

[00:17] Asst. Prof. Aaron Mallari (Host): Good day to everyone who are tuned in here on DZUP 1602, and welcome to the first episode of the newest season of The Katipunan Dialogue Podcast – where we hold conversations about national security and foreign policy. I am back, Aaron Mallari of the UP Diliman Department of Political Science, as your host for this season.

[00:41] The Katipunan Dialogue Podcast is brought to you by the Strategic Studies Program of the UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies or UP CIDS. UP CIDS is the policy research unit of the University of the Philippines, and the Strategic Studies is one of its research programs.

[01:01] In the fifth season of the Katipunan Dialogue Podcast, we will once again discuss issues related to national security, international relations, and foreign policy.

[01:14] In our first episode, we will talk about the changing foreign policies of the United States under the second Trump administration.

[01:25] Less than 100 days in office, Trump shocked the whole world with his policies on raising U.S. tariffs on imported products. China, Mexico, and Canada received the largest increases. There was also a suspension of funding and projects under USAID, withdrawal from the World Health Organization and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

[01:52] There were also negotiations with Russia to end the turmoil in Ukraine. And finally, we see a push for other allied countries of the United States to spend more on their military capacity.

[02:09] In the Philippines, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. stood firm that Filipinos should not worry because of the U.S. pronouncement that it maintains its ironclad commitment to the country.

[02:23] In light of the intensifying rivalry between the U.S. and China, what are the implications of Trump's foreign policy on the so-called changing world order? Does this help maintain the U.S.' around the world? Or is it doing the other thing and the other way around?

[02:43] Today, we are joined by Assistant Professor Edcel John Ibarra from the UP Diliman Department of Political Science to share his insights on our topic for this episode.

[02:56] Assistant Professor Ibarra is a distinguished scholar in the field of strategic studies. He is the managing editor of the Philippine Political Science Journal and he once served as the officer in charge of the Strategic, Territorial, and Maritime Issues section of the Center for International Relations and Strategic Studies (CIRSS) ng Foreign Service Institute, the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs' think tank.

[03:23] Welcome to Katipunan Dialogue Podcast, Edcel.

[03:26] Asst. Professor Ibarra (Guest): Hello, good day to you, Aaron. Thank you very much for inviting me.

[03:31] Host: Before we delve into the changes Trump is implementing in terms of the U.S.' diplomatic approach, it might also be important to discuss where these changes are coming from or what their underlying reasons are. So for our first question, how would you describe the current situation in the United States, at least domestically, and to some degree internationally, and how do these affect the United States' relations with other countries?

[04:13] Okay, let's focus on the domestic factors first, right. So according to the surveys released before and after the election, re-election, of Donald Trump, there are, let's say, three issues that are prevalent in their society that concern Americans.

[04:36] First here, immigration. The American's perception is that there are too many illegal migrants.

[04:44] Secondly, surveys also mention that Americans are concerned about crime. And this has an intersection with immigration as well. In America, the perception is that crime rates are, crimes have been increasing. Although if you look at the real data, crime rates are relatively stable. But people are perceiving that crime has increased and that they have ascribed part of that perceived increase in crime to the rise of illegal migrants. So, they blame the illegal migrants for the alleged increase in crime among them.

[05:23] Third are economic problems. Chief among these is inflation, the rise in prices. Another problem that has been a core concern among Americans ever since is the budget deficit or the excessively large spending of their government relative to the revenues of their government. And after the COVID pandemic especially, there has been a rise in homelessness in the U.S.

[05:53] But I think it's important to highlight, at this point, that these are perceived economic problems. If you look at the hard data, ironically, the economy of the United States is quite strong for an advanced industrial country. But even though, for example, there is GDP growth experienced in 2024, people are not perceiving it as such, in part because there's this real problem of falling wages or falling real wages. Their wages are increasing, but because of the high prices, people are not feeling it. So, there's this disconnect between the real performance of the economy and their perception that the economy is not functioning.

[06:41] In all these three problems, economics, crime, immigration, only Donald Trump and the Republican Party have been able to present themselves as having the solution. So, for example, in economic problems, regarding the budget deficit, that has long been the platform of the Republican Party, that the government should spend less so that the deficit is not that huge. But Trump also campaigned on lowering prices and he did so by promising tariffs. Those things we see him doing now. And most dramatically, Trump has presented himself as the solution to the

immigration crisis. Because of those enduring factors, these factors were already present even during the Biden administration, but because of these enduring factors among American voters, they decided to re-elect Trump.

[07:38] Host: Do you see any difference between Trump 2.0 and Trump's first term?

[07:45] Guest: The main difference is that Trump is bolder now. I think in part because he knows how it works. He has already been a president. The second part of it is that he has been persecuted politically, legally by many of his enemies. And so, he is now bolder to do things, he knows what he needs to do, he knows whom to target.

[08:13] The description of Trump's first 100 days has been that Trump is in a blitzkrieg, signing executive orders left and right. Ironically, even though the Republicans gained a trifecta, meaning they have control of both houses of Congress and the presidency, President Trump is not relying on Republicans in Congress. He's doing things on his own, like a proper strongman, if you want to put it that way, and doing things fast because, again, he knows what to do already and he knows whom to target, unfortunately.

[08:55] Host: And immigrants are one of them.

[08:57] Guest: Yes.

[08:58] Host: So, this kind of posturing, if we can call it Trump's posturing, and the policies he signed during his first 100 days, many say that the U.S. seems to deviate from the world order that it helped in creating, especially in the post-World War II period. So, we see that he is becoming more isolationist. Then there are those who say that Trump's foreign policy is very transactional. What do you think will this affect the U.S.? Do you agree that the U.S. under Trump is dismantling the world order that it helped create?

[09:47] Guest: Yeah. First, I agree that Trump is doing this. If we look at the history of U.S. foreign policy, it has always swung between interventionism/internationalism and isolationism. There are instances in American history where they really favored an isolationist foreign policy.

[10:09] Host: Monroe Doctrine.

[10:09] Guest: Yes, or more interventionist foreign policies. And Trump, to a certain degree, fits that pattern of the U.S. being isolationist at one point in time and then being interventionist, internationalist in another. But the difference, I think, with Trump is, as you mentioned, his transactionalism.

[10:33] When we say transactionalism, what matters more for Trump is scoring points, however he defines it. The danger in that is that, the priority is scoring points even to the detriment of values.

[10:49] So even though, for example, the U.S. has been isolationist or interventionist, democracy promotion has been a pillar of its democracy and democracy promotion have been pillars of its foreign policy. But under Trump, because he's transactional, that's gone.

[11:07] Even though the United States was isolationist at certain periods in time, they did support international institutions and as you mentioned, they created the milieu of international organizations that we have right now. They are partly responsible for it, in part because they believed in multilateralism. But even that is under threat under Trump because he does not believe in the value of internationalism.

[11:37] There is an economic dimension to the post-World War II order created by the U.S. And that economic dimension is favorable to what we call neoliberal policies.

[11:45] Host: Bretton Woods institutions.

[11:47] Guest: Yes, so, privatization, free trade, minimal government intervention, etc. Unfortunately, under Trump, even that economic dimension is under threat.

[11:59] Trump seems to be, in summary, Trump seems to be undoing what the United States has done. And some have said that the U.S. has depended, that the U.S.'s hegemonic power has depended on these post-World War II institutions. And so therefore, Trump is also undermining the basis or the foundations of U.S. power.

[12:24] Host: I think we can dovetail my next question with what you mentioned about the neoliberal world order. The impact was enormous, especially in the new cycle, with Trump's policy of imposing higher tariffs. For you, what will be the impact internationally of this kind of U.S.' approach, creating such tensions? Then there's that context that the U.S. hegemony is challenged, can we consider this the falling 1of the U.S.? Is this it? Is this the beginning of it all?

[13:08] Guest: So, first of all, I'm not an economist, so I should preface my answer by saying that I'm not very well versed about how these things work. But I'd like to begin by saying that one of the biggest ironies of the tariff thing is that, in my opinion, it's impossible for you to become a superpower without incurring trade deficits. Meaning, as a superpower, you really have to import more than you export. Because you need to keep spending money—not exports, but money—which will eventually circulate and become things that you import back to your country. So, that's one.

[14:01] I think, therefore, that the United States' economic influence in many countries will wane because of this. Because this means that if they want U.S. companies to manufacture in the United States, that means they don't want investment to be foreign, to be made in foreign lands. They want investment back to the U.S. So that means that FDI is not going to be an economic leverage anymore by the U.S. And for developing economies such as the Philippines

and many countries in Southeast Asia, foreign direct investment is such a huge incentive. That's a huge influence on the Southeast Asian countries. I think, in the long run, this is not tenable.

[14:52] Host: He's already backtracking.

[14:57] Guest: Yeah, yeah. That's right, we need to see if Trump really does insist on these tariffs, I would agree with you that we can mark this as the day that the United States has begun to decline. But perhaps it's too early to tell because Trump might backtrack.

[15:17] And the second thing is that I'm not so sure if other countries are prepared to undertake the role of global leadership. Love or hate the United States, there's another aspect of why it's impossible for you to become a superpower without incurring deficits. Because you have to provide for public goods. You have to send aid to countries. Nobody else would do it. If you are a superpower, you are the only country that could do it. And even other countries, China is not taking on global leadership roles. The European Union is not. They are not prepared to spend the way the United States has spent in preserving or in delivering these global public goods, so to speak. So, if you really want to become a superpower, you have to pay, and America does not want to pay right now. And that I think will hurt its chances in maintaining its superpower status. In the long run, I think that's the effect. But since Trump is erratic, we're not sure, maybe after listening to this podcast, those tariffs are gone. He will do something different.

[16:29] Host: The issues will be different. That's true. That's true.

[16:30] Guest: So, we don't know. But if this continues, I would agree that this would mark the beginning of the decline of U.S. power.

[16:37] Host: If he insists?

[16:38] Guest: If he insists.

[16:40] Host: So, now, let's go to the Philippines. We all know that we are an ally of the United States. We have a standing treaty with them, the Mutual Defense Treaty. But, didn't we also have a 17% tariff increase on our end? He also imposed something like that. So, especially with our, of course, strategic concerns in the region, with our disputes with China and then, of course, many other economic and political concerns that we have. What do you think will be the effect of this to the Philippines? This kind of erratic behavior from Trump, how should we respond?

[17:21] Guest: For me, the proper policies, I think, is not to further irritate him. Because, it's different if you incur his ire, who knows what might happen, he's not going to base his policy on some rational decision-making model. Whatever he decides to impose on us, he might just suddenly impose it.

[17:43] This is why, to a certain degree, I agree with the policy of the current administration with regard to the tariffs. They downplayed the tariffs. I think that's the correct strategy for now. This is, it poses like a collective action problem because I think it's good to fight back against these tariffs if you have a, if you get other countries on board, in fighting back.

[18:11] Host: But no one wants to do it. At least no one wants to take the lead role like, 'oh, let's fight back.' Nobody.

[18:17] Guest: Yeah. So, China is taking that role, but other countries are not supporting it, joining it.

[18:23] ASEAN, here in Southeast Asia, all countries in Southeast Asia have agreed not to retaliate.

[18:30] Host: Thailand is negotiating.

[18:32] Guest: Yeah. Thailand is negotiating. We are also going to negotiate, if we are not already starting it. So, they downplayed it. To be honest, in a sense, I was quite surprised that we were imposed a higher tariff. But come to think of it, if you look into the bigger picture, the government spokesperson kind of makes sense. She said, we didn't receive the highest tariff. Which is true. That's in part because of our economic inefficiency. We are in this situation in part because we didn't get the gains during the first Trump administration. So, remember, the first Trump administration launched a trade war against China and American companies in China, they called it 'friend-shoring.' So, they moved to countries that are friendly to America, they moved to Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, not the Philippines. Because even though the Philippines is a treaty ally of the United States, the Philippines does not have a friendly investment, investment climate.

[19:46] Meaning our economy was not attractive enough for and competitive enough for these foreign companies to 'friend-shore' to the Philippines. So, because we missed that, it made us resilient, so to speak, in this round of tariffs.

[20:03] That's why the tariff imposed on us is relatively low because we didn't benefit from the first trade war. Compare the situation with Vietnam, for example. Many American companies moved to Vietnam, and because they moved to Vietnam, they manufactured there. Vietnam now has tons of imports, tons of exports to America. And that means that the U.S. has a huge trade deficit with Vietnam. That's why Vietnam is imposed, I think, about or more than 50%. So, because they benefited from the first trade war, that's what they got, so to speak.

[20:38] Host: They are in the zone where they can be targeted.

[20:42] Guest: But because our economy is mediocre, it has made us, ironically, more resilient this time around.

[20:52] In terms of security cooperation though, I think our relationship with the United States will prosper under, not prosper, but be okay under the second Trump administration. I think this because we had a good experience during the first Trump administration. If we are panicking now, we panicked back then too, during the first Trump administration. But that panic has been felt before and the Philippines prepared for the worst. But the Philippines actually got the best outcome, I think it did, under the first Trump administration.

[21:28] And those outcomes include, for the first time, guarantees under the Mutual Defense Treaty that the Philippines will be protected by the United States in the South China Sea. We've been asking for that for a long time.

[21:44] Host: That statement, that definitive guarantee.

[21:47] Guest: Yeah. That the mutual defense treaty applies to the South China Sea. We've been asking for that ever since, from George W. Bush, from Obama. They never gave it. Only Trump gave it to the Philippines. And Trump went further. Trump also said that paramilitary attacks or attacks coming from maritime militia vessels, which is what is the majority of Chinese vessels in the area are. So, Trump said, even paramilitary attacks are covered by the Mutual Defense Treaty. And most radical, I think, is that the United States abandoned its position on neutrality on the maritime aspect.

[22:28] On the territorial aspect of the South China Sea disputes, the United States is still saying that we take no position on whoever owns whichever what feature in the Spratly Islands or Paracels or whatnot.

[22:46] But, they said that UNCLOS should apply in the South China Sea. So, because of that position, it allowed the United States to eventually explicitly endorse the South China Sea Arbitration Award, which is like a huge thing for our government. Plus, there were freedom of navigation operations, a lot of which happened during Trump compared to the eight years of Obama, and many more security and military aid. So, because of that experience during the first Trump administration, I think that that's going to continue.

[23:23] A big caveat here is that I think there is a bifurcation of U.S. foreign policy. What this means is that I think the United States now is carrying a different foreign policy towards Europe and the "West," than towards the Pacific. So now there are two, it's unfair to compare what's happening, what Trump is doing to Europe and infer from that the U.S. foreign policy in the Pacific. Because I think they're different now. They're confronting Europe, "spend more on your militaries before the United States will help you."

[24:07] But in this part of the world, it's different. The messaging is different. The messaging of the United States is that in Philippines and Taiwan specifically, we will help you. We will help you counter the threat posed by China.

[24:21] Even in the Pacific though, there is a little bit of bifurcation within the bifurcation in the sense that the treatment apparently towards Japan and South Korea and Australia is different from the treatment towards the Philippines and Taiwan. And I think it's a recognition that the Philippines needs help compared to these countries which can pay for their own defenses. It's a recognition by the United States that we still need help. And so, I think because of that recognition, we're probably going to be okay.

[24:54] Host: Maybe to close this conversation that we have; I want to pick your brain a little bit. You mentioned earlier that it's highly unlikely for the U.S. to give up its security efforts here in the Philippines, the benefits we get from them. Hypothetically, if Trump ever decides to do that, what if all of a sudden, he said he would push isolationism to its extreme, that we are pulling out our bases in the Philippines, we recall everything, we'll just be concerned about our own borders, we build walls around the country. If that's how he positions himself, how would that impact us? And how should we respond, especially with our geopolitical concerns?

[25:46] Guest: Well, to be fair to the Philippines, I think we're going to be fine.

[25:51] Host: Still?

[25:52] Guest: Still. In part because we're not relying on the United States too much anymore. I say this because the government in recent years has really become serious in undertaking defense modernization. And if you look at where the Philippines procures its defense modernization assets, some of it yes, are from the United States, but some of the big players are South Korea, for instance. For the ships and aircraft, we buy from South Korea. For the missiles, we're buying from India. So, we are not that reliant defensively in our defense modernization effort on the United States. It's good that the United States is helping us modernize our own military, but if you look at the breakdown of where we actually buy, it's not just in the U.S.

[26:46] The other aspect of it is that since 2014, I think there has been a market shift in our strategic policy, in the Philippine strategic policy. And that market shift is in trying to reduce our security reliance in the United States. So, I'm not sure if it's 2014 or 2015, but in 2014 or 2015, for the first time ever, we signed a strategic partnership with Japan. A strategic partnership is like an alliance-like. Now, the word "alliance" is being thrown around lightly. In international relations, the only true alliance is one that you have a treaty with, a collective defense treaty with.

But the next level to that is strategic partnership. Short of an alliance, short of a formal...

[27:38] Host: Without the full commitment.

[27:40] Guest: Yeah, short of a formal full commitment, a strategic partnership is like an informal commitment that we're going to help you and we're going to help defend you, and we

did that for the first time ever with Japan. And since then, we have been expanding our strategic partnerships. So, it's not just Japan for now, we also signed strategic partnership agreements with Vietnam, with Australia, and with South Korea. And I think there are more in the way.

[28:09] And even if we look, for example, the Visiting Forces Agreement, we always think Visiting Forces Agreement as 'ah, U.S.' But the more technical term for Visiting Forces Agreements in general is Status of Forces Agreements. We have Status of Forces Agreements with other countries. In mid-2000s, we signed one with Australia. Very recently, we have one with Japan, the Reciprocal Access Agreement, which is also a status of forces or visiting forces agreement, and they say we have also or are also finishing negotiations for one with New Zealand and Canada, and one is on the way with France.

[28:56] So, all of these to me indicate that we're reducing our security reliance on the United States. If the United States tries to do that, like the full-blown isolationism, to be fair to our government...

[29:10] Host: They are preparing for it.

[29:12] Guest: Yeah, we have been resilient. What an optimistic take. But this is what we've been doing. We are not without agency in world affairs.

[29:22] Host: I think that's a very good way to end this conversation. We are not without agency in what is happening around us.

[29:27] So, thank you very much, Assistant Professor Edcel Ibarra from the UP Diliman Department of Political Science for sharing your insights in today's episode.

[29:40] So, what a way to start our season. In the face of an undeniable changing world order, it is becoming a greater challenge for the Philippines to strengthen our own capacity to defend our national interest and promote the welfare of the Filipino people.

[30:00] So, thank you very much to everyone who listened to our episode today, and watched today's first episode of the new season of the Katipunan Dialogue Podcast.

[30:12] Listen to the previous episodes and seasons of the Katipunan Dialogue Podcast on our Spotify account, The Katipunan Dialogue Podcast. For more updates about other projects of the Strategic Studies Program and the UP CIDS, you may visit of course our website, [cids.up.edu.ph](http://cids.up.edu.ph)

[30:32] We also invite you to like and follow the official Facebook page of UP CIDS and of course DZUP for episodes and upcoming discussions here on our podcast.

[30:44] Once again, I am Aaron Mallari, your host for this podcast, and thank you for being with us today. Join us again in the upcoming episodes of the Katipunan Dialogue Podcast, where we hold conversations about national security and foreign policy, only here on DZUP 1602. Kasali

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