



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. Over 4 million people in the United States identify as Filipino alone or in combination, 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. The United States is the Philippines’ third-largest trading partner, after China and Japan, and its largest export market.

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) commits the two countries to help defend each other against external armed attack. 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 flashpoint. Trump Administration officials have reaffirmed the “ironclad” U.S. commitment to the Philippines, including by supporting the Philippines’ military modernization, deploying advanced missile systems in combined exercises, and initiating a new bilateral task force to deter PRC coercion in the South China Sea. As part of the National Defense Authorization Act of 2026 (P.L. 119-60), Congress authorized up to \$2.5 billion in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and up to \$1 billion in loans for military sales for the Philippines.

In July 2025, 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 sides 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 U.S. ties 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 also 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 and other contingencies.

Philippines Politics

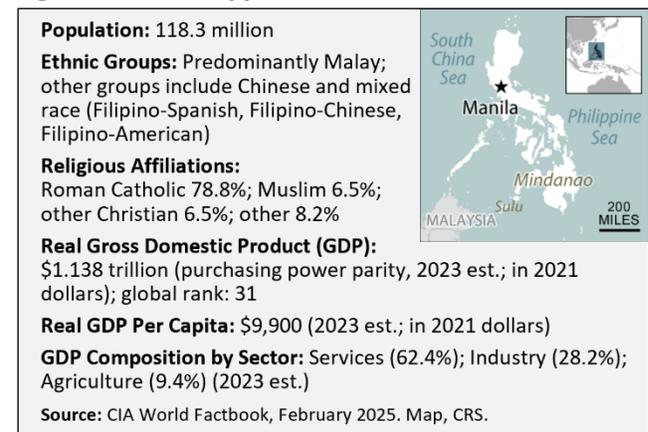
In 2022, Filipinos elected Marcos Jr. as president and Sara Duterte-Carpio as vice president. Marcos’s father,

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, 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

The MDT undergirds security cooperation between the two countries, and the Philippines generally has been a staunch supporter of an active U.S. presence in the region. 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 five locations in the Philippines; in February 2023, the two countries agreed to increase the number of Philippine military bases open to U.S. forces to nine.

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 one of the largest recipients of U.S. military assistance in the East Asia-Pacific region, including FMF 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 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, and joint technology development. 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 exclusive economic zone (which the Philippines refers to as the West Philippine Sea), 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 resulted in a collision between two PRC vessels that were harassing a Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) ship.

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, and that China had violated Philippine rights in the South China Sea. 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 in the Philippines 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 ongoing restrictions and harassment of journalists.

As a consequence of former President Duterte’s war on illegal drugs—which resulted in an estimated 6,000-30,000 extrajudicial killings—Congress suspended counternarcotics assistance to the Philippines in 2016, except for 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, though at a lesser rate.

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. The AFP has restricted terrorist groups’ ability to operate, though various groups remain an ongoing, if diminished, threat.

Congressional Interests

Some Members of the 118th and 119th Congresses have 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 2025 (H.R. 6013), and Filipino Veterans Family Reunification Act of 2025 (H.R. 1053; S. 461). Congress approved National Security Investment Programs funding and FMF in FY2026 Department of State appropriations legislation (Division F of P.L. 119-75), and an increase for the Philippines within the Defense Security Cooperation Agency’s International Security Cooperation Programs in FY2026 Department of Defense appropriations (Division A of P.L. 119-75).

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