



# The Philippines

## Overview and Recent Developments

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, shaped the relationship. 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 close security and counterterrorism partner. The 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) requires the two countries to help defend each other against external armed attack; Biden Administration officials have stated that the MDT applies to armed third-party attacks against Philippine armed forces, public vessels, and aircraft in the disputed South China Sea. The Administration has also made revitalizing U.S. alliances in Asia—including with the Philippines—a key pillar of its Indo-Pacific Strategy.

In September 2022, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. traveled to New York, where he addressed the United Nations General Assembly and later met with President Joseph Biden. The two leaders discussed ways to expand bilateral cooperation on climate action, energy security, human rights, infrastructure, and security. In February 2023, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin III and Philippine Secretary of National Defense Carlito Galvez announced the expansion of a 2014 agreement that allows U.S. access to Philippine military facilities (**see below**).

The United States is the Philippines’ third-largest trading partner, after the People’s Republic of China (PRC or China) and Japan, and its largest export market. The Philippines is 1 of 14 members of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework Initiative, which the Biden Administration launched in May 2022 to promote economic growth, fairness, competitiveness, and related objectives among allies and partners in the region.

Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. assumed the office of President on June 30, 2022, having won more than 31 million of 55 million votes cast. Marcos is the son of Ferdinand Marcos Sr., who 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-Carpio, daughter of outgoing President Rodrigo Duterte, won the Vice Presidency. The Philippine constitution limits both the President and Vice President, who are elected on separate tickets, to one six-year term.

## Foreign Relations

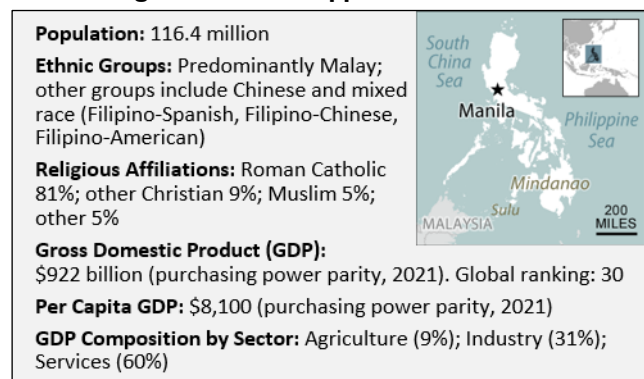
The Philippines has long sought to balance its relations with the United States and China. Manila has relied on the U.S. alliance and security presence in the region, while seeking

greater trade and investment from the PRC, despite numerous tensions between the Philippines and China. Unlike his predecessor, Marcos has reaffirmed the importance of the U.S.-Philippines alliance, even as he has also sought to maintain a stable relationship with China. Former President Rodrigo Duterte had expressed distrust in the United States and sought early in his term to strengthen ties with the PRC. However, Duterte’s goal of garnering major investments from Beijing was largely unsuccessful, and the two countries made no significant progress toward resolving disputes.

In January 2023, Marcos went to Beijing and met PRC leader Xi Jinping. The trip yielded PRC promises of loans, infrastructure assistance, and other investments. The two sides also agreed to resume talks on oil and gas exploration in the South China Sea. According to reports, however, no breakthroughs on major issues in the bilateral relationship were achieved. In February 2023, Marcos visited Japan, where discussions focused in part on further strengthening security cooperation between the two countries, both of which could be directly affected by a potential military conflict between the PRC and Taiwan.

The Philippines is the largest recipient of U.S. military assistance in the East Asia-Pacific region, including Foreign Military Financing and assistance under the Department of Defense’s (DOD’s) Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative. U.S. military personnel and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) hold regular military exercises and maritime patrols, collaborate on counterterrorism, and conduct joint humanitarian activities. In 2022, approximately 3,800 AFP and 5,100 U.S. soldiers participated in “Balikatan” (“Shoulder-to-Shoulder”), the premier annual bilateral exercise in the Philippines. The 2022 exercise focused on improving interoperability and joint defense capabilities and engaged in humanitarian and civic assistance projects.

**Figure 1. The Philippines at a Glance**



**Sources:** Map, CRS; Other information, Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, 2023.

The United States and the Philippines signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) in 2014, 22 years after the U.S. military withdrew from Clark Air Base and Subic Bay Naval Base. EDCA allows for the increased rotational presence of U.S. military forces, ships, and aircraft in the Philippines. The United States has allocated \$82 million toward infrastructure improvements at five military sites under the agreement. In February 2023, the two sides agreed to increase the number of Philippine military bases to nine, including in the main northern island of Luzon. Northern Luzon is roughly 160 miles south of Taiwan.

## Human Rights Concerns

Former President Duterte's "War on Drugs" resulted in extrajudicial killings, triggering international condemnation. Estimates of anti-drug campaign-related deaths range from 6,200 to 30,000. According to human rights groups, virtually all of the killings, which were carried out by police and armed vigilantes, occurred without due process, and the vast majority of victims were unarmed, poor, low-level offenders. President Marcos has stated that he will continue the anti-drug campaign "within the framework of the law and with respect for human rights," targeting large illegal drug operations and bolstering drug rehabilitation. Human rights groups allege that extrajudicial killings related to anti-drug operations have continued and there has been no apparent improvement in rehabilitation efforts. In January 2023, the International Criminal Court (ICC) announced it would reopen an investigation into possible "crimes against humanity" related to the drug war. The Philippines withdrew from the ICC in 2018.

In July 2022, the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, largely addressing human rights violations that had arisen under the Duterte Administration, called on President Marcos to decriminalize libel, withdraw charges against journalist Maria Ressa, reverse government decisions against media outlets, and investigate attacks on journalists. In 2020, a Philippine court found Ressa, co-winner of the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize who had reported critically on the drug war, guilty of "cyber libel." The Court of Appeals upheld the verdict in October 2022, and Ressa remains on bail as she appeals her case to the Supreme Court of the Philippines.

## U.S. Assistance and Restrictions

Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) assistance to the Philippines, totaling an estimated \$155.2 million in FY2022, includes military aid and programs aimed at promoting inclusive socio-economic development, the rule of law and human rights, and family health, basic education, and environmental management. Since 2016, the U.S. government has suspended counternarcotics assistance to Philippine National Police units due to human rights concerns related to anti-drug efforts. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, FY2023 (P.L. 117-328) states, "None of the funds appropriated by this Act may be made available for counternarcotics assistance for the Philippines, except for drug demand reduction, maritime law enforcement, or transnational interdiction."

## South China Sea

The Philippines, China, and other countries 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 interfered with Philippine commercial and military activity in its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Since 2019, flotillas of PRC vessels have regularly massed around Philippine-occupied land features, and have harassed Philippine fishing and coastguard vessels in the Philippines' EEZ.

The Aquino government (2010-2016) 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, among other findings, that China's maritime territorial claims based on "historical rights" have no basis in international law. China declined to participate in the proceedings and declared the verdict "null and void." In contrast to the Duterte government, which largely ignored the ruling, the Marcos government has often cited it, stating the ruling and UNCLOS "are the twin anchors of the Philippines' policy and actions" on the South China Sea.

## Extremist and Separatist Movements

The Philippines has long battled Muslim armed separatist and terrorist groups on the southern island of Mindanao. The Abu Sayyaf Group, 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. In 2017, a coalition of Filipino militant groups that had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS), known as ISIS-Philippines, 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 five months later. In 2018, the State Department added ISIS-Philippines to its list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations. The network, now renamed ISIS-East Asia (ISIS-EA), has an estimated 300-500 fighters, and conducts sporadic attacks in Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago. DOD and its Indo-Pacific Command have provided noncombat support for counterterrorism efforts since 2002.

In 2018, the Duterte government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, an armed separatist group, reached an agreement to establish a new Muslim-majority administrative area in Mindanao and Sulu called the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). The Coronavirus Disease 2019 pandemic reportedly delayed progress in key areas, including delays in electing a new ARMM government, disarming militants, providing social services, and attracting outside investment in the historically poor region.

For further information, see CRS Report R47055, *The Philippines: Background and U.S. Relations*.

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