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# Special Committee on the Canada–People’s Republic of China Relationship

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Chair: Mr. Ken Hardie





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• (1835)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Ken Hardie (Fleetwood—Port Kells, Lib.)):**  
I'm calling the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 44 of the House of Commons Special Committee on the Canada-People's Republic of China Relationship.

Pursuant to the order of reference of May 16, 2022, the committee is meeting on its study of the Canada-People's Republic of China relations.

I just have a quick note. As we saw during question period today a feedback incident that was very problematic for our interpreters, we would ask you to keep these earphones as far away from the microphones as you can. Just put them on that little decal that's on the desk, and we should be fine. We don't need to go into more detail than that, I'm sure.

We are having today's meeting in a hybrid format. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

Those of you on Zoom, of course, have the interpretation choice at the bottom of your screen.

Members in the room, if you wish to speak, we have a speaking order, but if you do wish to intervene, please raise your hand. The clerk and I will do our best to make sure that everybody is recognized in as close to the order as possible.

We're meeting today on the matter of Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy.

I'd like to now welcome our witnesses for today. We have Her Excellency Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria, Ambassador of the Republic of the Philippines; Myca Magnolia Fischer, deputy head of mission; and Leo Marco Vidal, third secretary.

Madam Ambassador, you have up to five minutes to make your opening statement.

**Her Excellency Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria (Ambassador of the Republic of the Philippines):** Mr. Chair, vice-chairs and members of the committee, I wish you a pleasant evening. Thank you for the very kind invitation extended to us.

When I was a young officer in the Philippines' foreign service, among my first assignments was attending the “managing potential conflicts in the South China Sea” workshop series, hosted by In-

donesia and funded by CIDA. Early on in my career, I realized the important role played by Canada in the Indo-Pacific region.

This year, the Philippines and Canada are celebrating the 75th anniversary of our bilateral relations. Though there is much to celebrate, one cannot deny the fact that the geopolitical backdrop of our partnership is no longer the same. In her keynote address in Toronto seven months ago, Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly described in vivid terms the state of play on the world stage.

She said:

Our world is marked by geopolitical turbulence, unpredictability, and uncertainty. The tectonic plates of the world order are shifting beneath our feet. And the structures that are built upon them are fracturing.

As a country that experiences 150 earthquakes a year, the Philippines clearly understands the analogy. Indeed, the world is facing a watershed moment. In our region, recent patterns of aggression, militarization and emerging arms races threaten our lands of promise with an uncertain future.

Today, I wish to share with you seven realities we face in the Indo-Pacific that were articulated by President Marcos at the recent Shangri-La dialogue.

First, the dynamics of this region are such that its future is being shaped not by one or two powers but by many actors. Framing issues within the prism of power rivalries overlooks the actual situation on the ground and removes the agencies of middle powers, such as the Philippines and Canada.

Second, the strategic competition between China and the U.S. is permeating the evolving regional landscape. This rivalry is constraining the strategic choices of regional states. This contest is exacerbating flashpoints and has created new security dilemmas.

Third, we acknowledge the centrality of ASEAN in shaping the landscape of the Indo-Pacific region. It must hold its centre as the lead actor in the regional security architecture no matter how many minilaterals emerge. ASEAN has been—and, in the foreseeable future, will remain—the neutral ground where all the other powers of the world interact and engage regularly. The Philippines is slated to chair ASEAN in 2026.

Fourth, as geopolitics continue to permeate the global governance infrastructure, multilateralism must strive to facilitate global action in response to challenges such as public health emergencies, humanitarian crises and climate change. The Philippines has consistently endeavoured to make multilateralism more constructive, inclusive and equitable.

Fifth, the global commons will continue to be crucial to the security of all states in the region. Developing countries' access to the high seas and outer space as well as the peaceful uses of science and technologies are crucial to international development.

Sixth, climate change remains a deadly challenge for the region and the world. It is the first truly global threat.

Finally, advanced technologies may solve many of our old problems, but they are so powerful that they may also have the potential to disrupt our political and social orders.

These seven realities muddy the waters we have to navigate in our collective journey as a community of nations. It is in this light that we welcome Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy, which strongly demonstrates Canada's decision to be an active, engaged and reliable partner. When she visited Manila last year, Foreign Minister Joly conveyed to President Marcos that now is the time for ambition. In direct response, the President stated, "Then let's get to work."

We have received our marching orders, and already we have seen very promising developments. In the first half of this year alone, the Philippines welcomed two senior Canadian ministers—the Minister of Agriculture and the Minister of International Development—and two members of Parliament.

● (1840)

Canada's Indo-Pacific agriculture and agri-food office was inaugurated in Manila in February to strengthen partnerships, advance technical co-operation and support Canadian exporters in finding new business opportunities.

Canadian cybersecurity experts also went to the Philippines, while a Philippine nuclear trade mission to Canada was organized in March.

Last month, our foreign minister, Secretary Enrique Manalo, came to Canada and met with four federal ministers and many members of the House in pursuit of a robust, responsive and mutually beneficial partnership.

The Philippines is among Canada's closest and longest-standing friends in the Indo-Pacific region, the oldest partner among all of the ASEAN countries. Because of the one million Canadians with Filipino heritage in Canada, we are not just friends, we are family. Though we are on opposite sides of the Pacific Ocean, we are both making consequential investments in building a rules-based regional architecture that will guarantee the peace and stability of our shared region.

We are committed to co-operating with Canada and other like-minded countries in ensuring that the Indo-Pacific remains an engine of global growth and a hub for human flourishing.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, ladies and gentlemen. *Maraming salamat po.*

**The Chair:** Thank you, Your Excellency.

We'll note that we have MP Ellis for MP Lantsman today, MP Drouin for Mr. Oliphant, and MP Kelloway is online replacing MP Fragiskatos. There will be some other substitutions as the evening and hockey games loom, but we'll go to questions now.

Our first six minutes will go to Mr. Kmiec.

**Mr. Tom Kmiec (Calgary Shepard, CPC):** Thank you Chair.

Thank you, Ambassador, for being here today.

You started by talking about the military tensions in the region, so I was going to ask about your government's position on ASEAN. How satisfied are you, as a piece of regional multilateral architecture—to use a term you used several times in your opening statement—with the performance of ASEAN in reducing tensions?

I note that, in the last week, in the exclusive economic zone of the Philippines, there was a PRC coast guard vessel that blocked one of your resupply ships.

Can you explain to the committee your government's view of ASEAN and whether it has been a useful tool? Is it successful at reducing tensions? The look from here is that it's not succeeding in reducing tensions in the region.

● (1845)

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** The West Philippine Sea is an issue of extreme importance to the Philippines. We are on the front lines of efforts to assert the integrity of the UNCLOS as the constitution of the ocean.

We also have under our belt the legally binding award from the Permanent Court of Arbitration that we secured in 2016.

We are prepared to use all channels, all available, peaceful and diplomatic means, to arrive at a peaceful settlement, a peaceful resolution of the issues in the South China Sea, in the West Philippine Sea. ASEAN has remained one of the very important tools that we have. We continue to talk to China within the framework of ASEAN in discussing mechanisms to manage the tensions and move on constructively. ASEAN remains a very important platform for us.

**Mr. Tom Kmiec:** My second question is going to be on the belt and road initiative. I note that your government pulled out in 2023. Both of our governments are still members of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. The AIIB is a critical piece to funding BRI projects, but your government pulled out of the BRI in 2023.

I'd like to hear what the position of your government is on why there was that pull-out. Is your government considering pulling out of the AIIB as a second stage?

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** Because of the developments in many parts of the world, including in our region, and the imperatives of economic development, there has been a process of recalibrating some of our engagements. Everything continues to be under review, and we will recalibrate to our national interest, especially at this point, to the economic interest of the country. We will go with what is best for our people.

**Mr. Tom Kmiec:** In the Indo-Pacific strategy that Canada has produced, there are many countries that are singled out to have their own pull-out sections. Now, the Philippines is featured, but it's usually mentioned as part of other ongoing strategies. It's not its own pull-out section.

Do you think that's the place that the Philippines should have in the Indo-Pacific strategy that Canada has produced? Would you have liked to have seen more time spent making the Philippines a greater ally? If not, because you may be satisfied to work through ASEAN, which is an opportunity to work with your government, but, if so, what are the areas in which Canada could better co-operate with the Government of the Philippines?

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** As I said in my opening statement, we like to think that we are always special to Canada, especially because of the one million-strong diaspora that has bound us together as family.

While there is no special section for the Philippines in the Indo-Pacific strategy, Canada chose the Philippines as the site of the regional Indo-Pacific agriculture and agri-food hub, so we believe that Canada recognizes the importance the Philippines plays in the regional architecture.

**Mr. Tom Kmiec:** Going back beyond ASEAN, what are the other opportunities that you think Canada could use in regional organizations like APEC and others to further get involved in the region? The experience of your government would be useful to know as well. What has been successful? Which non-ASEAN, APEC-style organizations should we be trying to participate in?

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** That's a very important question.

We are very gratified to see that Canada is taking on a more active part in the region. We particularly look forward to Canada's chairmanship of the G7 next year, as we believe this is a very important platform for Canada to do more for the region and to forward initiatives and programs that will benefit people on both sides of the Pacific.

**Mr. Tom Kmiec:** It's interesting you mentioned the G7, but what about Canada's chairmanship of the CPTPP? Is that not of interest to your government, or is it that what happens at the G7 has a big-

ger impact in your region, and to your country specifically, than the CPTPP? Why is there that prioritization?

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** All of the regional institutions work symbiotically. We believe that each has a unique contribution that it brings to the table.

Many people are looking forward to Canada's chairmanship of the G7, as this is the organization where most of the major powers in the region are around the table, but that doesn't diminish in any way the importance of the CPTPP, especially in the region.

**Mr. Tom Kmiec:** What do you think are the opportunities for Canada that we have not looked at yet for trade specifically with the Philippines beyond, obviously, the very large diaspora and labour? There are a lot of people with important skills that we need in Canada. On the trade of goods and services, what do you think the opportunities are that the Canadian market would have to sell to the Philippines?

• (1850)

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** That's a very important question for our country.

One of the challenges we have now is in terms of energy. The Philippines is highly dependent on fuel- and oil-based generation, which make up about 60% of our energy mix. We just sent a mission here composed of people from, on our side, the Department of Energy, the Department of Science and Technology and the private sector to look at the potential for learning from Canada on nuclear energy.

We have also passed amendments to our Renewable Energy Act allowing foreign companies 100% participation in our renewable energy sector. These are sectors which Canadian businesses might want to look at.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Kmiec.

We'll now go to Ms. Yip for six minutes or less.

**Ms. Jean Yip (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.):** *Mabuhay.* I welcome to this committee all of our witnesses today and Ambassador Austria.

How does the Philippine government feel about Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy?

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** The Philippine government warmly welcomes the Indo-Pacific strategy. We look at Canada as an old friend and partner and we welcome the renewed engagement in the region.

**Ms. Jean Yip:** Is there any foreign interference by China in the Philippines?

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** Foreign interference is a problem that I believe is shared by most countries in the region. We are looking at working with like-minded states to make sure that we don't have this malign influence.

**Ms. Jean Yip:** Do you have something like a non-profit organization that helps your citizens navigate misinformation like Taiwan does?

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** We do not have a government agency doing that—

**Ms. Jean Yip:** What about non-governmental organizations?

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** There are many non-governmental agencies. They verify. They are very active in trying to sort out disinformation and bringing the right information.

There are also government agencies like the Philippine Information Agency, which is actively engaged in that.

**Ms. Jean Yip:** Has anybody ever been charged for foreign interference?

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** Not to my knowledge.

**Ms. Jean Yip:** You mentioned in your opening statement that ASEAN is neutral. Do you feel that ASEAN has been effective in its support for the Philippines?

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** ASEAN continues to provide a very good venue for us to continue discussions with other parties on even the most contentious issues.

Yes, ASEAN has extended assistance to the Philippines in the sense that it provides a forum for discussion, and discussion is always better.

**Ms. Jean Yip:** That's true.

You mentioned that you use ASEAN as a way to speak to China.

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** Yes, among other means. We exhaust all possible means. We speak to China bilaterally, we speak to China regionally and we speak to China in fora like the United Nations.

**Ms. Jean Yip:** Do you feel that the code of conduct has been working for ASEAN countries and also for the Philippines?

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** We are hopeful that we would have a more responsive, up-to-date and binding code of conduct.

**Ms. Jean Yip:** Canada has had some near collisions with China, whether it's in the air or by ship in the Taiwan Straits. The permanent court has issued a judgment saying rights to the resources or waters without lawful effect.... How does your government manage these near collisions?

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** We have exercised the greatest amount of patience and restraint in handling the disputes. We believe that we have the law on our side. Our claim to the West Philippine Sea is not something we imagined. It is something granted to us by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, affirmed by the judgment of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016. We know what is right, we know what is ours and we are prepared to defend this.

• (1855)

**Ms. Jean Yip:** Many ASEAN countries wish to keep both the U.S. and China on side. How does the Philippines navigate between U.S. and China relations?

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** Both countries are very important to the region. In the Philippines, for example, China is a very close neighbour and our biggest trading partner. The U.S., on the other hand, is our only treaty ally. We believe that both powers need to be engaged but need to be engaged constructively. We don't think that we have to choose sides.

**Ms. Jean Yip:** Filipino-Chinese Friendship Day was yesterday, June 9. How do you maintain people-to-people ties with China despite the maritime challenges?

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** We have always said that the issues in the West Philippine Sea are not the sum total of our relations with China. Many Filipinos have family ties to China, and we have very strong economic ties. We share a lot of culture. People-to-people ties have always been at the forefront of our very good and healthy relations, and the West Philippine Sea is a separate issue.

**Ms. Jean Yip:** You mentioned trade and how important it is between Canada and the Philippines. I noticed that much of the trade with Canada involves electronics or electrical supplies. Can you comment on that?

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** The Philippines is one of the biggest suppliers of ignition wiring sets to Canada. That is our main export to Canada, but the balance of trade has mostly been in Canada's favour. We are now working to try to expand the trade relations to make it more commensurate with the maturity of our relations.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Yip. That's your time.

Now we'll invite you to make sure you have your earphones on, unless you're as good at French as Monsieur Bergeron, which may be difficult.

If you're ready, Mr. Bergeron, the next six minutes are yours.

[Translation]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron (Montarville, BQ):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Your Excellency, thank you to you and your officials for being here this evening. As you probably—

[English]

We are experiencing technical difficulties. Please stand by.

**An hon. member:** Oh, oh!

**The Chair:** The clock has stopped while the referees review the play.

[Translation]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** I'll pick up where I left off.

Your Excellency, thank you again to you and your officials for being with us this evening. Your input will be extremely useful to this study on Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy.

As you probably noticed from my fellow members' questions, we find the Association of Southeast Nations, or ASEAN, somewhat of a fascinating forum. It's a bit strange to us, here, given that it brings together countries that some consider democracies and that, in some cases, are considered to be more authoritarian regimes. Some countries are on friendlier terms with the People's Republic of China, or PRC, while others have a more strained relationship with the PRC. Some countries are on friendlier terms with the United States, while others have a more strained relationship with the U.S. Nevertheless, it all holds together and the group is able to pursue its established mission.

My question is quite simple. It's one I've asked previous witnesses the committee has met with. Is there a red line that the PRC mustn't cross because it would undermine ASEAN's neutrality? Violations that come to mind are the instances of aggression against your coast guard and fishers in the South China Sea.

• (1900)

[English]

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** That is a very important and very delicate question. ASEAN has been around since 1967, and I've been fortunate to have been working on many ASEAN issues since I joined the department. We have seen ASEAN grow and mature as an organization and handle many sensitive topics. We like to believe that ASEAN has been effective in managing these issues, and we hope that we will not have to come to the day when red lines will be crossed. That's why we continue to work together. We continue to work intensively to make sure that issues are managed and resolved peacefully.

[Translation]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** I'd like to follow up on Ms. Yip's questions about the reaction, attitude and support of ASEAN and its members vis-à-vis the PRC's harassment manoeuvres targeting your ships. Just a few weeks ago, near the Spratly Islands, the Chinese Coast Guard blocked Filipino vessels trying to evacuate a sick member of the Filipino armed forces to get them to hospital.

When incidents like that occur, does ASEAN step in? If so, how? What support does ASEAN provide?

[English]

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** We were very fortunate. Thank you for your concern about that incident. That was very distressing to the Filipino people. We were very clear that it

was a medical evacuation that was taking place, and our boats were still harassed.

We have tried to, again, manage the situation to make sure it does not spill over and it does not become inordinately violent on both sides. ASEAN has helped us, again, by providing a forum to discuss these issues. ASEAN continues to negotiate a code of conduct to avoid these issues happening. We are not there yet, but we continue to move towards this goal.

[Translation]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** Thank you.

At the 34th ASEAN summit, in 2019, the grouping released its outlook on the Indo-Pacific. It took us a few more years to devise our Indo-Pacific strategy.

What similarities and what differences do you see between ASEAN's view of the Indo-Pacific region and Canada's?

[English]

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** Thank you for mentioning the "ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific". The two documents are actually very similar in the sense that they aspire to a multilateral arrangement where all countries bordering the Pacific, and in the region, are engaged constructively toward ensuring a rules-based order, because it is the same rules-based order that has underpinned the security, the stability and the growth. These two documents are both making very concrete investments toward this goal. The fact that Canada came up with its own strategy is very welcomed because other countries in the region like Korea and Japan also had similar documents.

[Translation]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** Thank you. Unfortunately, my time is up.

[English]

**The Chair:** Ms. McPherson, the next six minutes are yours.

**Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much, Your Excellency, for being here today.

Thank you to your team for joining you.

One of the concerns that I have with regard to the Indo-Pacific strategy is I don't think it prioritizes human rights enough. We've pushed for them to be more included in there, and we've long advocated for Canada to devote more attention to human rights in its diplomatic, trade and security relations with other countries.

Several human rights organizations have brought serious concerns about the human rights record of successive governments in the Philippines. In fact, both in Ottawa and in my riding of Edmonton Strathcona, I've had Filipinos raise concerns about human rights within the Philippines. These concerns include things like extrajudicial killings, indiscriminate aerial bombings of civilian areas and attacks of political activists, journalists, union members and indigenous people. I do see that under the current government the human rights record appears to be improving, that the government is now allowing United Nations human rights experts into the country.

Gently, I would just like to ask two questions. First, what steps is your government taking to address these concerns that have been raised by Filipinos about human rights?

Second, has your government agreed to co-operate with the International Criminal Court in its investigations into crimes against humanity, including during the drug war?

• (1905)

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** Thank you for the very important question.

The Philippines, like Canada, places a premium on the protection of human rights. Under this current administration, there have been very vigorous investigations into allegations of human rights, particularly the extrajudicial killings. Even our current parliament is also launching its own investigation.

Considering that we are doing our own internal investigation into all these issues, we believe it is not the appropriate time to involve other parties, since our own internal mechanisms are working, and they're working well.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Thank you.

The Canada Indo-Pacific strategy states that "Canada will also increase our feminist international assistance to address local development challenges, advance collective efforts toward the Sustainable Development Goals and continue actively engaging in defending human rights in the region, including women's rights." Of course, we have a feminist international assistance policy.

What should Canada's approach be? Considering that this is part of our Indo-Pacific strategy, what should Canada's approach be to supporting the protection of human rights, and particularly women's rights, in the Philippines and the entire Indo-Pacific region?

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** One very important topic that the Philippines has advocated on is the protection of the rights of temporary foreign workers. One tenth of the Philippine population live and work overseas, many of whom work in many countries as temporary foreign workers. The Philippine government has always been at the forefront of many efforts to ensure the protection of temporary foreign workers.

We are thus very appreciative of the work of the Senate committee that did a study on the rights of temporary foreign workers. We

just met with Senator Ratna Omidvar last week, and we have committed our assistance in providing whatever information they may need. She spoke to many Filipino temporary foreign workers in Canada.

It may also interest you to know that the Philippines is, I believe, the only country in the world that has both labour officers and welfare officers embedded in our embassies and consulates to make sure that the rights of our temporary foreign workers working abroad are adequately protected. Like they are in Canada, many of our temporary foreign workers are women in the caregiving sector.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** They're in the care sector. I would say that the United Nations has actually named Canada for having such a poor temporary workers program in that there is a high risk of forced labour or modern slavery. Of course, women who are in the care sector are some of the most vulnerable, certainly.

I have one other question for you with regard to Canada's focus in the Philippines. We do know that international development projects are part of the Indo-Pacific strategy. There has been some funding allocated for that. Can you talk about the types of international development projects that you think Canada should focus on with regard to engagement in the Philippines?

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** Thank you for that very important question. This is something that's very close to our hearts.

Canada has been a very important partner of the Philippines in terms of development co-operation, but I have observed that the impact of Canada's footprint in the region, especially in terms of development co-operation, which is essentially soft power, is not very evident. I referred to it once as an "invisible" footprint, because Canada engages in many different projects but on a small scale.

We have advocated with our interlocutors in Global Affairs Canada to consult with the national government so that we can work together on development projects that will make a bigger impact. For example, there are the ASEAN SEED scholarships. These scholarships are eight-month research programs. For example, 100 researchers in the Philippines may research 100 different subjects. We were saying that perhaps they could invest in, say, master's degree programs in issues that are important to us, such as marine scientific research, considering the degradation of our marine environment. If Canada could fund 10 scholars doing their master's or Ph.D. in marine scientific research, that would create a very huge and visible impact and be very clear support to Philippine national development goals.



• (1910)

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. McPherson.

We will now go to Mr. Chong for five minutes.

**Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Ambassador. It's good to see you here. Thank you for your comments.

I'd like to talk a bit about something you mentioned earlier in your testimony when you talked about energy co-operation. I understand that your natural gas field has largely depleted in the last several years and that you are looking for energy sources. You mentioned renewables, which is encouraging, as well as nuclear.

I'm wondering if you have a need to displace coal and oil in your energy-electricity mix.

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** The issue of energy is very important to the Philippines. One reason we do not have many manufacturing jobs in the Philippines is that energy is expensive. In terms of our current mix, it's 60% coal and oil-based solutions, with about 32% renewables. If we had to rely on our own renewable energy, we could only produce less than 30%.

We really need to partner with other countries, like Canada, with vast experience in clean renewable energy to be able to do that. We are committed to changing our energy mix and making it better by 2030, with another goalpost by 2050, but we need the help of our friends and allies to do that.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** I understand that the Government of the Philippines a number of years ago approved the Philippines' first ever liquefied natural gas facility. I believe that was commissioned a year ago. Is that correct?

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** Yes.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Are there any other proposals being brought forward by private sector companies that the Philippine government is considering approval for in terms of additional liquefied natural gas facilities?

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** Yes, there are proposals on the table. The Philippine government continues to encourage more investments in liquefied natural gas. As I mentioned earlier, we have a revised renewable energy act, which allows 100% foreign ownership in the renewable energy industry to encourage more foreign players to come in.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** First of all, I assume, from what I've read, that most of the energy purchased for your electricity system is purchased by private sector companies.

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** Yes.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Thank you for clarifying that.

Is most of that energy purchased on the open market or through long-term contracts negotiated by these private sector companies?

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** They normally purchase through the open market.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Well, as you know, Ambassador, a new liquefied natural gas facility, our first, will be coming online in, hopefully, a few short years off the coast of British Columbia. It will be able to transport Canadian liquefied natural gas to the Indo-Pacific region. I think there's much interest here in expanding that export market, which I think would benefit the Philippines. I also note that you mentioned that 60% of your electricity generation comes from oil and gas. Coal is also a part of that mix, I believe.

• (1915)

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** Yes.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** That has a substantially higher greenhouse gas emissions profile than does LNG. Therefore, I'm wondering if there's any interest by the Philippine government in working more closely with the Government of Canada, not just on nuclear and renewables but also on the export of Canadian liquefied natural gas.

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** There is very clear interest in all sources of energy that will help us improve our energy mix. The initial issue was the difficulty in transporting LNG, but now that Japan has committed to buying a huge chunk, we are closely watching, because if it can get to Japan, then there's a very clear possibility that there's an economic sense for it to get to the Philippines. Therefore, we're watching those developments very closely.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** I assume you're referring to the Japanese government's direction to Mitsubishi to secure long-term LNG contracts for Japan's future economic growth.

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** Yes.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Thank you. That's very helpful.

Thank you very much, Ambassador, for your testimony.

**The Chair:** The next five minutes will be split between Mr. Erskine-Smith and Mr. Drouin.

**Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith (Beaches—East York, Lib.):** Ambassador, I appreciate the time. I have two questions for you. First, this is a study in the context of the Canada-China committee. What do you think is missing from the Indo-Pacific strategy or how do you think we can extend the relationship between Canada and the Philippines to address one of the goals in the Indo-Pacific strategy, which is to counter the influence of China in the region?

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** We believe the Indo-Pacific strategy is a very good first step. What people are watching in the region is how this strategy will be operationalized. Canada has taken very good first steps, like the establishment of the appropriate mechanisms and the regional agriculture and agri-food hub. We are looking at how the strategy will translate into concrete projects and initiatives that will make Canada's presence in the region felt and better appreciated.

**Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith:** I appreciate that.

My last question is more human rights-related. I find it quite interesting that you have a situation in which Maria Ressa won the Nobel Prize. You have a situation in which she was the commencement speaker at Harvard just a month ago, and yet, while she was acquitted of some charges in the fall, I understand that some charges remain outstanding. Now, it was under the previous regime that she was targeted, I would say, to undermine journalistic integrity.

What is the state of play there, and what is the government's view of Maria Ressa's journalism?

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** The fact that she was acquitted of some of the charges against her shows that the justice system works. It takes time sometimes, but the justice system is functioning. It gives a sense of stability, and it gives a sense of structure. We're closely watching the progress of the case, which is now under the judicial arm of our government.

**Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Mr. Drouin, it's over to you.

**Mr. Francis Drouin (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.):** Thank you.

Thank you, Madam Ambassador, for testifying before this committee.

You've mentioned something important, which is dear to my heart, and that is the Indo-Pacific strategy but also, more importantly, the fact that for the first time we have an agri-food hub office in Manila. In Canada, we're lucky. We have masses of land and we're 40 million people. You have almost 120 million people but 300,000 square kilometres of land mass.

Therefore, obviously, when we talk about security, feeding your population is important. I just want you to talk about what it meant to you when the minister was there in February announcing the official opening of the office and, more importantly, that Canadian farmers are now destined to feed part of your population, how keeping that human-to-human relationship is important and, more importantly, how food is always an important factor in discussing and building relationships.

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, for that very important question and for the important contribution that Canada has brought to the Philippines in terms of our food security.

Food security is a very big priority. When Minister MacAulay was in Manila, I had the privilege of being in Manila at the same time.

There was a personal side to the story. One NGO in the Philippines buys granola seed potato seeds from P.E.I., brings them to the Philippines and distributes it to at least five indigenous communities in the Philippines. Through that seed, the productivity of the potato farmers in those five areas has almost doubled. On the occasion of Minister MacAulay's visit, about eight or ten of the farmers made the six-hour drive from their mountain communities to present Minister MacAulay with their harvest.

Having witnessed that, it was a very touching reminder of the assistance that Canada has provided and how working together.... The potential of the bilateral relations to improve lives of people on the ground is very important to us. Working together and leveraging the bilateral relations, we can translate that to a better future for many people.

That, to my mind, is a golden moment for Philippine-Canada relations.

● (1920)

**Mr. Francis Drouin:** Often in trades, some countries—without naming them—will unilaterally break off trade or impose non-trade barriers because of X, Y or Z.

Do you believe that Canada would ever do that to the Philippines or do we have that strengthened tie between the Philippines and Canada, specifically when we talk about exporting food to your country?

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** Canada and the Philippines have a long history of sharing values, including the rule of law and democracy. I believe that if there was any dispute between the Philippines and Canada, we could resolve it peacefully without resorting to economic measures.

**Mr. Francis Drouin:** Thank you so much.

**The Chair:** We'll now go to Mr. Bergeron for two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In early May, the defence chiefs from the Philippines, Japan, the U.S. and Australia met for their second joint meeting in Hawaii. The defence chiefs from the four nations held their first meeting in Singapore, on June 3, 2023. At the meeting, the defence chiefs reiterated their shared vision for a free, open, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region. They expressed serious concern over the situation in the East China Sea and South China Sea. They strongly objected to the dangerous use of coast guard and maritime militia vessels in the South China Sea.

As you will recall, in September 2023, two Royal Canadian Navy vessels participated in a joint naval exercise with the navy of the Philippines in the South China Sea, as part of Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy.

Do you think every country that shares that vision for the Indo-Pacific region should take part in those defence chief meetings?

I have a follow-up question. Why do you think Canada is not part of those meetings yet?

[English]

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** The Philippines has always been supportive of Canada's more intense engagement in the region.

In certain mechanisms, for example, in the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Plus, there are administrative challenges, but we continue to discuss with our partners—both in ASEAN and our bilateral partners—how we can engage more partners.

We can involve more partners in these discussions and activities because we believe there are many more countries that have an equal stake in the issues that we are discussing.

[Translation]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** In your opening remarks, you referred to the perception of Canada based on a specific program or project. How does the Philippines view Canada's military contribution, participation or presence in Pacific waters?

[English]

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** Let me refer to a survey done very recently among ASEAN countries. It asked them to rank the importance of the dialogue relations between ASEAN and our dialogue partners. In the survey, Canada, unfortunately, came out almost last...it was New Zealand...in most countries except the Philippines. In the Philippines, Canada was the sixth or seventh most important among our dialogue partners.

• (1925)

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** How do you explain that?

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** We are more than friends. We are family.

**The Chair:** That's very good.

Thank you.

Ms. McPherson, you have two and a half minutes.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I almost wish we could stop on the “we are family”. It feels like a good place to hang our hats....

I do want to comment on something you had said in your opening statement as well. You had talked about multilateralism and how important that was going forward, and how the rules-based order was something that the Philippine government strongly believes in. You talked about trying to work to make it more constructive and more equitable.

How would you see the Filipino government playing a role in that, and how could Canada help in that manner?

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** For one, we have made a very big investment in ensuring the rule of law is upheld. For example, in our dispute over the West Philippine Sea, we

brought it at great cost, at great time and at great reputational cost to the Permanent Court of Arbitration, just to drive home the point that right is might. We have the rule of law to fall back on when the world seems to be in flames.

Canada is a very natural partner in that effort, so we appreciate very much Canada's consistent statements of support for the arbitral decision and for speaking out in situations when the Philippines is being harassed in the West Philippine Sea. Canada's active and consistent stand in support of the Philippines and the rule of law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, is a very powerful reminder that Canada is a very important player in the Pacific region.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Thank you very much.

As someone who represents a large Filipino population, I know in Alberta there are a number of Filipino members, people who are living in that province, who thank you very much for being here this evening.

That's all from me, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. McPherson, and I echo that. We have a very large, very active Filipino community. Narima Dela Cruz is probably known to you, and she is certainly an all-star member of our community.

I'll take the opportunity to ask one question.

With respect to Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy, how do you see Canada's relationship with China and the Philippines' relationship with China? Are they on an equal basis? As well, does the Philippines' involvement with Canada through the Indo-Pacific strategy complicate your relationship with China?

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** Thank you. That's an important and interesting question.

Both Canada and the Philippines have their particular set of challenges in dealing with China, and we have both handled it differently in our own way, but I believe effectively.

The more voices speaking for the rule of law, the better to secure and ensure the peace and stability of our region. If we speak with one voice against issues that are common to us, like defending the rule of law, being fair in dealing with other countries, that's a very important signal. The relations between Canada and the Philippines in the context of the Indo-Pacific strategy, I believe, bolster both our positions in dealing with other powers.

**The Chair:** We've heard from other people, especially the ASEAN representatives, who visited us a while back, that one thing that Canada should be considering is an ongoing relationship, given that those are built over a long period of time. Would the Philippines share that opinion?

**H.E. Maria Andrelita Sacramento Austria:** We welcome a more consistent, engaged and reliable partner, which we see Canada as.

There's the fact that you are now putting institutions in the region—for example, in the Philippines, the regional agri-food office. EDC is opening more offices, and FinDev will soon be opening more offices. You have appointed a special envoy for the Indo-Pacific. There's a special trade representative on the ground. These are all signs to us that Canada is engaging, and it will be a long-term engagement that's very welcome.

• (1930)

**The Chair:** Your Excellency, thank you very much for your visit with us tonight.

We will now pause because we are going to go and do some committee business.

**Mr. Tom Kmiec:** I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I'm sorry, but I have it that we're going until 8 p.m. with the ambassador. I'm wondering if the ambassador has that extra 30 minutes.

**The Chair:** No. The ambassador was very kind, actually, to shift her time to accommodate an earlier start to this.

**Mr. Tom Kmiec:** Okay. I appreciate that. It's a shame. I tried.

**The Chair:** I wish we could talk her into it, to be honest with you, Mr. Kmiec.

Thank you.

*[Proceedings continue in camera]*

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