



# 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. Public opinion surveys indicate that support for the U.S.-Philippines relationship is strong among Filipinos.

President Rodrigo Duterte, elected in 2016, remains popular domestically, according to opinion polls. Duterte's overall approval rating is high despite his violent anti-drug campaign, an economic downturn caused by the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, and some controversial foreign policy stances, including reducing Philippine dependence on the United States and developing deeper ties with China. There are large Duterte-aligned majorities in both chambers of the legislature.

## Recent Developments

On July 30, 2021, Philippine Secretary of National Defense Delfin Lorenzana announced that the Philippines had agreed to re-commit to 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 move reversed a February 2020 decision in which the Philippines sought to terminate the agreement.

The Philippine Constitution limits the President to one, six-year term. Preparations for the next Presidential election, scheduled for May 2022, have begun. In July 2021, Duterte said he is "seriously thinking" of running for Vice-President, sparking speculation he could be part of a future administration. (The Philippine President and Vice-President are elected separately and may be from different political parties.) A wide range of presidential candidates have expressed interest in running.

As of mid-August 2021, the World Health Organization reported approximately 1.6 million COVID-19 cases in the Philippines, and 28,000 deaths. About 11% of the population was fully vaccinated. On July 30, the government reimposed lockdown measures in the Manila metropolitan area. Most vaccines, both purchased and donated, have come from China and the United States.

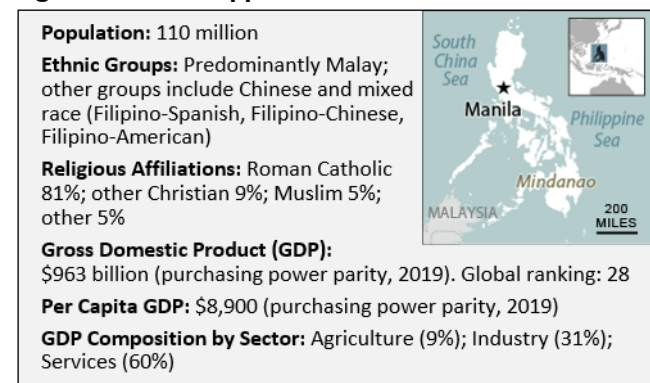
## The Alliance and Defense Relations

President Duterte has expressed distrust in the United States and sought to strengthen ties with China, the Philippines' leading trade partner and a large source of foreign investment. However, some of Duterte's ambitions to

garner major infrastructure investment from Beijing have been unsuccessful, and the Philippines has intensified its

efforts to protest Chinese incursions into disputed areas of the South China Sea that Manila considers to be part of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The Philippines has expanded its sources of foreign military assistance from beyond the United States, including from U.S. allies and strategic partners Australia, India, Japan, and South Korea, as well as from China and Russia.

Figure 1. The Philippines at a Glance



Source: Map, CRS. Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, 2021.

On July 30, 2021, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin met with Philippine Defense Secretary Lorenzana, reaffirming the U.S. commitment to the bilateral Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) and emphasizing the value of the VFA to the bilateral security relationship, supporting more than 300 annual joint military engagements. The MDT requires the two countries to help defend each other against external armed attack, and Biden Administration officials have stated that the MDT applies to armed attacks against the Philippine armed forces, public vessels, or aircraft in the South China Sea.

The Philippines remains the largest recipient of U.S. Foreign Military Financing (FMF) in East Asia and was a principal recipient of assistance under the Department of Defense's Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative (2016-2021). U.S. military personnel and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) hold regular bilateral military exercises and maritime patrols, collaborate on counterterrorism efforts, and conduct joint humanitarian activities. A scaled-down version of Balikatan ("Shoulder-to-Shoulder"), the premier annual bilateral military exercise, took place in March 2021 after a two-year hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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. The U.S.-Philippines Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, signed in 2014, allows for the increased rotational presence of U.S. military forces, ships, and aircraft in the Philippines, although Duterte has been skeptical of expanding the U.S. presence in the Philippines.

## Human Rights Concerns

Since 2016, Duterte's "War on Drugs" has resulted in thousands of extrajudicial killings, triggering international condemnation. Estimates of drug war-related deaths range from Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency figures of roughly 6,000 to counts by human rights organizations of over 27,000. According to human rights groups, virtually all of the killings, which have been carried out by police and armed vigilantes, occurred without due process, and the vast majority of victims have been unarmed, poor, low-level offenders.

Duterte and his allies have retaliated against some government critics. In 2017, Philippine authorities arrested Senator Leila De Lima, who has spoken out against the drug war, on charges that she had accepted money from drug lords while she was Justice Secretary. In June 2020, journalist Maria Ressa, founder of the online news site Rappler, which has reported critically on the drug war, was found guilty of "cyber libel." Many observers view both cases as politically motivated. In July 2020, the Philippine House of Representatives voted not to renew the broadcast license of ABS-CBN, the Philippines' largest broadcasting network, which had been a major source of critical reporting on the anti-drug campaign. Also that month, the Philippines enacted a new Anti-Terrorism Law that observers say contains broad and vague provisions that the government can use arbitrarily to target political opponents and silence dissent. In 2019 and 2020, extrajudicial killings of leftist and human rights activists increased, reportedly often carried out by unidentified assailants linked to security forces and government-backed militias.

## Separatist and Extremist 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 May 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 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 to its list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations. The network, now renamed ISIS-East Asia (ISIS-EA), has around 300-500 fighters, and continues to conduct sporadic attacks in Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago. Between 2017 and 2020, the U.S. Department of Defense's

Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines (OPE-P) provided counterterrorism support.

In 2018, the Duterte government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, an armed Muslim 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. Many observers expect the new political arrangement to result in the disarmament of militants and the growth of investment in the historically poor region, although COVID-19 restrictions have impeded progress.

## U.S. Assistance

Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) assistance to the Philippines, totaling \$154.9 million in FY2021, 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. USAID has provided \$22.6 million in pandemic assistance to the Philippines as of July 2021. In addition, USAID has committed \$63.6 million for humanitarian and recovery efforts in Marawi.

Since 2016, the U.S. government has suspended counternarcotics assistance to Philippine National Police units. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, FY2021 (P.L. 116-260) mandates that the Administration submit a report describing steps taken by 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 EEZ. Since 2019, flotillas of Chinese vessels have regularly massed around Philippine-occupied land features, and in 2019, a Chinese vessel sank a Philippine fishing boat in disputed waters.

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 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.

---

**Thomas Lum**, Specialist in Asian Affairs

---

**Ben Dolven**, Specialist in Asian Affairs

---

## Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.