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Professorial Address

ROLAND G. SIMBULAN

The Historic Senate Vote of 16 September 1991 Looking Back and Looking Forward Twenty-Five Years After

On 16 September 1991 the Philippine Senate voted against a proposed treaty to extend the presence of United States military bases in the Philippines for another ten years. As an insider in the Senate from 1987 to 1995, I reflect on the significance of this historic vote, which signified victory for the nationalist movement. How was it possible for a traditionally conservative and pro-US institution like the Philippine Senate to brave American displeasure by rejecting treaty extension? I address this question from the perspective of the broad antinuclear and anti-bases movement in the Philippines, from which a step-by-step strategy was implemented.

KEYWORDS: SENATE · TREATY · RATIFICATION · MILITARY BASES · SOVEREIGNTY

If what happened on 16 September 1991 was a victorious battle, we should be celebrating it as an official national holiday. But why don't we? And why is our nation not officially celebrating the Battle of Mactan and the victory at Balangiga as triumphs to inspire our continuing struggle for the defense of national sovereignty? All the more significant is the fact that the historic Senate vote on 16 September 1991 was a battle won without a single shot being fired, yet there is no official celebration of this event at all.

I welcome this conference for serving as an occasion for academics and historians to look back at those momentous and historic events that took place on 16 September 1991, twenty-five years ago to the day, when the Philippine Senate—our senate—voted against a proposed treaty to extend the presence of US military bases in the country for another ten years, after ninety years of having had these bases established in the country as military outposts starting in 1901. With this vote, the Senate virtually said NO to the wishes of the strongest superpower in the world—the United States—in order to put the country's destiny and future in its own hands. This historic vote cannot be said to have been the act of Filipinos deemed as “anti-American” people because they are not against the American people who want their wasteful defense expenditures to be rechanneled to their own basic needs and welfare. Rather, the Filipino people and their Senate voted against militaristic US policies as represented by the US bases, policies often supported by subservient members of the Filipino elite. Indeed, Philippine nationalism was largely a grassroots phenomenon to which, at particular times, certain members of the Filipino elite, such as the late senators Claro M. Recto, Lorenzo M. Tañada, and Jose W. Diokno as well as the majority of the senators in 1991, responded affirmatively.

As an insider in the Senate from 1987 to 1995, I reflect on the significance of 16 September 1991—how the Senate and the Filipino people achieved the historic victory for the nationalist movement in the Philippines.¹ I derive these reflections from the perspective of the broad antinuclear and anti-bases movement, which made and implemented a step-by-step strategy. I present the following features that I believe defined the dynamics of this strategy: (1) the unified and broad anti-bases movement's coordination and cooperation with patriotic members and staff of the 1987–1992 Philippine Senate as well as insiders in the executive branch of government; (2) the successful incorporation in the 1987 Constitution, in its declaration of state policies, of

a statement that the Philippines “adopts and pursues a policy of freedom from nuclear weapons in its territory,” which eventually enabled the Senate to transform its stand into an anti-treaty and inevitably anti-US bases position; and (3) the linking of the struggle undergone by the broad anti-bases and anti-treaty movement to a patriotic struggle for democracy and national sovereignty.

Historic Vote on a Rainy Day

Everyone remembers 16 September 1991 as a rainy day. In front of the old Senate Building at the Executive House in Manila (now the National Museum), marchers were assembled the whole day. Wet banners and streamers surrounded the building as anti-bases advocates laid vigil starting from the night before the vote, staying on until the following day. Yet it was to be a jubilant day for Philippine nationalism. Twelve out of a total of twenty-three senators rejected the proposed treaty that would have extended the presence of US military bases in the country.

From 2 to 6 September 1991, the Senate conducted daily public hearings in the morning and afternoon on the proposed treaty. Resource persons from the Philippine negotiating panel, cabinet members, defense and foreign affairs officials, and academics and experts on Philippines–US relations were invited to give their opinions. Representatives from labor unions, NGOs and people’s organizations, and churches were likewise invited for their inputs. Then, from 7 to 10 September, the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations under Sen. Leticia Shahani sat down to discuss the treaty.² The plenary debates were held from 11 to 15 September.

On the day prior to the vote, the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs had already sealed the fate of the proposed treaty. It voted to approve Sen. Wigberto Tañada’s Resolution of Non-Concurrence (no. 1259) to “A Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Security” — the sugarcoated title of the proposed treaty that would have extended the stay of US military bases. The twelve senators who supported the Resolution of Non-Concurrence were: Jovito “Jovy” Salonga (the Senate president), Agapito “Butz” Aquino, Juan Ponce Enrile, Joseph “Erap” Estrada, Teofisto “Tito” Guingona Jr., Sotero “Teroy” Laurel, Ernesto “Ernie” Maceda, Orlando “Orlie” Mercado, Aquilino “Nene” Pimentel Jr., Rene Saguisag, Victor Ziga, and Wigberto “Bobby” Tañada.

With that Resolution of Non-Concurrence sponsored by members of the Senate majority, only eight “no” votes (i.e., in favor of nonconcurrence)

were needed to reject the bases treaty in the plenary. Twelve voted “no” while eleven voted “yes.” The results paved the way for the approval of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Report No. 1422, recommending before the Senate plenary its nonconcurrency with what was in fact a ten-year bases treaty. Because the 1987 Constitution required a two-thirds vote by the chamber to concur and ratify any treaty, the twelve senators’ approval of the Resolution of Non-Concurrence had made the odds of reaching a two-thirds vote impossible.

Thus, on that rainy day and night of 16 September 1991, the twenty-three senators (excluding Sen. Raul Manglapus, who Pres. Corazon “Cory” Aquino had appointed foreign affairs secretary and head of the Philippine negotiating panel) cast their votes and delivered speeches to explain their respective positions. The proceedings began at 9 AM that day and ended at exactly 8:30 PM.

Former Sen. Lorenzo Tañada, then a sickly 90-year-old on a wheelchair, arrived in the Senate to witness his son Wigberto finally succeed in the lofty cause that the elder Tañada had fought so hard to attain since the 1950s. As Sen. Wigberto Tañada declared in his sponsorship of the Senate Resolution of Non-Concurrence:

A historic and economic opportunity awaits the Philippines as the Filipino people, reinforced by the mandate of their Constitution, now seek to remove the last most visible vestiges of colonialism in this country, the US military bases. Upon the powers vested in us by the will of our people, through the Constitution, let us be a beacon of the long-shackled hopes of our martyrs and nation. (Legislative Publications Staff, Philippine Senate 1991, 220)

Senate President Salonga, who presided over the historic marathon proceedings, was the last to cast his vote and give his explanation that evening. Salonga’s (ibid., 242–43) explanatory speech stated: “Sept. 16, 1991 may well be the day when we in this Senate found the soul, the true spirit of this nation because we mustered the courage and the will to declare the end of foreign military presence in the Philippines. I vote NO to this Treaty and vote YES to the Resolution of Non-Concurrence.”

During the last phases of the proceedings of the Committee on Foreign Relations, Pres. Cory Aquino had even tried to lobby the Senate to approve the bases treaty. She became the first president of an independent republic

to march and lead a rally to the Senate to call for the restoration of foreign military bases and troops. It was an act that her own cabinet member who headed the Philippine negotiating panel, Health Secretary Alfredo Bengzon (1997), considered so shameful that at that moment he wanted to dissociate himself from the Aquino administration, despite his closeness with his principal, President Aquino.

In this regard, I consider as a big let-down Sen. Jose “Joey” Lina, who I did not expect to support the US bases treaty as he was a youthful activist lawyer who had in the past consistently supported nuclear-weapons-free legislation in the Senate. Considered as one of the core activists among the anti-bases members of the Senate together with Tañada, Pimentel, Aquino, Guingona, Mercado, and Saguisag, Lina was not expected to vote ultimately in favor of the bases. Perhaps Senator Lina could not say no to President Aquino; it was payback time, as Aquino had supported and campaigned for his bid in the Senate.

Surprise

Despite the signs of an impending rejection, the US government thought that the Philippine senators were bluffing and merely asking for more crumbs in the form of aid and assurances of support for some of the senators who had presidential ambitions. Evidently, the US underestimated the post-EDSA Senate by thinking that, like the Philippine negotiating panel, the senate legislators were merely grandstanding (as in fact a few were). It thought that those who resisted US pressure were merely opportunistic and vacillating Filipino politicians who would ultimately give way to its wishes. In the end, the Americans had the greatest shock of their lives.

Especially after the victory of the US-led forces in the First Gulf War against Iraq in 1991 and the eruption of Mount Pinatubo, which brought untold sufferings to many Filipinos, no one could believe that what happened on 16 September 1991 was possible. So confident was the US of keeping the bases that, just about a month before the Senate made its crucial decision, the US changed its ambassador to the Philippines (Simbulan 2009, 125). But the Senate did not blink, and it held out.

Just how was it possible for a traditionally conservative and pro-US institution like the Philippine Senate to brave American displeasure by rejecting a bases treaty of extension? In Philippine politics, the Senate,

then regarded as the training ground for future presidents, was the turf of pro-US conservative Filipino politicians vying for the highest position in the land. How, many skeptics had asked, could a handful of “trapo”—the popular portmanteau for “traditional opportunistic politicians” but which in the Philippine vernacular also derisively means rags—turn around from an age-old stance of compromise and subservience to the US and, in a decisive moment, remake history?

The US Pays for Supporting the Marcos Dictatorship

Indeed, how could a country so economically and politically unstable hold its ground (or, in the words of an American senator, “tweak our noses”) before the only remaining superpower in the world after the Cold War? My explanation is this. The US was unquestionably looked up to as the standard bearer of the free world and democracy. This view was shattered when Pres. Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law on 21 September 1972 and dismantled the same democratic political institutions the US had introduced to the country since the prewar Commonwealth period.

Many Filipinos, including most of the senators elected in the post-Marcos era (1987 onward), could not understand how and why the US could support a dictatorship that not only plundered the national economy dry, but also imprisoned, tortured, and murdered all who stood in Marcos’s way, closed down all mass media outfits except his mouthpieces, abolished Congress, scrapped the constitution, and banned freedom of speech and assembly. The US not only maintained its support for Marcos, but it also doubled and tripled its military aid for his martial law government, enabling Marcos to expand his military forces from 60,000 in 1972 to 250,000 by 1985 (Kessler 1986, 50).

It became very clear to Filipinos and the future senators that the US was not interested in democracy in the Philippines. If it were a choice between US strategic interests such as nuclear bases, on the one hand, and human rights and democracy in the Philippines, on the other, the US showed that it would not hesitate to choose the former. Thus, the martial law experience under Marcos had made more Filipinos critical of US intentions, motives, and interests in its former colony.

In addition, over the long term, Philippine nationalist ideas and consistent social movement activism in the country, inspired by the writings of José Rizal, Apolinario Mabini, Claro M. Recto, and historian Renato

Constantino, undoubtedly shaped the senators' perspectives (Legislative Publications Staff, Philippine Senate 1991, 2018). Their ideas made the senators and other Filipinos reexamine the internal and external policies that had made us lose effective control over our own natural resources, economic activities, and even our own state. For decades our government had bowed to the impositions of foreign interests, which we had allowed to shape and dictate our policies. These economic and foreign policies had made us weak and vulnerable.

When the time came to decide, Filipino national interests had to prevail over narrow US strategic interests. The support of the US for the Marcos dictatorship had developed animosity and anger among the Filipino people who were its victims. Note that many of the Philippine senators who served between 1987 and 1992 were human rights lawyers of political detainees during the Marcos dictatorship, such as, to my personal knowledge, Tañada, Saguisag, Salonga, Guingona, and Pimentel.

In the specific case of the pro-Marcos Sen. Joseph Estrada, his close friendship with nationalist Senator Tañada from 1987 onward converted him into an anti-bases advocate. Senator Estrada not only took in as his advisers Randy David and Renato "RC" Constantino Jr., but he even produced an anti-US bases movie, *Sa Kuko ng Agila*, in 1990 with himself as leading man and then Rep. Nikki Coseteng as his leading lady.

Consistent Move

On 2 February 1987 the Philippines made a breakthrough in its pro-peace and antinuclear weapons position. On that day Filipinos ratified a new constitution that banned the entry of nuclear weapons and the presence of foreign military forces in the country. The fifty-member Constitutional Commission had drafted a pro-peace constitution that pursued an independent foreign policy by banning nuclear weapons from any part of Philippine territory with its provision in article 2, section 7: "The Philippines, consistent with the national interest, adopts and pursues a policy of freedom from nuclear weapons in its territory."³

The senators who rejected the treaty argued that the Philippines could not pay mere lip service to nuclear disarmament both in our municipal law and in international agreements. As an original member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Philippines had signed the ASEAN Declaration for a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality in 1971 (ASEAN 1971). It had also signed on 11 October 1965 the United Nations Treaty

Banning Nuclear Weapons Tests in the Atmosphere, in Outer Space, and Under Water (FSI–DFA 2005, 45). In addition, the Philippines even signed in 1967 the UN-initiated Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, Including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies (ibid., 47), an international treaty banning the deployment of nuclear weapons on the moon and other celestial bodies! In this treaty, the signatories agreed “not to place in orbit around the earth any objects carrying nuclear weapons or any kinds of weapons of mass destruction, install such weapons in celestial bodies, or station such weapons in outer space” (ibid.). The treaty also forbade “the establishment of military bases, installations and fortifications, the testing of any type of weapons and the conduct of military maneuvers on celestial bodies” (ibid.). How, then, could the Philippines allow such weaponry on its own territory?

During the 42nd General Assembly of the United Nations (1987–1988), the Philippines voted “yes” to thirty-nine of the forty nuclear disarmament resolutions. In consonance with these constitutional and international initiatives, the Senate, by a bipartisan vote of nineteen affirmative votes, three negative votes, and one abstention, approved on 6 June 1988 the “Freedom from Nuclear Weapons Act” (Salonga 1995, 211). This measure effectively served to implement and enforce the then constitutional mandate and now national policy banning nuclear weapons on Philippine territory. That was the last nail on the US-bases coffin since everyone perceived that the bases were storing and transiting nuclear weapons, despite the US policy to neither confirm nor deny the presence of such weapons on its bases (Albert 2016, 89; Heydarian 2016; Kaplan 2014). All these events reinforced one another as the day of reckoning neared.

Inside the Senate

As an insider during the Senate deliberations and as Senior Political Consultant, I was not surprised by the final vote. From Day One, my assisting legislative staff in the Senate and I kept tab of the balance of forces inside the Senate, taking full note of the occasional informal headcount initiated by Senate President Salonga. In early 1991, at least ten of the anti-bases senators helped organize a seminar-briefing of the senators and their technical staff on the issue of the US bases, nuclear weapons, and the bases conversion program. I was requested to be one of the resource persons for this briefing, along with UP president Jose Abueva, who chaired the Legislative–Executive

Bases Council to Study the Feasibility of Bases Conversion towards Peaceful and Economic Uses. The members of the Senate staff who organized the seminar-briefing and this author noticed that senators Tañada and Estrada attended all the proceedings.

The unified and broad anti-bases movement's coordination with patriotic members and staff of the 1987–1992 Philippine Senate as well as insiders in the executive branch of the government assured the defeat of the proposed bases treaty on the ground. From Day One of the new bases treaty negotiations in 1990, certain members of the technical staff of the Philippine bases panel privately volunteered to provide updates to the Senate technical staff, including myself, especially on provisions in the three drafts of the proposed treaty that compromised Philippine interests and sovereignty. A copy of the draft treaty was even leaked to a national daily, which published the unauthorized draft in full to generate outrage on the onerous provisions. In fact, before the draft treaty was even formally transmitted for ratification by the Office of the President to the Senate, we already had an advanced copy of the draft! Some leaders of the Anti-Treaty Movement (ATM), including Loreta “Etta” Rosales and Lidy Nacpil-Alejandro, were also kept abreast in advance of the draft treaty's contents.

Armitage's Arrogance

Between 1990 and 1991 the US negotiating panel on the bases treaty extension was led by Assistant Secretary of the US Department of Defense Richard Armitage. According to Bengzon (1997, 121), Armitage seemed more used to bullying than negotiating with Third World allies. In his book, *A Matter of Honor*, Bengzon (ibid., 306) recalled that Armitage was so high-handed that he even tried to tell the Philippine government to remove Bengzon from the Philippine panel. The negotiations for the treaty clearly showed that the US operated on the assumption that what was good for Uncle Sam must definitely be good for all freedom-loving peoples of the world—and that it would not hesitate to resort to bullying the latter to achieve this objective.

The US thus had a very distorted view of the situation: it underestimated the capacity of Filipino officials to think and act according to their interests. In the year-long negotiations between the Philippine and US panels, Armitage's hard-line position produced a treaty so one-sidedly in favor of the US that even Philippine negotiators like Bengzon became ashamed of it. The US negotiating panel thought it got what it wanted: a ten-year bases extension

treaty plus the option of renewal after every ten years. The US would not even commit to put into the agreement any definite compensation or rental for the use of the US bases. In fact, the draft treaty submitted to the Senate for ratification did not provide for reciprocal rights and obligations for the two countries: the treaty was mainly about the rights of the United States over base lands and the obligations of the Philippines to respect and enforce those US rights.⁴

The lopsided treaty sealed the unexpected alliance between the senators who were pro-bases but who became anti-treaty and the core group of anti-bases senators led by Senator Tañada. In addition, Armitage, who was after all merely looking after his own country's strategic and military interests, so antagonized the Philippine senators with his brazen and brusque behavior that he became the unwitting ally of the anti-bases senators and the anti-bases movement, helping ensure the defeat of the proposed treaty.

Here it is interesting to point out the “dollars-and-cents” mindset of lawyer-senators Enrile and Maceda, who during the deliberations wanted an outright written assurance in the proposed treaty that the Philippines would be paid a specific amount for rental of Philippine territory to house the US bases. During the negotiations, all the US could provide were verbal assurances of “best efforts” for US military aid, which did not convince them.⁵

By being too greedy, the US lost precisely what it sought to gain: the retention of its military bases. The US suffered its loss at the hands of a struggling sovereign people and their Senate.

Lessons in Sovereignty

The real moving spirit behind the twelve senators was the broad and unified people's movement outside the Senate. In the end, it was the power of the people that ended the most visible symbols of our colonial legacy and the Cold War in the Philippines.

The ATM was forged in 1990 with the broadest unity possible among organized forces and individuals. As in the People Power Revolution, the ATM brought together organizations coming from various political and ideological persuasions including BISIG or Bukluran sa Ikauunlad ng Sosyalistang Isip at Gawa (Union to Advance Socialist Thought and Action); BAYAN or Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (New Nationalist Alliance); Volunteers for Popular Democracy; BANDILA or Bansang Nagkakaisa sa Diwa at Layunin

(Nation United in Spirit and Cause); Demokratikong Sosyalistang Kabataan (Democratic Socialist Youth); Confederation for Freedom and Democracy; national labor unions, like the National Federation of Labor Unions (NAFLU); KMU or Kilusang Mayo Uno (May 1st Movement); chapters of civic organizations like the Rotary Club; and local government units like the Quezon City Council, which had officially declared Quezon City a nuclear-weapons-free zone. ATM attracted into its ranks Senator Estrada and movie icon Nora Aunor, who spoke in its various symposia, marches, and rallies. ATM articulated its advocacy through prayer rallies for peace and sovereignty, mobile cultural groups, newspaper ads in national dailies, tit-for-tat TV and radio appearances to present the anti-treaty position, community and school fora, t-shirts, comics, mural paintings, “Betamax” documentaries, and posters. Senator Estrada’s participation in the ATM was very important because he produced the film *Sa Kuko ng Agila* (1989), released in July 1989, which was shown extensively nationwide in commercial movie houses and reproduced in Betamax. In this light, 16 September 1991 was a great political victory for the Philippine nationalist movement in an arena that is traditionally not its own. The Americans and their local pro-bases and US statehood advocates were beaten in their own turf.

However, there would always be Filipino officials who would act as lobbyists for the United States. In this case, there were senators and officials in the Aquino administration who initiated back-channeling talks with the US. In doing so, they were ready to violate the 1987 Constitution, particularly its prohibition against nuclear weapons; they even proposed strategies such as holding a national referendum that would try to remove this particular provision of the Constitution banning nuclear weapons or even holding a referendum that would try to reverse the Senate rejection of the bases treaty. With the ending of the Cold War, however, this pro-bases strategy of keeping the bases through such a desperate move would be seen as unpatriotic and against the global trend, and so it was not pushed through.

In hindsight, it was not only the US that underestimated the Philippine Senate. Even many in the anti-US bases movement underestimated the Senate’s capacity to finally reject the US bases treaty. They thought the senators would eventually cave in to US lobbying and pressure. During one of the intense debates that raged inside and outside the Senate before September 1991, Crispin Beltran, a well-known labor leader popular for his anti-bases views and the then leader of KMU, testified during the public

hearing of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, which I personally witnessed and took notes on. Everyone was surprised when Beltran made a public statement before the committee that, if the Senate would reject the proposed bases treaty, the KMU and its affiliates would impose on themselves a three-year moratorium on strikes to help in the post-bases adjustment process. Right after the hearing, one of the anti-bases senators approached Beltran and asked, “Are you serious to commit a three-year moratorium on strikes in exchange for the rejection of the bases treaty?”⁶ The labor leader replied that they did not really believe the US military bases and facilities could be removed under the present economic, social, and political dispensation.

I found after the Senate vote an underground document of the National Democratic Front (NDF-P 1989) with the title “Wage a Vigorous Anti-Bases and Anti-USI Propaganda and Agitation Campaign!” and dated 16 August 1989, which clearly suggested that it did not expect the Senate to reject the US bases, but could not lose the opportunity to use the event for “propaganda and agitation campaign” (ibid., 1). Given such perspective, the document did not mention any preparations for the post-bases transition and the process that would be required in the economic conversion of the land *after* the US bases would have been removed.

Continuing Challenges of Sovereignty

In his Declaration of Faith before he passed away in 1992, Lorenzo Tañada, who was close friend and colleague of Recto’s in their lonely struggle against the US bases in the 1950s, wrote: “The validity of our movement gives me courage; the certainty of ultimate victory gives me tenacity and perseverance; the genuine support of the people provides me with inspiration to continue to struggle” (Wigberto Tanada cited in Legislative Publications Staff, Philippine Senate 1991, 219).

Looking back again, we can say that 16 September 1991 was a day of triumph for the Filipino people as the Magnificent 12 senators defied US attempts to bully and bamboozle the Senate into accepting an onerous bases treaty. Many of the senators who rejected the proposed bases treaty believed that dismantling the US war machine on our territory — and having no foreign troops and bases on Philippine soil — was a fitting way of commemorating the centennial of Philippine independence in 1998. On that historic day, the Philippine Senate became the beacon of Philippine sovereignty. By its

action, it gave substance to the country's independence and taught Filipinos how to live out the spirit of sovereignty.

It is now twenty-five years since that historic day, which resulted in the US bases' pullout from Philippine territory. Since 1991 we have moved on to convert the former US bases in Subic, Clark, Camp John Hay (Baguio), and Wallace Air Station (La Union) into productive commercial enclaves to benefit the Philippine economy (Simbulan 2009).⁷

Admittedly, what we missed to do is to develop a credible national defense force for external security. Thus we have recoiled back to dependence on the US for our security. In particular, the 1999 Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), the 2003 Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA), and the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) have signaled a de facto return of US military presence in the Philippines, allowing the US to build military facilities on Philippine soil. The US has used these agreements to be involved in combat operations undertaken by the Armed Forces of the Philippines, such as during the Mamasapano operation in Cotabato in 2014 and the siege of Marawi City in 2017. The agreements have also legitimized the construction of military infrastructure within Philippine territory for the sole use of the US military.

The post-US bases years have seen the country gradually give full access to the US war machine in any part of Philippine territory through the VFA and the EDCA agreements.⁸ For *raisons d'être* ranging from antiterrorism to disaster relief and rehabilitation to the helplessness of the country in protecting Philippine interests in the South China Sea, US military forces are back in the country. Our constitutional ban on nuclear weapons is wantonly disregarded by US nuclear-armed and nuclear-powered naval vessels and warplanes to which we have given unconditional access and transit. Have we forgotten that, unless we stand up for our national, economic, political, and security interests as a sovereign nation, we cannot earn the respect of the world as we did on 16 September 1991?

The 2016 ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea at The Hague, which was a resounding victory for the Philippines, is both a challenge and an opportunity. It will test our maturity as a nation: if we handle the challenge well, we will achieve a situation where the Philippines enjoys good relations with China. At the same time, we also maintain our close friendship with the US, Japan, Russia, and other partners.

A genuinely independent foreign policy is one that swears friendship to all and enmity to none, a policy that gives primacy to our national interests independent of the conflict between Big Powers. It is a policy that, above all, refocuses our effort on the most urgent issue, that of accelerated economic growth to address mass poverty, on which all other sources of national strength depend. On the South China Sea issue, we must ask ourselves, what is our strategic goal? The ideal strategic goal is for the Philippines to enjoy the friendship of the US, China, and Japan and not to be a pawn in their inevitable conflicts.

Our vision for the Philippines is to become a respected, sovereign nation in the region, politically and economically. But if we play by the old rules of military alliances and confrontation, such as what prevailed during the US bases era, then the opportunity will be lost and no benefit in terms of genuine security or economic prosperity will be gained.

We have looked back to learn the hard lessons. Now we can only move forward. *Tulad ng isyu sa diktadurang Marcos, huwag na nating isubo pa ang isinuka na natin sa nakaraang panahon* (As with the Marcos dictatorship, let us not take in what we had already once thrown out in the past).

Maraming salamat, and more power to this conference commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Senate rejection of the US bases treaty.

Mabuhay!

Notes

This professorial address is a revised version of the keynote address originally delivered at the conference “Back to the Bases: Subic, Clark, and Philippines–US Relations 25 Years After the 1991 Philippine Senate Vote,” organized by Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints and held at the Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City, Philippines, on 16 September 2016.

- 1 From 1987 to 1995, the author served as Senior Consultant for Foreign Policy and National Defense at the Philippine Senate, where he helped design strategies and tactics for the historic Senate rejection of the bases treaty on 16 September 1991 as well as the post-bases alternative development and bases conversion program of the Philippine government.
- 2 Sen. Leticia Shahani proved to be an outstanding chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee as she steered its deliberations and respected the will of the majority toward nonconcurrence of the bases treaty, although she herself voted for its approval. Later, in 2015 former senator Shahani, in a speech before the gathering of the Pilipinong Nagkakaisa Para sa Soberanya (PINAS) of which she became a lead convenor, stated that she regretted having voted for the

retention of the US bases during the Senate deliberations in September 1991 because events had shown that removing the US bases from our soil was an important step for us to develop our own capabilities by not leaning on any foreign power for our national defense.

- 3 This paradigm shift in our foreign policy may have a similarity with the Bataan Nuclear Power Plant fiasco, which involved American corporate interests. In both military and economic spheres, the US government fully supported the Marcos martial law dictatorship from 1972 to 1986, exposing the self-serving US motives and projects in the country (cf. Kessler 1986).
- 4 For more on the background of the bases talks between the Philippines and the United States, see Castro-Guevara 1997. This book puts together all the official documents used and exchanged during the Philippines–US bases negotiations held in 1990–1991.
- 5 It was also likely that Senator Enrile personally wanted to defeat what Pres. Cory Aquino was advocating, in this instance, the approval of the treaty to extend the US bases in the country. Enrile, who was not anti-US bases when he was Marcos’s defense minister, wanted to embarrass President Aquino by showing that she could not even convince her staunchest allies in the Senate, where her allies formed the majority.
- 6 The author personally witnessed this conversation between Senator Tañada and Beltran as I happened to be walking and talking together with them as we headed toward the exit of the Senate session hall after the public hearing on 4 Sept. 1991.
- 7 During his reign as mayor of Olongapo City, Richard Gordon used to be one of the fiercest pro-bases advocates in the country. He mobilized the city’s base-dependent communities to go to Manila and rally for the retention of the bases. After the 1992 pullout of the US, he was appointed as the first administrator of the newly established Subic Bay Metropolitan Authority (SBMA) and was soon to preside over what he himself later called “the most successful bases conversion story at Subic” (Mydans 1996). Gordon’s role in the transformation of the former Subic naval base into an economic enclave for the country earned him national (and even international) prominence that later catapulted him to the Philippine Senate.
- 8 For more on the Visiting Forces Agreement, cf. Velasco 2015.

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