



U.S.-Philippine Relations and Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s Election

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Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. won the Philippine presidential election on May 9, 2022. Marcos Jr., the son of [former Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos](#), won more than 31 million or 58% of the 55 million votes cast. The second place candidate, outgoing Vice President Leni Robredo, received 15 million votes. Under Philippine law, presidents are limited to one six-year term. The Philippines elects presidents and vice presidents separately; Sara Duterte-Carpio, daughter of outgoing President Rodrigo Duterte, won the vice presidency by a similar margin. Marcos and Duterte-Carpio are to be inaugurated on June 30. Congress may monitor whether the newly elected Marcos will change Duterte’s approaches to foreign policy and human rights.

U.S.-Philippine people-people ties are extensive, and the two nations have long shared a wide range of strategic and economic interests. As a U.S. ally and key partner for U.S. efforts in maritime security and counterterrorism in Southeast Asia, the Philippines plays an important role in the U.S. [Indo-Pacific Strategy](#). Under the 1951 [Mutual Defense Treaty](#), the United States and the Philippines, a former U.S. colony, committed to help defend each other against external armed attack. The Philippines is the largest recipient of U.S. military assistance and Development Assistance account funding in the East Asia-Pacific region. The [U.S.-Philippines Congressional Friendship Caucus](#) was launched in 2021 in honor of the 75th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries. In May 2022, the Philippines became one of the initial members of the [Indo-Pacific Economic Framework](#) launched by the Biden Administration.

For many [democracy advocates](#), Marcos Jr.’s election, after six years of [democratic backsliding](#) and human rights abuses under President Duterte, raises questions about the state of human rights and democracy in the Philippines. Although Marcos earned a clear electoral victory, [civil society groups express concern](#) about the use of social media and other information outlets to misrepresent or downplay his family’s role in human rights abuses and corruption during his father’s 21 years as president, many of them spent under martial law.

The elder Marcos, first elected in 1965, was deposed in the face of “[People Power](#)” protests in 1986 and fled to the United States, along with his wife Imelda and the rest of his family, including Marcos Jr. In the years since the elder Marcos’s ouster, the Philippines has developed into a [robust](#), albeit [flawed](#) democracy, in which no president has sought to exceed the constitutionally mandated term. In the ensuing

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three-and a-half decades, the Philippines has [attempted to recoup](#) billions of dollars in government assets that the Marcos family had appropriated and stashed overseas. Marcos Jr.'s election, many observers say, will likely slow or halt efforts to recoup those assets.

Key Areas to Watch

A key question before Congress and for U.S. policymakers is how the newly elected Marcos will govern and whether there will be shifts in Philippine approaches to foreign policy and regional security. Outgoing President Duterte, elected in 2016, regularly expressed his desire to reduce Philippine reliance on the United States, including threatening to terminate the [U.S.-Philippine Visiting Forces Agreement](#) in 2018, before reversing course several months later. Duterte hindered the United States' efforts to push back on China's encroachments in the South China Sea. He downplayed a 2016 ruling by a United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) tribunal, issued just as he took office, which held largely in favor of a Philippine complaint against Chinese behavior in the South China Sea. He also initially suspended U.S.-Philippine joint patrols before reversing course in 2017. Congress may observe how Marcos Jr. carries out the objectives of the [U.S.-Philippines Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement](#), implementation of which was delayed under Duterte. The agreement, signed by the United States and the Philippines in 2014, allows for increased rotational presence of U.S. military forces, ships, and aircraft in the Philippines and greater U.S. access to Philippine military bases, including the ability to store U.S. defense materials and equipment.

[Public opinion polling](#) suggests that attitudes toward China in the Philippines have been hurt by China's assertive behavior in the Philippines' 200-nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), limiting the ability of any Philippine president to adopt stances that might be seen as a compromise of Philippine sovereignty. Another factor lending ballast to U.S.-Philippine cooperation under Marcos is the deep support of bilateral ties within the Philippines military, which many analysts claim [upheld the U.S.-Philippine security relationship](#) under a skeptical President Duterte. President-elect Marcos initially spoke of [shifting Philippine-China ties to a "higher gear,"](#) but later stated, ["We will not allow a single square millimeter of our maritime coastal ... rights to be trampled upon."](#)

Another key question is how Marcos will approach democracy and human rights. Outgoing President Duterte's counter-narcotics efforts, also known as the War on Drugs, [resulted in nearly 30,000 extrajudicial killings according to human rights activists](#), sparking [international concern](#). In 2017, the Duterte administration detained Philippine Senator Leila De Lima, a critic of the drug war, on charges that [human rights groups assert](#) were politically motivated. Other actions under Duterte that some observers view as politically motivated include the [2020 conviction of journalist Maria Ressa](#), winner of the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize, for the crime of "cyber libel," and the 2020 revocation of the broadcast license of ABS-CBN, the country's largest broadcasting network.

In response to the alleged abuses under Duterte's War on Drugs, since 2016, the U.S. government has suspended some counter-narcotics assistance to the Philippine National Police (see P.L. 117-103, Section 7043(g)). With Duterte no longer in office, Congress may consider whether to lift the restrictions. Congress may also monitor Marcos's actions toward political opponents, the press, and the judiciary, and consider how U.S. security and foreign assistance may be used to influence his government's approach to human rights overall. Marcos has [indicated](#) that he would continue the drug war but that his tactics would be somewhat different, focusing on drug lords instead of petty offenders and investing in rehabilitation facilities.

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

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