

Updated February 14, 2025

# The Philippines

## Overview and Recent Developments

The United States and the Republic of the Philippines maintain a relationship that includes a bilateral security alliance, extensive military cooperation, close people-to-people ties, and many shared strategic and economic interests. The United States administered the Philippines as a colonial territory (1898-1946) after 300 years of Spanish rule. There are over four million Filipino Americans, and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs operates its only office outside of the United States in Manila, serving thousands of veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces.

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 security and counterterrorism partner. The 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) requires the two countries to help defend each other against external armed attack. Rising tensions between the Philippines and the People's Republic of China (PRC or China) over maritime claims in the South China Sea are a potential regional flashpoint. In January 2025, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio reaffirmed the “ironclad” U.S. commitment to the Philippines in a call with his Philippine counterpart.

The United States is the Philippines’ third-largest trading partner, after China and Japan, and its largest export market. The Departments of State and Defense and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) provided \$169.5 million in assistance to the Philippines in FY2023. Aid included military assistance and programs aimed at promoting economic development, the rule of law, human rights, health, education, and environmental management.

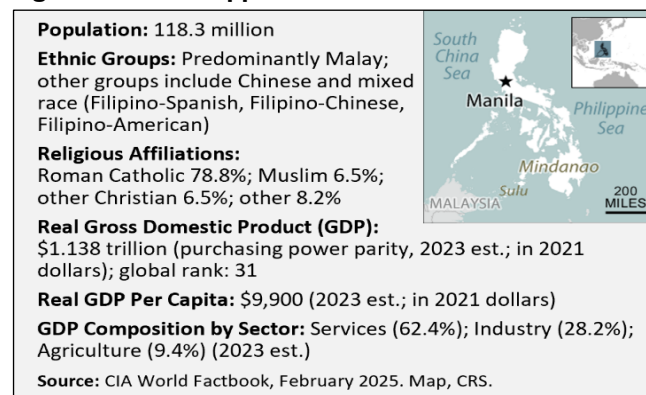
Congress has provided oversight, policy direction, and funding to shape the U.S. relationship with the Philippines, which is located in the “first island chain” in the Pacific and could play a key role in a regional conflict. Members of Congress have sought to shape U.S. policy on human rights and counterterrorism in the Philippines, as well as security cooperation related to the South China Sea.

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. The Philippines is slated to hold midterm elections—traditionally a key measure of the President’s popularity—in May 2025 for House, half of the Senate, and local offices.

## The U.S.-Philippines Alliance

In 1992—during a period of relative peace and stability following the fall of the Soviet Union and in the face of vocal Philippine opposition to U.S. military bases—the U.S. military withdrew from the two bases it had operated since the Philippine-American War (1899-1902). (The 1987 Constitution of the Philippines prohibits the establishment of foreign military bases in the country.) In 1998, the two countries signed a Visiting Forces Agreement. In 2014, as tensions in the South China Sea were on the rise, the U.S. and Philippine governments signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), allowing the rotational presence of U.S. military forces, aircraft, and ships at agreed locations in the Philippines. The two countries agreed to increase the number of Philippine military bases open to U.S. forces from five to nine in February 2023.

**Figure 1. The Philippines at a Glance**



President Marcos visited Washington, DC, in May 2023, and 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.

The Philippines has been 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 Biden Administration 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 have provided \$100 million in FMF for the Philippines (Section 7043(g)). A Senate committee-reported version of the SFOPS bill would have provided \$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. Small 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), where the PRC and Philippines have overlapping maritime claims.

The Marcos administration has strengthened security relations with major U.S. allies and partners, including Australia, Japan, France, Germany, and Vietnam. 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 and Japan signed a reciprocal access agreement in July 2024.

## South China Sea

Tensions between the Philippines and China in the South China Sea have risen since 2012. China has enlarged disputed features in the Spratly archipelago, including within the Philippines’ EEZ, placed military assets on these features, and interfered with Philippine commercial and military activity. Since 2019, PRC vessels have regularly congregated near Philippine-occupied land features and harassed Philippine fishing, coastguard, and other 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 agreed to de-escalate tensions around Second Thomas Shoal and allow for the resupply of BRP *Sierra Madre*.

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

In 2013, the Philippine government sought arbitration under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

(UNCLOS) against aspects of China’s claims and behavior in the South China Sea. In 2016, an UNCLOS tribunal concluded, among other findings, that China’s maritime 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.”

## 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 corruption. The State Department, in a report 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.” Observers have also noted significant restrictions and harassment of journalists; for example, in 2020, a court found Maria Ressa, who had reported critically on the Duterte administration’s “War on Drugs,” guilty of “cyber libel.” She co-won the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize.

Estimates of extrajudicial killings related to former President Duterte’s war on illegal drugs 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 and armed vigilantes, occurred without due process, and the vast majority of victims were unarmed, poor, low-level offenders. In 2016, the U.S. government suspended counternarcotics assistance to the Philippines, except for drug demand reduction, maritime law enforcement, or transnational interdiction. Some human rights groups allege that extrajudicial killings related to anti-drug operations have continued under Marcos.

## Separatist and Terrorist Movements

The Philippines government 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, including against the Abu Sayyaf Group, which the United States designated a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) in 1997. In 2018, the State Department added ISIS-Philippines (renamed ISIS-East Asia in 2020) to the FTO list.

## Congressional Interests

Some Members of the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress introduced bills intended to support the U.S.-Philippine alliance, Philippine security, and bilateral ties, including the United States-Philippines Partnership Act of 2024 (S. 4073), the Filipino Veterans Fairness Act of 2023 (H.R. 6121) the Filipino Veterans Family Reunification Act of 2023 (H.R. 1053; S. 461). Congress also approved development assistance and FMF in the SFOPS bills, and support for regional maritime domain awareness in the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2024 (P.L. 118-31, Section 1305).

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**William Piekos**, Analyst in Foreign Affairs  
**Ben Dolven**, Specialist in Asian Affairs

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