

The Philippines Under Marcos Jr: Restoring the Marcos Name?

After his victory in May 2022, the President of the Philippines Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. said, “Judge me not by my ancestors, but by my action.” To mark the first year of his six-year presidency, we take a closer look at Marcos Jr.’s leadership and actions to date.

Keeping It in the Family

Political dynasties are common in the Philippines; some studies in the mid-2010s found that over 70 percent of the House of Representatives’ elected members and approximately 80 percent of Congress came from political families.* All eight presidents over the last five decades have come from prominent political families, including Marcos Jr.

Marcos Jr. won the 2022 elections with a landslide victory, after serving as a senator and governor of Ilocos Norte, the family’s stronghold. The Marcos clan also holds several other leadership positions in the government. The 2022 election saw Marcos Jr.’s first son become a district representative and his first cousin was elected the Speaker of the House of Representatives. Meanwhile, his sister is a senator, and his nephew is the current governor of Ilocos Norte.

Another family that performed well in the 2022 elections was that of Marcos Jr.’s predecessor and ally, former president Rodrigo Duterte. Sara Duterte-Carpio, Duterte’s daughter and Marcos Jr.’s running mate, was elected Vice President. Duterte’s two sons became congressmen and vice mayor.

* <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2667319322000222>;
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26372038>

Fast Facts – Philippines

Government Type:

Republic,
Presidential system

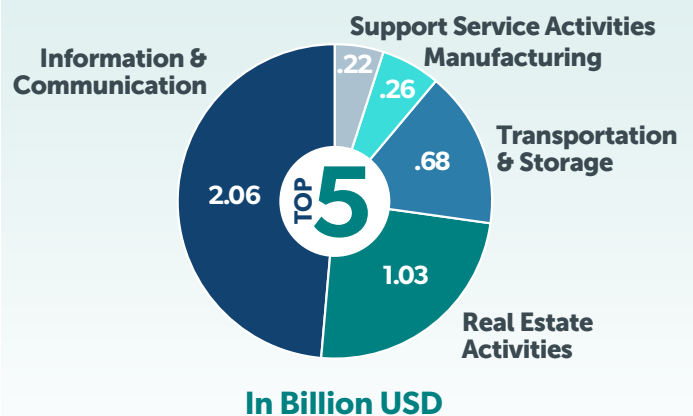
Population

115.56 M

GDP Per Capita

USD 3,623

FDI Top 5 by Industry (2022)



Rewriting History

Marcos Jr. is the only son of the dictator and former president Ferdinand Marcos Sr (1917 – 1989) who ruled the country for 20 years, nine of which were under martial law. Marcos Sr. was toppled by the nonviolent 1986 People Power revolution, and the Marcoses subsequently lived in exile in Hawaii before returning to the Philippines in the 1990s, after Marcos Sr.'s death. The legacy left by Marcos Sr. is a dark history of repression, violence, election fraud, and corruption that many older Filipinos still remember.

Given his family's image, Marcos Jr. orchestrated a massive social media campaign, years ahead of the 2022 election, to change the narrative about his family's legacy. Targeting the youth who did not grow up or live through the martial law period (those born from the 1980s), Marcos Jr. rebranded the years under his father's rule as a "golden era" of prosperity and stability, and downplayed criticism against the brutal military regime. While campaigning, Marcos Jr. shunned away from presidential debates and most questions from the press to avoid stirring up the past.

"Friend to All"

Since taking office, Marcos Jr. appears to have prioritized foreign policy amidst increasing China-U.S. tensions and the risk of a war over Taiwan, which is just 190 kilometers away from Philippines' northernmost islands.

Marcos Jr. vowed to continue Duterte's foreign policy of making the Philippines a "friend to all, an enemy to none," but his approach and actions are very different from his predecessor's. Duterte attempted to move the country away from its traditional pro-American stance and pivoted towards a friendly relationship with China. During most of Duterte's presidency, the U.S. was portrayed as a weak and unreliable partner. He went so far as to say it was "time to say goodbye to Washington" in his first visit to China after taking office in 2016.

Meanwhile, Marcos Jr. has quickly made his intentions to re-align with the U.S. clear. Within his first year in office, he visited the U.S. twice: in September 2022 and in April-May 2023 (whereas Duterte did not make any visits to the U.S.). He also met with several high-level U.S. officials, including Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and Vice President Kamala Harris.

The result of these meetings is mutual commitments to deepen Philippines-U.S. security ties. In particular, Marcos Jr. has allowed the U.S. Army access to four new bases in addition to the five sites covered by the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement. In April, the two countries conducted the largest ever Balikatan exercise, their annual bilateral shoulder-to-shoulder military drills, with 17,600 participants. During Marcos Jr.'s most recent visit to the U.S., he secured the U.S.' "ironclad" commitment to protect the Philippines

Marcos Jr.'s Career History



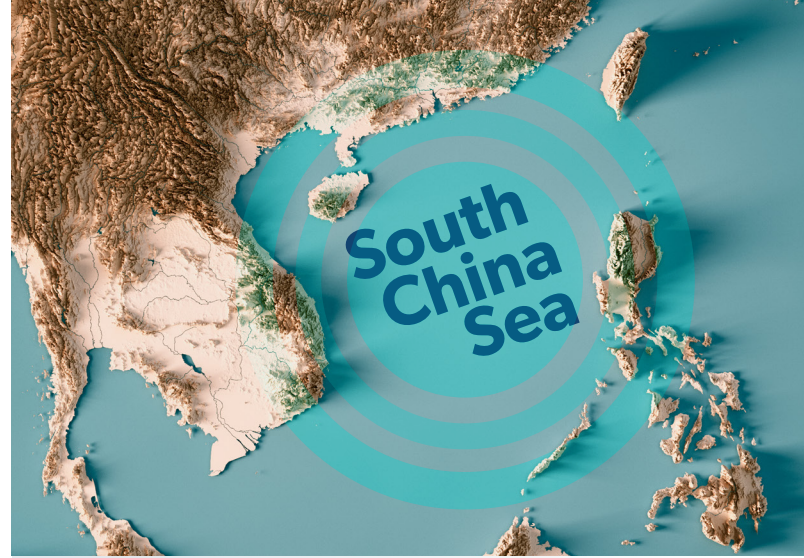
under the 1951 Mutual Defence Treaty as well as U.S. support to modernize the Philippines military.

In addition, Marcos Jr. made his first visit to Japan in February 2023, where the two countries' leaders agreed to strengthen their defense alliance and to simplify procedures to send Japan's Self-Defense Force to the Philippines for humanitarian assistance. They also conducted their first integrated air defense training in November 2022. The Philippines and Australia have also been in talks to deepen bilateral defense relations and are considering joint patrols in the South China Sea, which accounts for at least a third of the world's maritime shipping and is an area contested by China and several Southeast Asian nations, including the Philippines. Both Japan and Australia are U.S. allies.

Treading the Fine Line with China

Many argue that Marcos Jr.'s moves are consequential to China's aggressive behaviors in the South China Sea. Within the first two months of 2023 alone, the Philippines filed 10 diplomatic protests against China over violations in the South China Sea. In a February incident, a Chinese Coast Guard ship pointed a military grade laser at a Philippines vessel carrying supplies to its troops, temporarily blinding the crew. The incident happened just one month after Marcos Jr.'s meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping and was viewed as a warning from China ahead of his visit to Japan.

Despite increasing cooperation with other pro-U.S. nations, Marcos Jr. has been careful to avoid provoking China, its top trade partner, and he has stated "disengagement with Beijing is not an option." In his first visit to China in January 2023, he tried to foster stronger economic cooperation with China, particularly in trade, infrastructure development, and agriculture. He also expressed his willingness to resolve disputed issues via peaceful means; he proposed direct and prompt communication between the two countries' leaders via a hotline to avoid mishaps in the



China-Philippines Relation under Duterte

It is worth noting that China's assertiveness in the disputed South China Sea was also a sticky issue under Duterte's presidency.

During Duterte's administration, despite his warm gestures and eight visits to Beijing, China did not hesitate to push its territorial claims. China continued to flex its military muscle in the disputed water while the Chinese government's promise of billions of dollars in infrastructure investments to the Philippines under its One Belt One Road initiative went unfulfilled. Therefore, in his last years in office, Duterte turned away from China and started reinstating security ties with Washington.

South China Sea. In April, Marcos Jr. also held talks with Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang to clarify that the four new military bases granted to the U.S. Army are not a direct military challenge to China but are for disaster relief and response to climate change impacts.



Did you know?

The Philippines is the home of Asia's first basketball league?

Founded in 1974, the **Philippine Basketball Association (PBA)** is Asia's first and the second oldest professional basketball league in the world after the NBA.



Looking Into the Future

Despite the outward focus thus far, Marcos Jr. is keenly aware that sustaining domestic pre-pandemic economic growth of 6 percent to 7 percent is key for his presidential performance. Thus, he has also brought in foreign investment to boost growth, and is targeting investments in public infrastructure, energy, agriculture, and digitalization. The country's projected GDP growth for 2023 is a respectable 6 percent to 6.5 percent, although it needs to deal with rampant inflation.

He has brought home a pledge of USD 1.3 billion in economic investments from U.S. firms after his second visit with Biden. For example, during the visit, he met with an American solar technology firm and an American healthcare services provider, which respectively pledged a USD 900 million investment into solar energy projects in the Philippines, and an investment of approximately USD 14 million in medical business process outsourcing.

Similarly, he also inked 35 investment deals totaling USD 13 billion into infrastructure, energy, health-care and agriculture sectors after his February visit to Japan, in addition to USD 3 billion infrastructure loans for two major public transportation projects.

We pose the following questions about Marcos Jr' presidency:

- Will Marcos Jr. be able to redeem his father's legacy?
- Will Marcos Jr. and the Philippines be able to maintain the delicate balance between China and the U.S. or will it be forced to pick a side?

Leaving no stone unturned.

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