels from stealing resources. In contrast, during the Duterte administration, the approach was more open to China, which the audience believes led to increased unauthorized fishing and resource loss.

The audience also raised worries about the country's energy crisis and emphasized the need to protect natural resources. They mentioned possible corruption within the Coast Guard that could weaken efforts to secure maritime resources.

The discussion highlighted the critical role of political will in protecting national sovereignty and enforcing maritime laws.

### ***Economic Impact and Human Cost of the South China Sea Dispute***

Abigail Guevarra, a youth representative from the Migrant Forum in Asia, raised an important point about the economic consequences of the South China Sea dispute. She suggested that quantifying the financial losses caused by the conflict could motivate ASEAN countries to address the issue more seriously. She noted how the dispute has affected global supply chains and delayed economic progress in the region.

In response, Richard confirmed that studies have estimated nearly \$600 million lost annually due to illegal fishing by China alone. He emphasized that while numbers are important, it is equally crucial to highlight the human impact and how the dispute affects fishermen and local communities.

The discussion underlined the need to connect economic data with the lived experiences of people to foster greater understanding and cooperation within ASEAN.

### ***ASEAN's Quest for Independent Foreign Policy Amid Great Power Influence***

An audience member raised concerns about the dominant role of the United States in the South China Sea dispute. They noted increasing militarization in the region, highlighting the U.S. military presence in the Philippines. This prompted a question on whether ASEAN countries, including the Philippines and Indonesia, can realistically pursue an independent foreign policy given the strong influence of both the U.S. and China.

Heydarian briefly addressed the question, pointing out the challenges mid-sized countries face in achieving full independence from great powers, suggesting that complete non-alignment may be more aspirational than realistic.

Widjojo responded in detail, emphasizing the difficulty of full non-alignment for countries that lack strong self-reliance. He underscored the importance of ASEAN building economic cooperation as a foundation for greater independence. Widjojo also explained that a major obstacle in resolving the dispute is the "language" or approach gap between China and other claimant states, making negotiations difficult. He concluded that while ASEAN can try to foster cooperation beyond the security sector, concrete agreements remain elusive due to these challenges.

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Heydarian and Torrecampo explained the complexity of the issue, emphasizing its political, military, economic, and social dimensions. From the Philippine perspective, diplomacy and military preparedness both play key roles, especially with concerns over Taiwan's situation. Historical context shows these challenges are long-standing but have become more complicated recently.

Torrecampo stressed that while studies exist to quantify the economic losses from illegal activities like fishing and artificial island-building, the main obstacle remains political will. Policy ideas exist but are often not implemented due to leaders' risk tolerance and political perspectives. Political infiltration by China, described as "political warfare," further complicates the issue by influencing local officials without direct conflict.

Looking ahead, Torrecampo highlighted the importance of the 2025 Philippine elections, as new lawmakers will shape future foreign and defense policies. He urged citizens to engage actively in democracy to influence these critical decisions.

### **Session III** **Finding a Way Forward:** **Exploring Possible Areas of Cooperation Amidst Competing Claims**



The final session of the conference centered on the pressing need for maritime cooperation in the South China Sea, amid deepening territorial disputes and rising geopolitical tensions. With a particular focus on the strategic challenges posed by the People's Republic of China's expanding military and cyber activities, especially toward Taiwan and regional actors like the Philippines, panelists emphasized the urgency of regional collaboration and increased awareness. The conversation highlighted the vulnerabilities of smaller claimant states attempting to uphold their rights under international law and the limited success of existing confidence-building measures.

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Moderator Ricky Carandang, a journalist and CEO of Ronin Consultancy, opened the session by acknowledging the region's complex security environment but underscored the strategic imperative of cooperation, given the area's rich yet untapped resources. He structured the discussion around three guiding questions: how to de-escalate tensions and foster cooperation; the role of ASEAN and non-claimant states in enabling diplomacy; and practical recommendations for short-, medium-, and long-term conflict resolution. Despite past proposals for joint exploration, intelligence sharing, and scientific collaboration, Carandang noted that implementation has largely stalled due to ongoing strategic mistrust. The session ultimately aimed to generate actionable insights to preserve regional stability and sustain a rules-based maritime order in one of the world's most contested and economically vital waterways.



## Michael Lee

Deputy Representative

Taipei Economic &amp; Cultural Office in the Philippines

Lee opened the discussion by underscoring the urgent need for regional cooperation in the South China Sea. He began by referencing recent military exercises conducted by the People's Republic of China (PRC) near Taiwan, framing them as a significant and growing concern not only for the Philippines but for the broader Indo-Pacific region. Emphasizing the importance of strategic awareness among young leaders, Lee argued that understanding these developments is essential to shaping a secure and stable future.

He detailed the movements of the PRC's Shandong (CV-17) aircraft carrier, noting its proximity to Luzon and the aggressive naval drills conducted around Taiwan. These maneuvers, he explained, are part of China's broader naval transformation, with both the Liaoning (CV-16) and Shandong forming the backbone of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). Lee drew a direct parallel between these provocations and similar patterns observed in the West Philippine Sea, which reflects consistent and calculated escalation.

Turning to the PRC Coast Guard, Lee described it as a "big monster" — a term projecting its assertive and often intimidating presence, particularly around Taiwan. He warned that its tactics of verification, warning, and interception could easily be replicated against Philippine vessels. He presented a historical review of PRC military activities from 2022 to 2024, tracing an increasingly aggressive pattern following key events such as then-U.S. Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in 2022. By 2024, military drills had intensified, incorporating both naval and aerial incursions not only near Taiwan but into the Philippine Sea as well.

Lee highlighted Taiwan's intelligence efforts, including the use of sensors and surveillance systems to track PLAN ship and aircraft movements. He mentioned sightings of Chinese surveillance balloons crossing into Taiwanese and even Luzon's airspace, further exposing China's expanding presence. The discussion also covered the PLA's use of DF-15 missiles, some of which were launched over Taiwan and into Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), signaling a deliberate attempt to threaten and destabilize the region.

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He explained that the broader goal of these maneuvers is to establish a blockade around Taiwan, isolating it from international support and applying pressure on its population. The presentation also addressed the PRC's use of drones, emphasizing their long-range capabilities and reliance on Beidou satellite navigation. These unmanned aerial vehicles or UAVs have been observed near both Taiwan and Japan, illustrating China's growing unmanned threat.

Lee then shifted focus to critical infrastructure, particularly the vulnerability of undersea submarine cables connecting Taiwan with Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines. These cables are vital for global internet and communications networks. He stressed that beyond kinetic actions, the PRC also engages in cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns—key components of its cognitive warfare strategy designed to mislead and destabilize public opinion across the region.

He described how the PLA uses live-fire zones as a rehearsal for potential aggressive operations, warning that similar exercises could soon appear in the South China Sea. Lee emphasized China's A2AD (Anti-Access/Area Denial) strategy, aimed at cutting off Taiwan from outside support—particularly relevant given Taiwan's geographic proximity to the Philippines, being just 99 kilometers away.

To illustrate the scope of the threat, Lee presented a timeline of PRC Coast Guard incursions in the West Philippine Sea from 2012 to 2024. He outlined China's overarching strategy: securing control over maritime resources near Palawan and asserting dominance over trade routes spanning from the West Pacific to the Indian Ocean.

Lee warned of increasing physical confrontations, including the use of water cannons against Filipino vessels and the deployment of Z-9 helicopters in near-collision scenarios that have endangered lives. He identified a strategic shift in PRC military posture—from a traditionally land-based force to a naval-centric power. This transformation includes dominating key maritime chokepoints such as the Miyako and Balintang Channels, which sit dangerously close to both Taiwan and the Philippines.

He also noted rising naval activity between Mindoro, the Sulu Sea, and the West Pacific from 2021 to 2024, framing it as part of a broader effort to assert regional control. One major element of this strategy is the establishment of the so-called A280 line, a maritime barrier that restricts non-Chinese vessels from entering the South China Sea.

To explain China's strategic thinking, Lee drew an analogy between the game of "Go," in which China seeks to encircle its adversaries, and the Western preference for "chess," where the focus is on direct confrontation. He pointed to China's integrated approach, combining economic coercion, drone incursions, and psychological operations to advance its regional ambitions.

In conclusion, Lee emphasized Taiwan's critical role—as both a vibrant democracy and a global hub for semiconductor manufacturing—and its strategic value in monitoring PRC activity. He called for deeper regional cooperation to push back against authoritarian influence, urging continued engagement, information-sharing, and solidarity among like-minded nations to uphold peace and security in the region.

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## Andi Wijoyanto

Head of Research Agency, Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle  
Former Cabinet Secretary, *Indonesia*

Wijoyanto began his remarks by sharing, “I wrote a very short essay on this topic, giving it an unusual title: *Walk Three Steps on Water*. The Christian must understand—who in our history has actually walked on water? This metaphor highlights the difficult challenge we face when discussing the South China Sea.” He clarified that his focus is on short-term solutions, specifically until 2028, explaining, “As an academic, it’s impossible for me to predict what the next Trump policy will be. It’s better to wait until after the 2028 election when a new president takes office.”



The idea behind what he calls *Walk Three Steps on Water* —is to ease tensions between China and the U.S. Essentially, Wijoyanto's proposal aims to create a “negative peace” in the South China Sea, meaning the goal is to prevent any escalation of conflict rather than to solve all underlying issues. For the bigger structural challenges, it’s important to wait until the current unpredictable leader, President Trump, is replaced by a more rational successor.

With that in mind, Wijoyanto focused on identifying shared interests among the U.S., China, Indonesia, the Philippines, and other regional states over the next three to four years. He shared three key priorities. First, maintaining economic stability. Second, avoiding conflict while leaders are preoccupied and uncertain. And third, exercising caution because no single power—neither China, the U.S., Indonesia, ASEAN, nor the UN—is fully in control of the situation.

Wijoyanto's main goal is clear: to sustain a stable negative peace in the South China Sea until 2028.

Emphasizing the need to maintain economic stability, Wijoyanto stated, “Everyone wants their economies to stay strong.” He pointed out that “Trump, for example, is currently focused on fixing global trade through internal measures to support the U.S. economy,” while “China is striving to stabilize its economy and sustain its global initiatives in the South China Sea.” To manage this delicate balance, he proposed a short-term arrangement where countries agree not to block shipping routes or escalate tensions. A neutral party like Singapore could oversee this agreement, ensuring safe trade and navigation. Such a move would help both the U.S. and China avoid worsening economic troubles, while allowing smaller nations like the Philippines and Vietnam to continue fishing and trading without risk.

Wijoyanto also noted that many global leaders are preoccupied with other pressing issues. “Leaders benefit from calming things down when they’re already stretched thin,” he observed. “Trump, for instance, is currently dealing with conflicts involving Russia, Ukraine, Gaza, and Iran, so he can’t fully focus on the South China Sea.” To prevent further escalation, he suggested practical steps such as pausing military activities and establishing a direct hotline for immediate communication, especially to resolve minor disputes like fishing conflicts before they spiral out of control.

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Addressing the region's leadership vacuum, Wijoyanto remarked, "No one wants to take on too much responsibility when there's no strong leader in control." He pointed out that "Indonesia, under Prabowo, could send a ship to the South China Sea, but ASEAN as a whole isn't stepping up. Meanwhile, China's economy and political situation remain unstable." To move forward, he recommended starting informal talks led by a neutral ASEAN country like Thailand. These discussions would focus on shared interests such as environmental protection and resource management rather than contentious territorial claims. This, he suggested, could foster trust and cooperation despite the lack of a dominant regional power.

In closing, Wijoyanto acknowledged the limitations of this approach: "These steps are not perfect—they only delay the larger problem, and success depends on everyone's willingness to comply. If Xi or Trump turns their attention to new domestic pressures, things could unravel. Still, this 'three-step walk on water' can maintain peace for now, prevent conflict escalation, and buy time until a more rational leader emerges within the next three years."



## Dae-Jin Jung, Ph.D.

Professor

Halla University, *South Korea*

Jung began his presentation with a personal reflection, stating, "I navigated the South China Sea in 2008 and 2009 while serving as a naval officer. It is very meaningful for me to speak here, near the South China Sea." His opening underscored not only his familiarity with the region but also with the complexities in geopolitical dynamics.

Before delving into the South China Sea dispute, Jung drew a parallel with maritime tensions on the Korean Peninsula, particularly in the West Sea (Yellow Sea). He detailed the ongoing dispute over the Northern Limit Line (NLL), a maritime boundary unilaterally drawn by South Korea and the U.S. after the Korean War. North Korea has never recognized the line, resulting in overlapping claims and heightened tensions. The disputed waters have witnessed several naval confrontations, including two deadly clashes since 1999.

Jung then recounted key diplomatic efforts aimed at easing these tensions. In October 2007, South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il held a summit and agreed to create a joint peace and cooperation zone in the West Sea, particularly to allow joint fishing. However, no tangible progress followed. A similar attempt was made in April 2018, when President Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un met and agreed to establish a special peace region in the same area as part of the broader Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity, and Reunification of the Korean Peninsula. Despite these efforts, Jung noted that functionalist cooperation, which focused on practical collaboration without resolving underlying political issues, ultimately failed to bring lasting peace.

He posed a fundamental question: "Can functionalist cooperation ensure political and military security?" Citing historical data, he pointed out that despite 667 official dialogues and 258 agreements over the past five decades, tensions persist—largely due to North Korea's unpredictable political stance, including Kim Jong-un's decision to cut inter-Korean ties and declare a hostile relationship.

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Jung then introduced an AI-generated outline, remarking, “AI gives a brilliant outline, as we already know, but have not achieved.” He noted that while strategies such as diplomatic engagement, codes of conduct, joint development, demilitarization, and legal arbitration are theoretically sound, they have yet to be realized in practice.

Calling for a fundamental reassessment of current approaches, Jung emphasized: “We need to address this from the very beginning.” He distinguished between two key strategies: a step-by-step legal and conditional framework, and a gradual political and economic dialogue. He advocated for these approaches to work in tandem, not in isolation. Moreover, he stressed the importance of balancing bilateral and multilateral cooperation, noting: “We decided that the South China Sea dispute will be under the US and PRC-led negotiations or ASEAN-led negotiations or political situation.” His comment underscored the dominant roles of the U.S. and China, while affirming ASEAN’s indispensable part in regional diplomacy.

In closing, Jung urged a renewed commitment to collaborative action: “We need to start again at this point... Solidarity and creating shared benefit is very important.” Reflecting on both the unresolved tensions in the West Sea and the broader concerns over China’s maritime behavior, he called for a fresh approach—one that combines legal, political, economic, and multilateral strategies to meaningfully address the challenges in the South China Sea.

### **Jay Batongbacal, Ph.D.**

Director, Institute for Maritime Affairs and the Law of the Sea  
College of Law, University of the Philippines

Batongbacal opened his presentation stating that “The question for our session is finding ways forward for areas of cooperation amidst competing claims. And I think it’s pretty obvious that even beyond the West Philippine Sea and the South China Sea, competing claims within the region abound.” Batongbacal acknowledged the challenging nature of these disputes, emphasizing that past efforts at cooperation had yielded limited progress. Reflecting on the dynamic geopolitical environment, he remarked: “We have to be very aware that the geopolitical situation indeed continues to evolve rapidly and change rapidly. The latest move by President Trump is certain to rock the boat a lot more than we would rather not have at this time.”



He highlighted the urgency of Taiwan’s situation, describing it as a critical flashpoint with indirect but significant implications for the Philippines. “The most dangerous or most critical flashpoint right now is actually to the north around Taiwan. We have 150,000 OFWs in Taiwan. Evacuating them is no easy task, especially since we basically have unofficial contacts with Taiwan through the Manila Economic Cooperation Office,” he explained, stressing the humanitarian, economic, and diplomatic complexities involved. He also pointed out the broader economic repercussions: “Taiwan is a very strong trading partner of the Philippines... any contingencies that arise in Taiwan would directly affect our energy security.” The interconnectedness of trade, energy, and security, he argued, underscored the need to consider both direct and indirect impacts of regional tensions.

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Moving to the question of defusing tensions and promoting cooperation, Batongbacal identified the root issue: “It’s clear that the source of the tension really is China’s expansion. Expansion per se does not necessarily have to be problematic, but the manner in which China is expanding really is, because that expansion demands that we basically give up and abdicate our interests in favor of the PRC.” He stressed that the Philippines’ struggle was fundamentally about asserting its rights under international law and ensuring equal treatment for all nations: “We invested a lot in the rule of the sea negotiations because we knew at the time that as a smaller, less powerful country, our hope lay within a system of international law and an international community that abided by a rule of law where all nations are treated as equals.” He contrasted this ideal with China’s current stance, describing it as “a regional superpower that believes now that since it has grown economically and militarily, it does not have to be equal to the others at the table.”

On the question of how to move forward, Batongbacal outlined two stark choices: either smaller countries yield to China’s demands—effectively becoming subordinates to a regional power and placing their interests beneath China’s—or China exercises restraint and recommits to respecting international agreements and the rules-based order. Batongbacal clearly favored the latter, stating, “That actually is the preferred manner that we wish these tensions to be resolved.”

He emphasized that ASEAN’s longstanding principles of non-interference and respect for sovereignty have underpinned regional cooperation. However, he acknowledged these principles’ limitations in the face of China’s growing assertiveness. Underscoring the value of ASEAN’s original vision, Batongbacal noted, “The Philippines and ASEAN have invested a lot historically in this. The whole ASEAN project, for example, can be seen as an attempt on the part of the region to establish ways of living with each other without having to subordinate one to the other.”

Yet in practice, ASEAN’s role—particularly that of non-claimant states—has been constrained by internal divisions and geopolitical complexity. “ASEAN has proven time and again that it is rather incapable of effectively playing a role when it comes to the South China Sea,” Batongbacal said, citing both geographic and political differences among its members as major obstacles to building consensus. While negotiations over a Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea have made procedural progress, he argued that they remain largely symbolic and lack substantive breakthroughs.

Geography itself, Batongbacal explained, plays an intrusive role in shaping national interests. “The Philippines shares more interest with Taiwan, for example, than with Indonesia or Vietnam in this regard.” This reflects a deeper geopolitical reality: the Philippines and Taiwan lie between China and the southern ASEAN states like Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore—geographically and strategically set apart from mainland Southeast Asian nations such as Cambodia, Vietnam, and Myanmar. These horizontal and bilateral divisions mirror broader divergences in strategic priorities within the region.

Despite these challenges, Batongbacal emphasized the need to stay the course. He concluded that ASEAN members, including the Philippines, must remain committed to upholding international law, resist unilateral efforts to reshape it in favor of a single power, and continue working together to preserve a rules-based international order.

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## Open Forum



The open forum brought together experts and participants from across East and Southeast Asia to discuss the escalating security tensions in the region, with a particular focus on China's ambitions regarding Taiwan and the South China Sea. Representatives from Taiwan, Indonesia, South Korea, Vietnam, and the Philippines shared diverse perspectives on the challenges posed by China's military modernization, cyber threats, and regional influence. The discussion explored the delicate balance of power, the critical role of alliances, and the political constraints faced by countries navigating between major powers. Participants also examined the preparedness of Taiwan's defense, the vulnerabilities in digital infrastructure, and the potential for future conflicts. This session highlighted the complexities of maintaining regional stability amid growing geopolitical competition and underscored the urgent need for unity, modernization, and strategic foresight.

### ***Taiwan's Defense Preparedness and Distinct Identity***

A participant asked about Taiwan's preparations for a potential conflict and military alliances. Lee emphasized the clear distinction between Taiwan and China, stating, "Taiwan is Taiwan, China is China." He highlighted Taiwan's decades-long efforts to prepare for defense, saying, "We have prepared for almost 80 years with Trump's determination to defend ourselves." Carandang added that Taiwan has spent more time building its defense than Ukraine, underscoring Taiwan's strong resolve to protect itself.

### ***The Necessity of Regional Unity Against Chinese Influence***

Batongbacal highlighted how China exploits divisions among countries in East Asia to advance its agenda. He warned that if countries fail to unite, China can dominate each one separately. In

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addition, he stressed that alliances and partnerships are essential for maintaining regional security and preventing China from exerting unchecked influence.

### ***Military Modernization Challenges in Southeast Asia***

Wijoyanto said that China's long-term military modernization predicts that China will be ready for war in East Asia by 2027. He detailed Beijing's multi-phase buildup since the 1980s and contrasted it with Indonesia's insufficient military capacity, noting the country currently has only 40 warships compared to the 274 needed.

### ***Political Constraints on Vietnam's Stance Toward China***

Tran Duc from Vietnam expressed concern over the Vietnamese government's reluctance to confront China firmly due to its communist regime. He stated, "Vietnam will never be firm enough against China as long as it's ruled by a communist party," and called for international support for democratization efforts to create a more reliable regional ally.

### ***Countering Cyber Threats and Espionage in East Asia***

A question was raised regarding how to counter espionage and cyber threats from China and other hostile actors. Lee highlighted the critical role of legal frameworks and public education in deterring betrayal and espionage. Taiwan's swift response system to disinformation was also discussed, featuring a 20-minute turnaround for issuing clarifications. Wijoyanto outlined Indonesia's plan to establish a dedicated "Cyber Force," a military branch focused on cyber defense, expected to be operational by 2027. Meanwhile, Jung detailed South Korea's strong anti-espionage capabilities in response to threats from North Korea and China.

### ***Vulnerabilities in Regional Digital Infrastructure***

An employee from the Department of Information and Communications Technology asked about the extent of the cybersecurity threat posed by China in the Philippines. In response, Batongbacal described cybersecurity as "the biggest threat we've ever faced," citing the widespread presence of Chinese technology in both entertainment and financial platforms. He noted that apps like TikTok, while seemingly harmless, and fintech services such as Alipay, GCash, and PayMaya rely on Chinese infrastructure. This dependence, he warned, could give China access to sensitive financial information and the ability to manipulate it if desired. Batongbacal emphasized the risks associated with Chinese technology firms embedded in the region's digital infrastructure, arguing that companies like TikTok, Alipay, and Tencent could be compelled to serve Beijing's interests, thereby posing serious security vulnerabilities for other nations.

In contrast, Wijoyanto offered a different perspective, stating that "Indonesia actually does not consider China as a threat" due to ongoing strategic cooperation. He explained that about one-third of Indonesia's cyber and digital infrastructure has been developed by China, highlighting the Palapa Ring project completed in 2019, which brought 4G internet access to over 500 regencies across the country. He also noted that China has surpassed Japan and South Korea to become Indonesia's largest investor in manufacturing—particularly in the automotive and electric vehicle sectors.

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## ***Predictions of Future Conflict in East Asia***

In response to a question from a representative of the UP Asia Center about the likelihood of war in the South China Sea, Wijoyanto predicted a regional conflict is “very, very likely,” with Taiwan and the South China Sea as probable flashpoints. He referenced geopolitical modeling that suggests a possible Third World War could occur around 2037.

## **Closing Ceremonies**

### *Video Address*



### **Didrick de Schaetzen**

Secretary General

Alliance for Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party,  
*Belgium*

De Schaetzen extended greetings from Brussels on behalf of European liberals and democrats, expressing gratitude to Chairperson Mardi Seng and CALD for organizing the timely and important discussion. He began by emphasizing that the democratic and rule-based international order is under pressure, and the fight for human rights and democracy is needed now more than ever. He highlighted the crucial importance of ensuring freedom of navigation, avoiding conflict, and securing lines of communication in the South China Sea. It was regrettable, he noted, that some European countries in recent years have been passive, prioritizing Chinese political interests over the human rights situation in

China. However, he affirmed that European liberals speak with a united voice, recognizing any increase in tensions in the South China Sea as a major threat to stability, security, and peace in the region, as well as to the global economy, given that about one-third of global maritime trade passes through the area. He warned of the economic impacts, referencing lockdowns and blockages that can disrupt daily life, and stressed that China’s tactics of economic coercion and control over international trade routes cannot be allowed to continue.

He called on the EU to maintain pressure on China to accept binding arbitration rulings under UNCLOS and to de-escalate tensions, while urging the EU to play its role as an honest broker, working with democratic allies to establish multilateral conflict resolution mechanisms and support diplomatic initiatives in the region. He also expressed concern over disinformation and the declining human rights situation in China and Hong Kong, while voicing strong support for Taiwan. Notably, he mentioned that European liberals were the only party to include explicit mention of Taiwan in their manifesto for the previous year’s European Parliament elections. De Schaetzen referred to increased Chinese activity in response to Taiwan’s vibrant democracy, particularly following the January election of President Lai and the strong showing of the DPP. Reflecting on the evolving situation, he remarked that European liberals often wonder about the next move of the US administration, emphasizing the need for the EU to emerge as a superpower capable of competing with China and the United States.

He stressed that for liberals, diversification and trade with like-minded partners are essential to this strategy, and that a change in US administration does not mean China will suddenly become

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a trustworthy partner. The democratic world must therefore stand united. Concluding his remarks, he assured the audience that representatives across Europe, led by ALDE Party President Svenja Hahn and supported by members of the European Parliament, would continue to be a strong voice and a reliable partner for those engaged in the struggle for democracy, human rights, and stability in the region. He thanked the audience for their attention.

## Synthesis

### Lorna Israel, Ph.D.

President, Philippine International Studies Organization  
Graduate Program Coordinator, Department of International Studies  
Miriam College, *Philippines*

Israel reflected on the key themes and messages that emerged during the timely, intensive, and insightful conference. A recurring thread throughout the discussions was the importance of *finding common ground*—particularly in the context of ongoing tensions in the South China Sea and broader regional disputes shaped by an evolving global landscape, including the implications of a possible second term for Donald Trump and its impact on regional diplomacy and security.

She emphasized that despite signs of fatigue, frustration, or waning confidence among stakeholders, the conversations reaffirmed a vital truth: the need for cooperation endures. “We must stay the course,” she said, underlining the importance of sustained strategic dialogue and unwavering commitment to international law in managing the tensions that continue to define this crucial maritime region.



Israel also stressed that while great power competition undeniably influences the region, ASEAN and its member states must take a more proactive stance in shaping their own security narratives and interests rather than reacting to external pressures.

Maritime security, she reminded the participants, extends beyond traditional concerns of defense and deterrence. It also encompasses the protection of livelihoods, human rights, and social justice. In this regard, Israel reiterated three key areas of consensus and action that must guide the region forward:

1. ASEAN must lead in fostering dialogue and enhancing maritime security cooperation across the region.
2. Diplomatic engagement remains essential—whether through multilateral, bilateral, or mini-lateral formats—in managing tensions and resolving disputes.
3. A rules-based approach, grounded in international law and particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), is critical to addressing competing claims and maintaining stability.

In closing, Israel reaffirmed a central principle: while geopolitical rivalries will continue to pose challenges, the region’s shared future depends on its collective ability to meet those challenges

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with wisdom, diplomacy, and unity. “Geopolitical divisions are designed to fragment us,” she warned, “but it is only through solidarity and strategic cooperation that we can protect our shared interests and secure lasting peace.”

## Closing Remarks



### **Lorenzo “Erin” Tanada**

Acting President, Liberal Party of the Philippines  
Former Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives,  
*Philippines*

Tanada expressed hope that the conference had provided clarity regarding the complexities of the South China Sea, or West Philippine Sea. He emphasized that the issue cannot be properly resolved without mutual understanding and respect among countries, highlighting the need for continuous dialogue and the pursuit of strategies to promote peace in the region. He pointed out, however, that until the “big bully” in the West Philippine Sea is willing to cooperate, achieving a resolution remains uncertain. Despite this challenge, he expressed his gratitude for being part of the conversation and conveyed the Liberal Party’s heartfelt thanks to Senator Mardi Seng, CALD

Chairperson, and CALD for choosing the Philippines as the venue for such an important discussion. He concluded by thanking everyone for their participation.

### **Francis Gerald “Blue” Abaya**

Secretary General, Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats  
Former Member of House of Representatives, *Philippines*

Abaya highlighted that the conference’s theme, “South China Sea Disputes under Trump 2.0: Finding a Common Ground among Claimant States,” provided an essential platform to engage with key issues affecting both claimant states and the international community. Over the course of the discussions, participants examined recent developments, shared diverse perspectives, and identified potential areas for cooperation amidst the complexities of competing claims. Abaya noted that despite occasional difficulties in understanding each other’s viewpoints, a shared commitment to dialogue and continued cooperation emerged. He expressed deep appreciation to the distinguished guests, speakers, and moderators who skillfully navigated the complex topics.



Abaya thanked partner organizations, Miriam College, the Center for Liberalism and Democracy, and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, for their crucial support and collaboration. He also expressed gratitude to the international delegates from the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats for contributing broader political perspectives. He extended special thanks to all participants, whose engagement made the conference meaningful, as well as to the emcees, Atty. Karry Sison and Mr. Jules Guiang, for keeping the sessions engaging. Abaya

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acknowledged the hard work of the CALD Secretariat and volunteers for ensuring the seamless execution of the event.

In conclusion, Abaya underscored the vital role of the rule of law in building a just and equitable society, echoing former Philippine President Benigno “Noy” Aquino III’s words at the 10th East Asia Summit: “Under the rule of law, right prevails over might.” He encouraged all participants to carry forward the spirit of cooperation and mutual understanding cultivated during the conference. Wishing everyone a safe journey home, he closed with a heartfelt, “Mabuhay tayong lahat.”

## **Official Group Photos**





**Council of  
Asian Liberals  
and Democrats**