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The Philippines

Overview and Recent Developments

The United States and the Republic of the Philippines maintain a deep relationship that includes a bilateral security alliance, extensive military cooperation, close people-to-people ties, and many shared strategic and economic interests. U.S. administration of the Philippines as a colonial territory (1898-1946), which followed 300 years of Spanish rule, shaped the relationship. Situated east of the South China Sea and south of Taiwan, the Philippines has long played an important role in U.S. Asia policy as a close security and counterterrorism partner. The 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) requires the two countries to help defend each other against external armed attack. The Biden Administration made revitalizing U.S. alliances in Asia—including with the Philippines—a key pillar of its Indo-Pacific Strategy. Rising tensions between the Philippines and the People's Republic of China (PRC) over maritime claims are a potential regional flashpoint

The United States is the Philippines' third-largest trading partner, after China and Japan, and its largest export market. The Philippines is one of 14 members of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework Initiative, which the Administration launched in May 2022.

Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. was elected president of the Philippines in 2022. Marcos's father, Ferdinand Marcos Sr., ruled the country from 1965 to 1986, including through martial law from 1972 until he was ousted by the 1986 People Power Revolution. Sara Duterte-Carpio, daughter of former President Rodrigo Duterte (in office 2016-2022), won the vice presidency. The Philippine constitution limits both the president and vice president, who are elected on separate tickets, to one six-year term. In 2024, Duterte-Carpio resigned from the Marcos cabinet, reflecting growing strains in their relationship. (The move does not affect her status as Vice-President.)

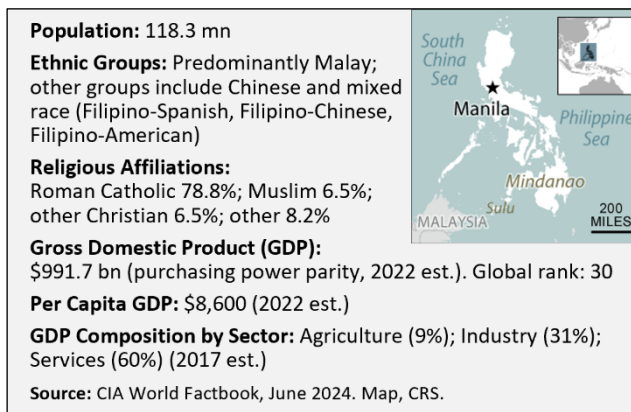
During President Marcos's visit to Washington, DC, in May 2023, the two allies established new Bilateral Defense Guidelines, which aim to help modernize Philippine defense capabilities, deepen interoperability, enhance bilateral planning and information-sharing, and combat transnational and nonconventional threats. The guidelines appear to reinforce treaty obligations, stating that an armed attack “anywhere in the South China Sea,” on either party's “armed forces—which includes both nations' Coast Guards—aircraft, or public vessels, would invoke mutual defense commitments” under the MDT.

Foreign Relations

Marcos has reaffirmed the importance of the U.S.-Philippines alliance and has strengthened security relations with Australia, Japan, Vietnam, and others. In April 2024, a U.S.-Japan-Philippines summit was held in Washington,

DC, to promote trilateral cooperation in multiple areas, including security, infrastructure investment in the Philippines, joint technology development, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The Philippines signed reciprocal access agreements with Australia in 2022 and with Japan in 2024.

Figure 1. The Philippines at a Glance



The Philippines is the largest recipient of U.S. military assistance in the East Asia-Pacific region, including Foreign Military Financing (FMF—\$40 million in FY2024) and assistance under the Department of Defense's (DOD's) Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative. At the U.S.-Philippines 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue in July 2024, the U.S. government pledged to work with Congress to provide the Philippines with \$500 million in FMF out of the FY2024 Indo-Pacific Security Supplemental Appropriations Act (Division C of **P.L. 118-50**). **H.R. 8771**, a House-passed Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs (SFOPS) appropriations bill for FY2025, would provide \$100 million in FMF for the Philippines (Section 7043(g)). A Senate committee-reported version of the SFOPS bill would provide \$70 million in FMF for the Philippines (S. 4797, Section 7043(h)).

U.S. military and Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) personnel conduct regular joint military exercises and maritime patrols, collaborate on counterterrorism, and carry out humanitarian activities. In 2024, over 16,000 primarily U.S. and AFP soldiers participated in the “Balikatan” (“Shoulder-to-Shoulder”) annual bilateral exercise in the Philippines. Smaller contingents of Australian and French troops also joined. For the first time, military drills focused on maritime security took place outside the Philippines' “territorial waters” (12 nautical miles)—in the country's 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ), challenging China's claims in the South China Sea.

In 2014, the U.S. and Philippine governments signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), 22 years after the U.S. military withdrew from Clark Air Base

and Subic Bay Naval Base in the Philippines. EDCA allows for the rotational presence of U.S. military forces, aircraft, and ships at agreed locations in the Philippines. The 1987 Constitution of the Philippines prohibits the establishment of foreign military bases in the country. In February 2023, the two sides agreed to increase the number of Philippine military bases open to U.S. forces from five to nine, including two across the Luzon Strait from Taiwan and two facing disputed maritime features in the South China Sea.

Human Rights Concerns

Human rights challenges include extrajudicial killings carried out by the military and police, lack of protections for press freedom and the safety of journalists, a weak judicial system, and government corruption. The State Department, in a report that it updated pursuant to the Consolidated Appropriations Act, FY2023 (P.L. 117-328, Section 7019(e)), indicated the AFP “has made progress on human rights,” although “some AFP personnel, particularly those acting outside the chain of command, commit human rights abuses and violations.” In 2020, a Philippine court found Maria Ressa, later a co-winner of the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize, who had reported critically on the Duterte administration’s “War on Drugs,” guilty of “cyber libel.”

Former President Duterte’s campaign against illegal drugs resulted in thousands of extrajudicial killings. Some estimates of drug war-related deaths range from 8,000 to over 30,000. Human rights groups report that virtually all of the killings, which were carried out by the Philippine National Police (PNP) and armed vigilantes, occurred without due process, and the vast majority of victims were unarmed, poor, low-level offenders. President Marcos stated he would continue the anti-drug campaign “within the framework of the law and with respect for human rights.” Some human rights groups allege that extrajudicial killings related to anti-drug operations have continued under Marcos. Philippines courts have convicted eight police officers of crimes related to the drug campaign.

U.S. Assistance and Restrictions

Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) assistance to the Philippines totaled \$169.5 million in FY2023. It included military aid and programs aimed at promoting economic development, the rule of law and human rights, and health, basic education, and environmental management. Since 2016, the U.S. government has suspended counternarcotics assistance to the Philippines, except for drug demand reduction, maritime law enforcement, or transnational interdiction. (See Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024 [P.L. 118-47, Division F, Section 7043(h)].)

South China Sea

Tensions between the Philippines and China over disputed waters and land features in the South China Sea have risen since 2012, as China has enlarged and placed military assets on several disputed features in the Spratly archipelago, and interfered with Philippine commercial and military activity in the Philippines’ EEZ. Since 2019, PRC vessels have regularly massed around Philippine-occupied land features and harassed Philippine fishing and coastguard vessels.

Since 2023, PRC Coast Guard and maritime militia vessels have escalated their interference with Philippine boats

attempting to conduct resupply missions to Second Thomas Shoal in the Spratly Islands chain. The Philippines posts a small cadre of its marines on a now-derelict Philippine Navy ship, the BRP *Sierra Madre*, which it grounded on the shoal in 1999 as part of its efforts to assert its maritime claims. In 2023 and 2024, PRC harassment resulted in at least three collisions between PRC and Philippine vessels, including one in which PRC Coast Guard personnel boarded a Philippine boat attempting to resupply the *Sierra Madre*. In July 2024, the two sides reportedly agreed to de-escalate tensions around Second Thomas Shoal.

In August 2024, PRC Coast Guard ships clashed with Philippine vessels at nearby Sabina Shoal. Philippine officials say China is attempting to enlarge Sabina Shoal, which China denies, and for several months the Philippine Coast Guard has deployed a ship to the shoal. The U.S. government condemned PRC “dangerous and escalatory actions ... against lawful Philippine maritime operations in the vicinity of Sabina Shoal.”

The Aquino government (2010-2016) sought arbitration under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) against aspects of China’s claims and assertive behavior in the South China Sea. In 2016, an UNCLOS tribunal concluded, among other findings, that China’s maritime territorial claims based on “historical rights” have no basis in international law. China did not participate in the proceedings and declared the verdict “null and void.”

Separatist and Terrorist Movements

The Philippines has long battled Muslim armed separatist and terrorist groups on the southern island of Mindanao and in the Sulu archipelago. The U.S. military has provided noncombat support for counterterrorism efforts in the southern Philippines since 2002. The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), which the United States designated a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) in 1997, carried out hostage-takings for ransom, killings, and bombings since the early 1990s. By 2023, the AFP reportedly had reduced the number of ASG fighters to under 100. In 2017, a coalition of Filipino militant groups that had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, known as ISIS-Philippines, along with dozens of foreign fighters, captured Marawi, a provincial capital in Mindanao. With U.S. and other foreign assistance, the AFP retook the city five months later. In 2018, the State Department added ISIS-Philippines (renamed ISIS-East Asia in 2020) to the FTO list.

In 2018, the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, an armed separatist group, agreed to establish a new Muslim-majority administrative area in Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago called the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). An election for the BARMM parliament is scheduled for 2025.

See also CRS In Focus IF12550, *China-Philippines Tensions in the South China Sea*, and CRS In Focus IF10607, *China Primer: South China Sea Disputes*.

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