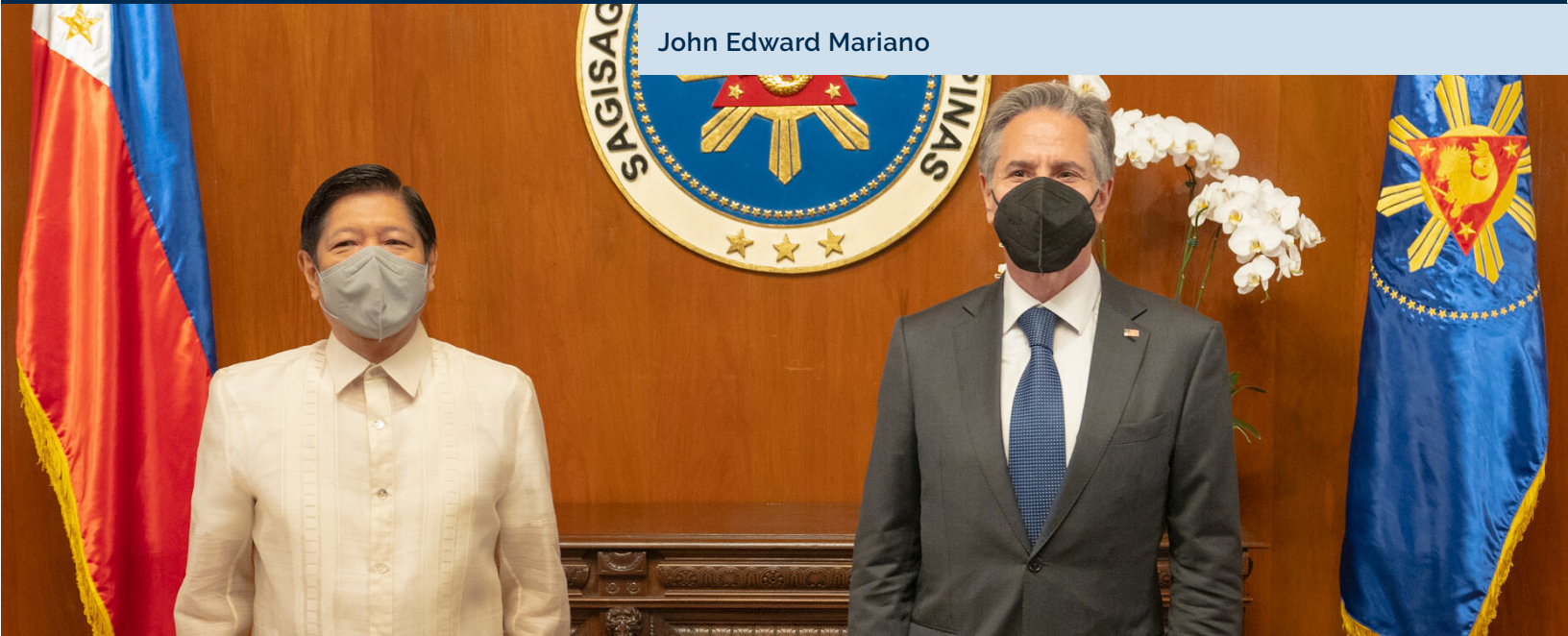


U.S. SECURITY ASSISTANCE AND ARMS SALES TO THE PHILIPPINES FROM DUTERTE TO MARCOS

John Edward Mariano



*Image of U.S. Secretary Blinken meeting with Philippine President Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos Jr. in Manila, the Philippines on August 6, 2022.
[State Department photo by Freddie Everett/ Public Domain]*

WHAT'S AT ISSUE

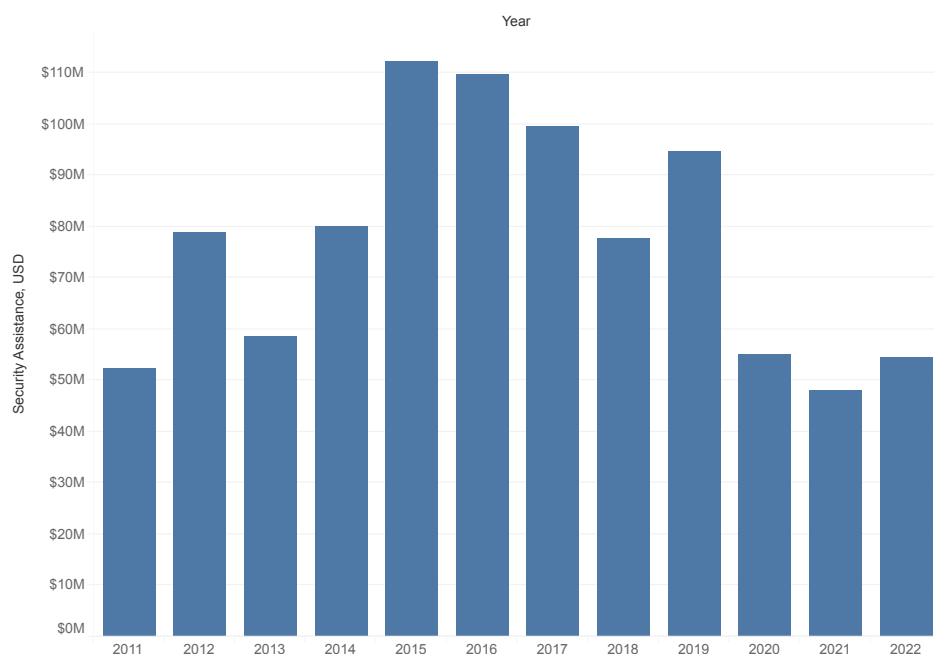
The Philippines is the [largest recipient of U.S. security assistance](#) in the Indo-Pacific region. However, members of Congress are calling for limits on military aid to the Philippines due to the country's poor human rights record. Most recently, two [amendments](#) focused on the Philippines passed the House as part of the 2023 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). One would make Department of State funding for the Philippines National Police contingent on meeting human rights requirements, and the other would expand human rights reporting on the Philippines, focusing on abuses carried out by security forces.

Since 2016, the Philippines has endured increased human rights abuses from former President Rodrigo Duterte's oppressive "war on drugs," which is responsible for the extrajudicial killings of [thousands of Filipinos](#). Additionally, ongoing [territorial disputes over the Spratly and Paracel Islands](#) have thrust the Philippines—with [American backing](#)—into [tense political disputes](#) with China, as China asserts sovereignty over the sea, and the United States seeks to maintain freedom of navigation for maritime routes. Furthermore, the May election of President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr., the son of the infamous former dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr., places the future of the country and the U.S. alliance in flux.

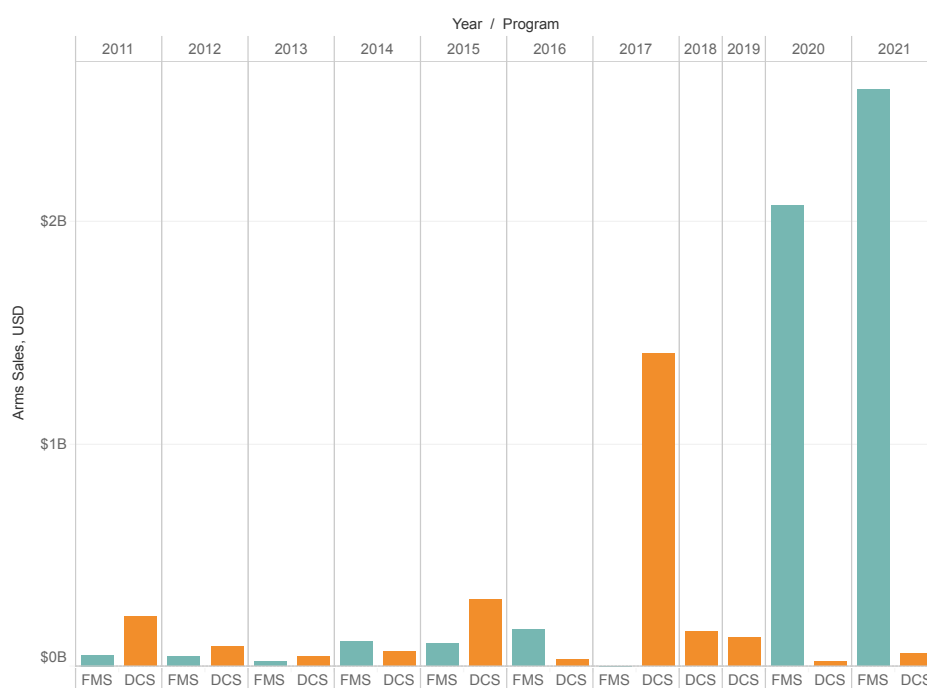
U.S.-PHILIPPINES ARMS SALES & SECURITY ASSISTANCE OVER TIME

Since 2000, the United States has provided approximately \$1.5 billion in security assistance and around \$5 billion in foreign military sales to the Philippines.¹

U.S. Security Assistance to the Philippines, 2011-2022



U.S. Arms Sales to the Philippines, 2011-2021



¹ This data is drawn from Security Assistance Monitor databases.

The modern security relationship between the United States and the Philippines originates from the [1951 Mutual Defense Treaty between the Philippines and the United States](#), which attempted to engender stability and cooperation in post-WWII Southeast Asia. According to the State Department, the security partnership today aims to: [“strengthen democratic governance and support Philippine government efforts to promote inclusive development and contribute to security and development cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.”](#) In other words, the U.S. hopes its aid will establish strong democratic institutions, foster liberal values, and safeguard human rights in the Philippines. However, U.S. security assistance has not improved Philippine institutions, security, or its human rights record. For many, the continued flow of funding and weapons from the United States has instead served as a symbol of U.S. support in the face of continued human rights abuses.

Major U.S. Arms Sales Notifications to the Philippines, 2020-2021

Year	Item	
2020	AH-1Z Attack Helicopters and Related Equipment and Support	\$450M
	Apache AH-64E Attack Helicopters and Related Equipment and Support	\$1,500M
	Scout, Assault, and Light Support Boats with armaments and related equipment	\$126M
2021	AGM-84L-1 Harpoon Air Launched Block II Missiles and related equipment.	\$120M
	AIM-9X Sidewinder Block II Tactical Missiles and related equipment.	\$42M
	F-16 Block 70/72 Aircraft and related equipment.	\$2,430M

In 2021, the Philippines was one of the top recipients of [U.S. foreign military sale offers](#), totaling nearly \$2.6 billion. Those 2021 sale notifications included [F-16 aircraft](#), [Harpoon missiles](#), and [Sidewinder missiles](#). The 2020 sale notifications included [Apache helicopters](#) and [AH-1Z helicopters](#), as well as [boats and armaments](#).

CORRUPTION & ILLICIT ARMS SALES

Keeping ammunition and weapons in the right hands in the Philippines has proven to be a difficult task. According to the CATO Institute, there are [“nearly 2 million unregistered firearms”](#) in the Philippines, allowing for a “vigorous black market.” In 2013, former President Benigno Aquino III was concerned over illicit arms sales within the Philippine police force, warning officers that they would be [“sacked if they sell their new semi-automatic pistols.”](#) Because Philippine officers are being paid a meager salary, the police force has become plagued with corruption. But, corruption is not endemic just for Philippine officers of low rank. Recently, [Oscar Albayalde](#), the former Chief of National Police during President Duterte’s “war on drugs,” was charged with “corruption for allegedly protecting officers linked to the narcotics trade.” During his tenure, he reportedly failed to account for [approximately 163kg of drugs and \\$191,000 of seized assets](#). American arms sales likely help exacerbate the already rampant internal corruption within the Philippine justice system.

PHILIPPINE SECURITY ASSISTANCE & HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

Despite the Philippine government's poor human rights record, it still receives large sums of U.S. weapons, equipment, and training. Since the beginning of his administration, former President Duterte's 'War on Drugs' resulted in over [12,000 "officially-recorded" deaths](#), while [other sources suggest a true figure of upwards of 27,000 deaths](#). Duterte's anti-drug war, coined "Operation Double Barrel," primarily targeted the poor in impoverished neighborhoods in Metro Manila. Philippine police and anti-drug personnel conducted house raids without warrants and were [effectively given a "license to kill" by Duterte](#). These extrajudicial killings exemplified the president's indifference toward human rights. The President boasted in 2016 that he would ["forget the laws on human rights" and kill upwards of 100,000 criminals and "dump all of you into Manila Bay, and fatten the fish there."](#)

U.S. security sector assistance spiked in 2016, the same year Duterte was sworn into office, totaling almost \$110 million, and averaged approximately \$81 million throughout Duterte's presidency. In 2017, the United States even authorized \$900 million worth of firearms, close assault weapons, and combat shotguns, essentially supplying Duterte's extrajudicial killings and human rights abuses.

In fact, the true amount of arms sold to the Philippines is likely substantially higher than reported amounts, in part due to the Trump administration's move to change export oversight of firearms from the Department of State to the Department of Commerce. Despite recent pressure from Congressional Democrats, as of September 2022, President Biden has yet to pull back on this Trump-era directive, potentially allowing certain categories of foreign arms sales to continue behind closed doors. Over the course of Duterte's administration, the Philippines received \$4.79 billion in foreign military sales from the United States, despite the country's abysmal human rights landscape.

U.S. CONGRESS & PROPOSED LEGISLATION

These human rights concerns, however, were not entirely unnoticed. In December 2016, Senators Coons (D-DE), Markey (D-MA), and Rubio (R-FL) wrote a joint statement to the U.S. Department of State, urging the United States to denounce Duterte's ["horrific violations of basic human rights, and ensure that no foreign assistance is being provided to support egregious acts against humanity."](#) In May 2017, Senator Cardin (D-MD) and Senator Rubio (R-FL) introduced a bill, coined the ["Philippines Human Rights Accountability and Counternarcotics Act of 2017,"](#) designed to block U.S. arms exports to the Philippines and work "to support civil society and a public health approach to substance abuse." The bill,

however, died in Congress and did not receive a vote. Despite the U.S. Senators' efforts to promote human rights and [laws and regulations](#) designed to prevent security assistance from being provided to human rights abusers, the weapons and equipment from the United States continued to flow.

Representative Susan Wild (D-PA) introduced the "[Philippines Human Rights Act](#)" in June 2021, intending to block all U.S. security assistance until the Philippine government makes institutional policing reforms. While this bill did not move forward, Representative Wild and her colleagues also introduced an equivalent amendment in H.R. 7900, the "[National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023](#)" (NDAA), that eventually passed the House. This amendment would block all further State Department funding to the Philippine National Police (PNA) until the institution meets "basic human rights standards." Under another amendment passed by the House, the State Department would produce a full report on human rights violations by the PNA, Philippine military, and other organizations for oversight and accountability. The full passage of the 2023 NDAA is still pending.

THE RETURN OF THE MARCOSES: AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

Newly-elected President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. is all but certain to bring the Philippines back into the international limelight, as analysts predict [continued human rights abuses and democratic backsliding](#). Before being ousted by the People Power Movement, Bongbong's father, Ferdinand Marcos Sr., instituted nine years of martial law from 1972-1981 that saw [extensive human rights violations and turned the country into a dictatorship](#). Bongbong Marcos has pledged to hold an 'independent policy' on the current Russia-Ukraine conflict, citing potential cooperation with Russia. If Marcos rules similarly to his father, the U.S. and the international community should be prepared to denounce any anti-democratic practices and help foster democracy and the rule of law in the Philippines.

Despite all the money being spent on arms, other urgent priorities still remain for the Filipino people, most notably climate change. The Philippines, being one of the most susceptible countries to extreme weather events, will face dire climate challenges in the coming decades, such as rising tides, flood control, and major crop failures.

Recently, Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited the new president in the Philippines to congratulate him on his electoral victory and reinforce U.S.-Philippine relations in the region amid current tensions. Blinken even assured Marcos the U.S. would come to the Philippines' "[defense if attacked in the South China Sea](#)," potentially by China. However, Marcos still indicated he wants "[his country's ties with China \[to\] expand and shift to a higher gear](#)." Nevertheless, there are potential fears over escalation between China and the Philippines,

especially if [Beijing feels “threatened by Washington’s support for Manila.”](#)

As Sino-American competition occurs in this alliance formation, the Philippines stands at a crossroads to determine its future. As the Marcos administration begins in Malacañang Palace, the United States must be judicious in sending military aid to the Philippines and keep a watchful eye for injustice and violence against the Filipino people.