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The Philippines

Overview

The United States and the Republic of the Philippines have 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. Since President Rodrigo Duterte was elected in 2016, his violent antidrug campaign and harassment of political opponents, human rights activists, journalists, and the media, as well as his distrust of the United States and rapprochement with China, have raised concerns among many U.S. policymakers.

Among Filipinos, popular support for the U.S.-Philippines relationship is strong. According to a November 2019 survey conducted by Philippines-based Social Weather Stations, 80% of respondents said they had “much trust” in the United States as an ally (compared to 21% for China). A 2018 Pew poll found that Filipinos prefer U.S. global leadership (77%) over that of China (12%). Despite his antidrug policies and generally nonconfrontational stance toward China, both of which have raised some controversy in the Philippines, Duterte remains popular domestically. Mid-term elections in May 2019 resulted in large pro-Duterte majorities in both houses of the national legislature.

Recent Developments

Foreign operations appropriations legislation for FY2020 (P.L. 116-94; S.Rept. 116-126) bars entry of Philippine officials determined to “have been involved in the wrongful imprisonment” of Philippine Senator Leila de Lima, a leading critic of the antidrug campaign. On January 8, 2020, S.Res. 142, condemning the Philippine government for state-sanctioned extrajudicial killings and calling for the release of Senator De Lima, passed in the Senate. In mid-January 2020, reports emerged that the U.S. visa of Senator Ronald Dela Rosa, who ran the antidrug campaign between 2016 and 2018, had been revoked, although the cancellation may have occurred earlier.

On February 10, 2020, the Philippines submitted a “notice of termination” of the Philippines-U.S. Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), which governs the legal status of U.S. military forces operating in the Philippines and establishes rules by which U.S. troops, vessels, and aircraft may enter the country. On June 2, 2020, the Philippines suspended the termination for six months. Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin stated that the suspension was decided “in light of political and other developments in the region.”

The Philippines has recorded over 15,000 cases of COVID-19 and over 1,000 deaths as of early June 2020. In April 2020, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights criticized several countries, including the Philippines, for violating human rights while implementing

coronavirus measures. The United States has provided nearly \$19.5 million in pandemic response assistance to the Philippines as of May 2020. The Philippine economy, which has grown at an average rate of over 6% since 2015, is expected to contract in 2020 due to the pandemic, particularly its effects on trade, tourism, and remittances.

The Alliance and Defense Relations

The U.S.-Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty requires the two countries to help defend each other against external armed attack. 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.”

Philippines at a Glance

Land Area: Slightly larger than Arizona

Population: 109 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%).

Source: Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, 2020.

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 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.

The Philippines remains the largest recipient of U.S. Foreign Military Financing (FMF) in Asia and a principal recipient of military assistance under the Department of Defense (DOD) Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative. 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. Balikatan 2020 was cancelled due to health concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic. 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, although its future course is unclear given uncertainties surrounding the VFA.

The “War on Drugs”

Duterte’s “War on Drugs,” which began shortly after he took office, has resulted in thousands of extrajudicial killings, triggering international condemnation. Drug war-related deaths range from government statistics of approximately 5,500 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.

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. In June 2020, the United Nations Human Rights Council released a report on the human rights situation in the Philippines, with a focus on the drug war. It stated, “Persistent impunity for human rights violations is stark and the practical obstacles to accessing justice are almost insurmountable.”

Violent Extremism and U.S. Assistance

The Philippines long has battled Muslim armed separatist and terrorist movements on the southern island of Mindanao. The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), which the United States designated as a foreign terrorist organization in 1997, has carried out hostage-takings for ransom, killings, and bombings since the early 1990s. Philippine military efforts, supported by U.S. assistance as part of Operation Enduring Freedom from 2002 to 2015, reduced the size of the ASG from 1,000-2,000 militants in the mid-1990s to an estimated 400 members.

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), a loose collection of groups who had pledged allegiance to IS, to its list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations. The network, renamed ISIS-East Asia (ISIS-EA) in 2019, has an estimated 300-500 fighters in the Philippines. In March 2020, a week-long AFP offensive against ISIS-EA in Mindanao resulted in the deaths of at least 14 militants and four Philippine soldiers. Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines (OPE-P), a counterterrorism campaign launched by the U.S. Department of Defense

(DOD) in 2017, aims to support the Philippines in combatting terrorist groups in the south of the country. In 2020, DOD plans to spend an estimated \$72.3 million on OPE-P, in which approximately 270 U.S. military personnel serve in advisory roles.

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). The BARMM, which encompasses five provinces and 4 million people, was approved by voters in the region and established in 2019.

Other U.S. assistance to the Philippines, which totaled an estimated \$124.2 million in FY2019, includes FMF and programs promoting the rule of law, inclusive socio-economic development, natural resource management, and environmental preservation, as well as reducing barriers to U.S. investment and encouraging private sector investment in the energy sector. In addition, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has committed \$63.6 million for humanitarian and recovery efforts in Marawi and has launched a three-year, \$25 million program to help restart the local economy.

Maritime Disputes with China

The Philippines and China have long-standing 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 its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). In 2019 and 2020, Chinese vessels maintained a near-constant flotilla in waters around Thitu Island, the largest Philippine-occupied feature in the Spratlys.

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 violated its UNCLOS obligations by blocking Philippine access to 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 largely ignored the ruling, focusing initially on cooperation with China and seeking Chinese development loans, investment, and assistance with large infrastructure projects. Such investment, however, has been slow to materialize. In 2016, Duterte suspended U.S.-Philippine joint maritime patrols in the South China Sea, although they were resumed two years later. In 2019, the Philippines took part in a joint patrol in the South China Sea with the navies of the United States, Japan, and India.

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