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The Philippines

Overview

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, also shaped the relationship. Bilateral relations have faced challenges under President Rodrigo Duterte, who has long held negative views of the United States. Elected in 2016, Duterte has pursued rapprochement with China and a violent extrajudicial antidrug campaign. Major areas of U.S.-Philippine cooperation, nonetheless, have continued.

Among Filipinos, popular support for the U.S.-Philippines relationship is strong. According to a survey conducted by Philippines-based Social Weather Stations (SWS), 81% of respondents said they had “much trust” in the United States as an ally. A 2018 Pew poll found that Filipinos prefer U.S. global leadership (77%) over that of China (12%).

President Duterte remains popular domestically, despite his antidrug campaign and generally non-confrontational stance toward China, both of which have raised controversy. A July 2019 SWS poll found that 80% of Filipinos were satisfied with his performance. May 2019 mid-term elections resulted in large pro-Duterte majorities in both houses of the legislature.

Defense Relations

In contrast to his predecessor, Benigno Aquino III, who steered the Philippines strategically towards the United States, Duterte has sought to strengthen ties with China, the Philippines’ biggest trading partner and a potentially large source of foreign investment. The Philippines also has expanded its sources of military assistance, including from U.S. allies and strategic partners Australia, Japan, South Korea, and India, as well as from China and Russia.

U.S.-Philippine security ties, nonetheless, remain close. U.S. military personnel and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) collaborate on counterterrorism efforts, regular joint military exercises, and humanitarian activities. Balikatan (“Shoulder-to-Shoulder”), the premier annual bilateral exercise, took place in March 2019 with 7,500 U.S. and Philippine troops and a small military contingent from Australia. The U.S.-Philippines Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), signed in 2014, allows for the increased rotational presence of U.S. military forces, ships, and aircraft in the Philippines. Implementation of the agreement continues, although it has slowed under Duterte.

The Philippines is to receive \$60 million out of the \$300 million in regional security assistance announced by the Department of State in August 2018, and is a principal

recipient of military assistance under the Department of Defense (DOD) Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative.

Philippines at a Glance

Land Area: Slightly larger than Arizona

Population: 105.9 million

Ethnic Groups: Mostly Malay (95%); Chinese, mixed race (Filipino-Spanish, Filipino-Chinese, Filipino-American), and other (5%).

Religious Affiliation: Roman Catholic (81%); other Christian (9%); Muslim (5%); other (5%).

Gross Domestic Product (GDP): \$877 billion (purchasing power parity). Global ranking: 29.

Per Capita GDP: \$8,400 (purchasing power parity).

GDP Composition by Sector: Agriculture (9%); Industry (31%); Services (60%).

Life Expectancy: 69 years

Literacy: 96%

Source: Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, 2019.

The “War on Drugs”

Extrajudicial killings long have been a major human rights problem in the Philippines. Duterte’s “War on Drugs,” which began shortly after he took office, has resulted in thousands of extrajudicial killings, triggering international condemnation. The number of drug war-related deaths ranges from government statistics of 5,500-6,600 to estimates by human rights groups of up to 27,000.

According to human rights groups, virtually all of the killings have been carried out without due process, and the vast majority of victims have been unarmed, poor, low-level offenders. They allege that police have collaborated with vigilantes, planted evidence at the scenes of killings, fabricated reports, and held suspected drug offenders for ransom. Philippine government officials state that law enforcement personnel have killed drug offenders in self-defense during anti-drug operations. Few cases of police misconduct have been investigated.

In March 2018, President Duterte announced that the Philippines would withdraw from the International Criminal Court after the tribunal launched a preliminary investigation into possible “crimes against humanity” related to the antidrug campaign. In July 2019, Iceland sponsored a resolution at the United Nations Human Rights Council, which was narrowly adopted, calling for a comprehensive international report on the human rights situation in the Philippines. In response to the extrajudicial killings related to the drug war, beginning in 2016, the U.S. government suspended assistance to Philippine National Police units for counternarcotics activities, although it increased assistance

for drug demand reduction, maritime drug interdiction efforts, human rights training, and treatment and rehabilitation programs.

Violent Extremism and U.S. Assistance

The Philippines long has battled Muslim separatist movements on the southern island of Mindanao. Due in part to weak government control over the region and to the country's relatively open borders, some splinter groups have radicalized or formed links with regional and international terrorist organizations. The most established of these is the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), a terrorist organization that has carried out hostage-takings for ransom, killings, and bombings since the early 1990s. Philippine military efforts, with U.S. assistance, reduced the size of the ASG from 1,000-2000 militants in the mid-1990s to an estimated fewer than 200 members in 2018.

In May 2017, a coalition of Filipino Islamist extremist groups that had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS), along with dozens of foreign fighters, laid siege to Marawi, a city in Mindanao. With U.S. and other foreign assistance, the AFP retook the city in October 2017. The conflict resulted in the deaths of nearly 900 militants, over 150 Philippine troops and roughly 50 civilians, as well as the destruction of much of the city.

In February 2018, the Department of State added ISIS-Philippines (ISIS-P), also known as Daulah Islamiyah, a loose collection of groups who had pledged allegiance to IS, to its list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations. The AFP engages in ongoing, low-level clashes with ISIS-P, whose numbers are estimated at 300-550.

In 2018, the Duterte government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, an armed Muslim separatist group, reached an agreement that would establish a new, Muslim-majority administrative area in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago, called the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). In January 2019, voters in Muslim-majority areas overwhelmingly approved the BARMM, which would include five provinces and 4 million people. Many observers hope that the new political arrangement will result in the disarmament of separatist groups and help spur investment and reduce extremism in the historically poor region. On January 27, 2019, two suicide bombers allegedly linked to a faction of the ASG detonated two bombs at a Catholic church on Jolo Island in the Sulu Archipelago, killing 20 people and wounding over 100.

In 2017, DOD launched Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines (OPE-P), aimed at assisting the AFP combat terrorist groups in the south of the country. About 270 U.S. military personnel serve in advisory roles. In FY2018, DOD obligated \$99.4 million for OPE-P, conducted more than 250 joint military activities, and provided \$35 million in military equipment to the AFP. In July 2018, the U.S. government announced that it would provide \$26.5 million in State Department counterterrorism assistance for Philippine law enforcement over a two-year period. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has committed \$59 million for humanitarian and recovery efforts in Marawi and has launched a three-year, \$25

million program to help restart local businesses and expand livelihood opportunities.

Other U.S. assistance to the Philippines, which totaled \$152.9 million in FY2018 and an estimated \$119 million in FY2019, includes support for military modernization, rule of law programs, reducing barriers to U.S. trade and investment, inclusive socio-economic development, natural resource management, environmental preservation, and private sector investment in the energy sector.

Maritime Disputes with China

The Philippines and China have longstanding disputes over waters and land features in the South China Sea, which the Philippines calls the West Philippine Sea. Tensions have risen sharply since 2012, as China has enlarged and placed military assets on several disputed features in the Spratly archipelago, and increasingly interfered with Philippine commercial and military activity in the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Many analysts argue that China's island-building in the Spratlys has enabled it to deploy considerably more Coast Guard and fishing vessels in Philippine (and Vietnamese and Malaysian) waters.

The previous Aquino government 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 that China's "Nine Dash Line" claims to areas overlapping the Philippines EEZ have no legal basis. The tribunal also found that China had violated its UNCLOS obligations by blocking access to Filipino fishermen at Scarborough Shoal, interfering with Philippine oil and gas exploration at Reed Bank, and damaging the marine environment by reclaiming land. China declined to participate in the proceedings and declared the verdict "null and void."

The Duterte government has shifted strategy, and largely has ignored the ruling, instead focusing on cooperation with China and seeking Chinese development loans, investment, and assistance with large infrastructure projects. Duterte also suspended U.S.-Philippine joint maritime patrols, a move many analysts believe was aimed at stabilizing relations with China. The two sides, however, have not come to concrete agreements on how to resolve their territorial disputes or on joint resource exploration.

Mutual Defense Treaty

The U.S.-Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) requires the two countries to help defend each other against external armed attack. Some analysts argue that the MDT does not explicitly obligate the United States to defend maritime areas that are disputed by the Philippines and other nations. In March 2019, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated, "As the South China Sea is part of the Pacific, any armed attack of Philippine forces, aircraft or public vessels in the South China Sea will trigger mutual defense obligations under Article 4 of our Mutual Defense Treaty." Some analysts say that this declaration was the strongest assurance yet on the U.S. military commitment to the Philippines, particularly in the event of an armed conflict with China.

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