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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.

Surveys indicate that support for the U.S.-Philippines relationship is strong among Filipinos. However, President Rodrigo Duterte, elected in 2016, has pursued some policies to lessen Philippine dependence on the United States, toward which he often has expressed resentment, and to develop deeper ties with China.

Duterte remains popular domestically, according to opinion polls, despite an economic downturn caused by the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, his violent antidrug campaign, and his controversial foreign policy stances. Mid-term elections in May 2019 resulted in large pro-Duterte majorities in both houses of the legislature. Duterte's term is to end in 2022 as the Philippine Constitution limits the President to one, six-year term. The next election is scheduled for May 9, 2022.

Recent Developments

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. The Philippine government has twice suspended the termination for six months, in June 2020 and November 2020. If the suspension is not extended again, the termination will take effect 69 days after June 1, 2021. Some analysts believe that Duterte intends to leverage the VFA to negotiate better terms in the security relationship.

The Philippine government has reported over 575,000 cases of COVID-19 and over 12,000 deaths from the virus. The first batch of a Chinese-made vaccine arrived on February 28, 2021. The Philippine Food and Drug Administration has also approved the British-Swedish AstraZeneca and U.S. Pfizer vaccines. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has provided \$22.6 million in pandemic assistance to the Philippines as of September 2020.

The Alliance and Defense Relations

In contrast to his predecessor, Benigno Aquino III, who steered the Philippines strategically towards the United States, President Duterte has sought to strengthen ties with China, the Philippines' biggest trading partner and a large source of foreign investment. However, some of Duterte's

ambitions to garner major infrastructure investment from Beijing have been unsuccessful. 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.

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.

On February 9, 2021, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, in a telephone call with Philippine Secretary of Defense Delfin Lorenzana, affirmed the U.S. commitment to the bilateral Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) and emphasized the value of the VFA to the bilateral security relationship. The MDT requires the two countries to help defend each other against external armed attack. In a January 27, 2021, phone conversation between Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Teodoro Locsin, Jr., Blinken stressed the importance of the MDT and "its clear application to armed attacks against the Philippine armed forces, public vessels, or aircraft in the Pacific, which includes the South China Sea."

The Philippines remains the largest recipient of U.S. Foreign Military Financing (FMF) in East 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, last 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 and strongly supported by former-President Aquino, 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.

Human Rights Concerns

Duterte's "War on Drugs" has resulted in thousands of extrajudicial killings, triggering international condemnation. Drug war-related deaths range from Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency data of nearly 6,000 to estimates by human rights organizations of over 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 further 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 claim that law enforcement personnel have killed drug offenders in self-defense during anti-drug operations.

In 2019, there was a rise in extrajudicial killings of leftist and human rights activists, mostly carried out by unidentified assailants believed to be linked to security forces and government-backed militias. The government has harassed prominent press figures and publications for critical coverage of its policies, including journalist Maria Ressa, who co-founded the online news site Rappler, and ABS-CBN, the Philippines' largest broadcasting network. A Manila court found Ressa guilty of "cyber libel" in June 2020, and the next month, the Philippines House of Representatives voted to reject ABS-CBN's application to renew its broadcast license.

Separatist and Extremist Movements

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, reduced the size of the ASG from 1,000-2,000 militants in the mid-1990s to an estimated 400 members in the mid-2010s.

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 provincial capital 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 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, now renamed ISIS-East Asia (ISIS-EA), has around 300-500 fighters. Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines (OPE-P), a counterterrorism campaign launched by the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) in 2017, aims to support Philippine efforts in the south. In 2020, DOD committed \$85.4 million for OPE-P, in which around 200 U.S. military personnel serve in advisory roles.

In 2018, the Duterte government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, an armed Muslim insurgent group, reached an agreement that established a new, Muslim-majority administrative area in Mindanao and the Sulu

Archipelago called the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao.

U.S. Assistance

U.S. assistance to the Philippines, totalling \$152.6 million in FY2020, includes military assistance and programs aimed at promoting inclusive socio-economic development, the rule of law and human rights, and improving family health, basic education, and environmental management. In addition, USAID has committed \$63.6 million for humanitarian and recovery efforts in Marawi.

Since 2016, the U.S. government has suspended assistance to Philippine National Police units for counternarcotics activities, although it has increased assistance for maritime law enforcement, drug demand reduction programs, and transnational interdiction efforts. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, FY2021 (P.L. 116-260) mandates that the Administration submit a report describing steps taken by the Government of the Philippines to prosecute armed forces personnel who have been involved in extrajudicial killings, strengthen judicial institutions, and ensure that the armed forces and paramilitary groups are not engaging in acts of intimidation or violence against journalists, human rights and other social activists.

Maritime Disputes with China

The Philippines and China have long-standing disputes over waters and land features in the South China 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 claimed 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 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 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, although some analysts note that future Philippine governments may be more active in seeking international support for the judgement, which was widely perceived as favorable to the Philippines.

Duterte suspended U.S.-Philippine joint maritime patrols in the South China Sea in 2016, 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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