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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. Trump Administration officials have reaffirmed the “ironclad” U.S. commitment to the Philippines, including by continuing \$500 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) pledged under the Biden Administration and approving the sale of 20 F-16 fighter jets.

In late July, Philippine President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. visited the United States, meeting with President Donald Trump and the U.S. secretaries of defense and state. In addition to reaffirming the importance of the alliance, the two leaders agreed to a trade framework setting tariff rates on Philippine goods exports to the United States at 19%. The United States is the Philippines’ third-largest trading partner, after China and Japan, and its largest export market. During Marcos’ visit, the two sides also announced that the United States would provide over \$60 million in new foreign assistance to support energy, maritime, and economic growth programs. In September 2025, the United States announced \$250 million in foreign assistance to the Philippines to improve health systems, disease detection and response, and maternal and child health services.

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.

Philippines Politics

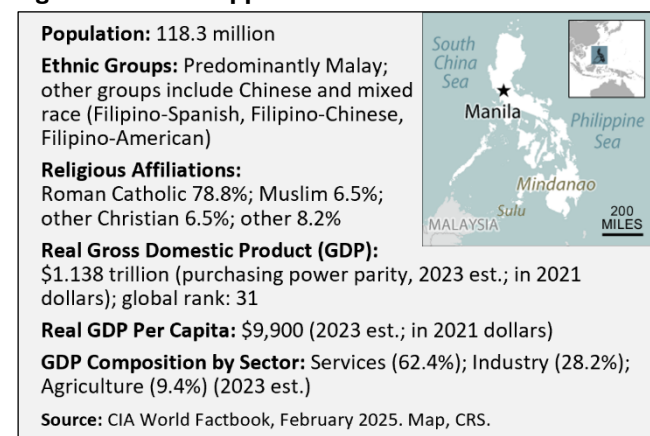
In 2022, Filipinos elected Marcos Jr. as president and Sara Duterte-Carpio as vice president. Marcos’s father, Ferdinand Marcos Sr., ruled the country from 1965 to 1986, including through martial law from 1972 until he was

ousted by the 1986 People Power Revolution. Sara Duterte is the daughter of former President Rodrigo Duterte (in office 2016-2022). The Philippine constitution limits both the president and vice president, who are elected on separate tickets, to one six-year term. The Philippines held midterm elections in May 2025, in which Marcos-aligned candidates fared poorly compared to pre-election polling. Prior to the election, the vice president was impeached in the House of Representatives for corruption and voicing a threat against the president; on July 25, the Supreme Court dismissed the proceedings as unconstitutional, citing a lack of due process. In March 2025, Rodrigo Duterte was extradited to the International Criminal Court to face charges of crimes against humanity for his anti-drug war; he was formally charged in September.

The U.S.-Philippines Alliance

In 1992—in the face of vocal Philippine opposition to U.S. military bases and during a period of relative peace and stability following the fall of the Soviet Union—the U.S. military withdrew from the two bases it had operated since the Philippine-American War (1899-1902). In 1998, the two countries signed a Visiting Forces Agreement. In 2014, with increasing tensions in the South China Sea, the U.S. and Philippine governments signed an 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



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.

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. 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 2025, over 14,000 primarily U.S. and AFP soldiers participated in the Balikatan annual bilateral exercise in the Philippines. Small contingents of Australian and Japanese troops also joined. The exercises included the deployment of the Navy-Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System (NMESIS) in the Luzon Strait near Taiwan. The Philippines has announced its intention to purchase a U.S. Typhon missile system, spurring China to warn that the Philippines is sparking a regional “arms race.”

The Marcos administration has strengthened security relations with major U.S. allies and partners, including Australia, France, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, Vietnam, and India. 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 a reciprocal access agreement with Japan in July 2024 and a status of visiting forces agreement with New Zealand in April 2025.

South China Sea

Tensions between the Philippines and China in the South China Sea have risen over the past two decades, particularly since 2012 when the PRC seized de facto control of a disputed reef known as Scarborough Shoal. China has enlarged disputed features in the Spratly archipelago, including within the Philippines’ claimed 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, China 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 cadre of marines on a now-derelict Philippine Navy ship, the BRP *Sierra Madre*, which it grounded on the shoal in 1999. After several incidents during attempts to resupply the *Sierra Madre*, in July 2024, the two sides agreed to de-escalate tensions around Second Thomas Shoal and allow for the vessel’s resupply. In 2025, tensions around Scarborough Shoal have resulted in a collision between two PRC vessels harassing a PCG ship and PRC declaration of a nature reserve around the shoal. The U.S. and Philippine governments have expressed opposition to the declaration.

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,” claiming the tribunal had no legal standing in the case.

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 2023 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 also have noted significant restrictions and harassment of journalists; in 2020, a court found Maria Ressa, a 2021 Nobel Peace Prize co-winner who had reported on the Duterte administration’s “War on Drugs,” guilty of “cyber libel.”

Estimates of extrajudicial killings related to former President Duterte’s war on illegal drugs range from 6,000 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 118th and 119th Congresses 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), Filipino Veterans Fairness Act of 2023 (H.R. 6121), and Filipino Veterans Family Reunification Act of 2025 (H.R. 1053; S. 461). Congress also approved development assistance and FMF in the SFOPS bills, and support for regional maritime domain awareness and cyber security in the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2024 (P.L. 118-31, Sections 1305 and 1315, respectively).

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

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