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IN FOCUS

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The Philippines

Overview

The United States and the Republic of the Philippines have maintained a deep relationship that has included 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 2016, when President Rodrigo Duterte was elected, his violent antidrug campaign and harassment of political opponents, human rights activists, and journalists, as well as his distrust of the United States and rapprochement with China, has raised concerns among many U.S. policymakers.

Among Filipinos, popular support for the U.S.-Philippines relationship is strong. According to a September 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 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emerged that the U.S. visa of Senator Ronald Dela Rosa, who ran the antidrug campaign between 2016 and 2018, had been revoked, although the cancellation may have occurred earlier.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 Government of the Philippines submitted a "notice of termination" of the Philippines-U.S. Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA). The VFA establishes rules by which U.S. military personnel, vessels, and aircraft may enter the Philippines and that pertain to criminal jurisdiction of U.S. military personnel. The U.S. Embassy in Manila issued a statement calling the action "a serious step with significant implications for the U.S.-Philippine alliance." The ending of the VFA, which is to occur 180 days after the notice of termination, may raise questions about how the United States would fulfill its obligations related to joint military exercises and operations, counter-terrorism cooperation, and the Mutual Defense Treaty.

Defense Relations

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 potentially 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 is 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. 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.

Philippines at a Glance

Land Area: Slightly larger than Arizona

Population: 105.9 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, 2019*.

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. The number of drug war-related deaths ranges 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 March 2018, President Duterte announced that the Philippines would withdraw from the International Criminal Court after the tribunal launched a preliminary investigation into possible "crimes against humanity" related to the antidrug campaign. In July 2019, the United Nations Human Rights Council narrowly adopted a resolution calling for a comprehensive report on the human rights situation in the Philippines.

Violent Extremism and U.S. Assistance

The Philippines long has battled Muslim separatist movements on the southern island of Mindanao. Due in part to weak government control over the region and to the country's relatively open borders, some splinter groups have radicalized or formed links with regional and international terrorist organizations. The most established of these is the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), a terrorist organization that has carried out hostage-takings for ransom, killings, and bombings since the early 1990s. Philippine military efforts, with U.S. assistance, reduced the size of the ASG from 1,000-2000 militants in the mid-1990s to an estimated 400 members. On January 27, 2019, two suicide bombers allegedly linked to a faction of the ASG detonated two bombs at a Catholic church on Jolo Island, killing 20 people and wounding over 100.

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), also known as Daulah Islamiyah, a loose collection of groups who had pledged allegiance to IS, to its list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations.

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 Automomous 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.

In 2017, DOD launched Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines (OPE-P), aimed at assisting the AFP to combat terrorist groups in the south of the country. About 270 U.S. military personnel serve in advisory roles. In FY2019, DOD budgeted $108.2 million for OPE-P.

Other U.S. assistance to the Philippines, which totaled an estimated $124.2 million in FY2019, includes FMF, rule of law programs, reducing barriers to U.S. trade and investment, inclusive socio-economic development, natural resource management, environmental preservation, and 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 local businesses and expand livelihood opportunities.

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 the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Many analysts argue that China's island-building in the Spratlys has enabled it to deploy considerably more Coast Guard and fishing vessels in Philippine (and Vietnamese and Malaysian) waters.

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 shifted strategy, and largely has ignored the ruling, instead focusing on cooperation with China and seeking Chinese development loans, investment, and assistance with large infrastructure projects. Duterte also suspended U.S.-Philippine joint maritime patrols, a move many analysts believe was aimed at stabilizing relations with China. The two sides, however, have not come to concrete agreements on how to resolve their territorial disputes or on joint resource exploration.

Mutual Defense Treaty

The U.S.-Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) 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." Some analysts say that this declaration was the strongest assurance yet on the U.S. military commitment to the Philippines, particularly in the event of an armed conflict with China.

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