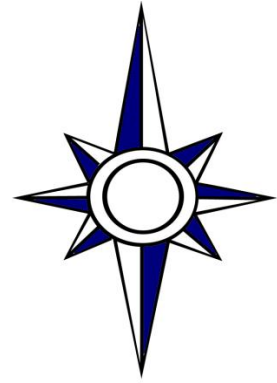


Comparative Connections

A Triannual E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations



US-Southeast Asia Relations: Deep in South China Sea Diplomacy

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Diplomacy related to the South China Sea disputes dominated US actions at the May ASEAN Summit, the June Shangri-La Dialogue, and the July ARF meeting. Washington endorsed ASEAN consultations before the Association's meetings with China on the territorial disputes as well as an independent ASEAN role in the South China Sea negotiations separate from the bilateral negotiations preferred by the PRC. Related to US support for ASEAN is Washington's assistance to the Philippines in gradually building its archipelagic security capability by funding Coast Watch South radars and promising more military hardware to the ill-equipped and underfunded Philippine armed forces. Manila also maintained its efforts to obtain a specific defense commitment from the US in the event of a military conflict with China over South China Sea islands. The Cambodia-Thai border dispute continues to flare periodically. ASEAN mediation efforts have established a timetable for military disengagement but, as yet, no implementation. Washington has endorsed the ASEAN efforts. In Indonesia, radical Jemaah Islamiyah, al Qaeda-affiliated cleric Abu Bakar Bashir was sentenced to 15 years in jail for aiding the formation of a new terrorist affiliate in Aceh. As in his previous trials, Bashir blamed his arrest and sentence on US and Jewish machinations. Although the Obama administration has appointed a new envoy, Derek Mitchell, as special ambassador to coordinate international approaches to Burma, this enhanced engagement runs parallel to increased US economic sanctions, suggesting little has changed with the new "civilianized" government.

South China Sea diplomacy

Diplomacy in the South China Sea disputes has dominated US actions in Southeast Asia over the past two years. Beginning with the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting in July 2010, the Obama administration decided to play a major role in promoting resolution of the Spratly Islands imbroglio, while laying down a marker that South China Sea stability for maritime commerce constituted a significant US interest. Six parties are involved in a complex set of historically based territorial disputes in the sea: Brunei, China, Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam. China's claims are the most extensive, covering all the Spratly and Paracel Islands and most of the South China Sea. ASEAN's first ever declaration on the South China Sea was issued long ago in 1992. Ten years passed before ASEAN and China agreed in 2002 on a Declaration of Conduct, a set of principles that were supposed to stabilize the status quo, though it was non-binding and lacked any enforcement mechanism. ASEAN's 2011 leader, Indonesian President Bambang Yudhoyono, stated at the Association's 44th Ministerial Meeting this July that the ARF should "finalize the long overdue guidelines because we need to get moving to the next phase, which is identifying elements of the Code of Conduct."

The US backed ASEAN initiatives with respect to the Code of Conduct, when at the July 2010 ARF, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated, “The United States, like every other nation, has a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia’s maritime commons, and respect for international law in the South China Sea. We share these interests not only with ASEAN members and ASEAN Regional Forum participants but with other maritime nations and the broader international community.” In effect, Clinton articulated what she believed was the consensus among most of the world’s maritime powers. She also proposed that ASEAN serve as a multilateral venue for South China Sea negotiations – a prospect supported by the four ASEAN claimants (Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam, and Brunei), but vigorously opposed by China.

The Obama administration has emphasized the importance of Asian politico-security organizations led by ASEAN: the ARF, the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+). US secretaries of state and defense have attended the ministerial meetings and the president is scheduled to attend the upcoming EAS in November 2011. Washington sees ASEAN as an institution essentially supportive of international law, the peaceful settlement of disputes, and implicitly of the territorial status quo under which maritime commerce and resource exploitation can be peacefully conducted. While the US insists that it does not take sides on territorial disputes and has no stake in them, it also holds that the disputes be reconciled according to customary international law, meaning the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) through which there are rules for fixing maritime boundaries via Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ). Application of these principles would invalidate China’s claims to most of the South China Sea in favor of the littoral states.

Despite current US economic problems and the prospect of a significant decline in its defense budget over the next decade, military officials insist that Washington will maintain a “continuous presence” in Asia and will sustain its exercises with and assistance to ASEAN states’ defense forces, according to US Pacific Command (PACOM) Commander Adm. Robert Willard as reported in the July 18, 2011 issue of *Defense News*. The Obama administration’s relatively relaxed “steady-as-she-goes” assessment of South China Sea tension probably reflects its belief that Southeast Asia is a pro-US region and that US reassurance depends on Washington upgrading its diplomatic activity alongside an already robust security presence. Increasingly, PACOM features its unparalleled humanitarian relief capabilities as a form of military diplomacy. More generally, the Defense Department is also assisting ASEAN states in developing coastal monitoring and patrol capabilities. If one adds capacity building to internationalizing the South China Sea disputes, these constitute an easy and low cost way for the US to inject itself into Southeast Asian regional politics.

Over the past four months, US diplomacy designed to implement the foregoing Southeast Asian strategy was displayed at the ASEAN Summit in May, the Shangri-La Dialogue in June, and the ARF in July. US Ambassador to the Philippines Harry Thomas endorsed the South China Sea statement issued at the ASEAN Summit on May 18, which averred that ASEAN consultations are perfectly appropriate before any meeting with China on territorial disputes, that “all claimants should sit down at the negotiating table.” In effect, this was a confirmation of an independent ASEAN role in the South China Sea negotiations separate from the bilateral negotiations with each claimant preferred by China. The ASEAN approach was also endorsed

by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates at the Shangri-La Dialogue on June 4. Subsequently, in late June, US Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell at the inaugural US-China Asia-Pacific Consultations in Hawaii repeated US support for “strengthening the role of regional institutions on the challenges facing the region.”

Although the July ARF meeting in Bali did not see a replay of the previous year’s China-US acrimony over an ASEAN role in resolving the South China Sea disputes, Secretary Clinton reiterated the need for an ASEAN role as well as a US “strategic stake in how issues there are managed.” While China and the 10 ASEAN members announced an agreement at the Forum on a set of guidelines to advance the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, Assistant Secretary Campbell called them “an important first step...[but] clearly it’s just that: a first step.” The guidelines cover the easiest issues for cooperation: maritime environment, infectious diseases such as SARS, transnational crime, and navigation safety – collectively known as nontraditional security. They fail to address the most critical issues – energy exploration and military tensions.

In the aftermath of the guidelines agreement, Secretary Clinton called on the South China Sea rivals to back their claims with legal evidence – a challenge to China’s declaration of sovereignty over vast stretches of the South China Sea. More specifically, she urged that they “clarify their claims ... in terms consistent with customary international law ... derived solely from legitimate claims to land features.” As stated above, this means that the claims should be delineated according to the 1982 UNCLOS by which EEZs could be extended only 200 nautical miles from the land borders of littoral countries. (Ironically, Washington itself has not yet ratified the UNCLOS, though US authorities have stated they will abide by its provisions.) Secretary Clinton went on to praise Indonesia’s leadership role in ASEAN, looking forward to its help in settling the conflicts.

In fact, the guidelines do not create a proper code of conduct for navies involved in the South China Sea disputes. There are no provisions for how contending navy ships should behave toward one another; nor are communications channels established in the event of such contact. In the past year, the US has engaged in joint naval exercises with all the Southeast Asian claimants – Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Brunei. Some of these exercises include protocols for appropriate naval relationships.

Washington’s emphasis on multilateral diplomacy for the South China Sea underlines the point that ASEAN as a whole as well as other states have significant interests in the region that go beyond the territorial disputes between the five states and China. Secretary Clinton has established the US as a *de facto* party in the facilitation of a peaceful settlement. After all, Washington has a security treaty with one of the claimants, the Philippines, which could potentially draw the US into the conflict. Hence, it is understandable that the US has a preference for a negotiated future that takes into account the interests of maritime trading states, China, and the ASEAN countries. These concerns will continue to dominate Washington’s Southeast Asia diplomatic agenda as well as ASEAN’s politico-security relationships with both China and the US.

Philippines appeals for US support on South China Sea

Of the four ASEAN states with claims to some of the South China Sea islets, the Philippines has the weakest enforcement capability. Its armed forces are underfunded, ill-equipped, and, with the exception of its special forces, poorly trained. The air force flies virtually no combat aircraft worth that designation, and the navy's ships are Vietnam War vintage and barely seaworthy. While the current Aquino government and its predecessor devised plans to modernize the armed forces, emphasizing the navy and air force, so far little has changed. Manila's alternative is to strengthen defense ties with the US, encourage Washington to reiterate its commitment to freedom of the seas, support Secretary Clinton's call for a multilateral negotiated settlement to the disputed maritime claims, and insist that the US honor its mutual security treaty with the Philippines.

Washington has assisted the Philippines in establishing the Coast Watch South program, helping fund 17 coastal watch stations in southern Philippine waters. The US is also discussing the construction of an additional 30 coastal watch stations to prevent smuggling, drug trafficking, and terrorist movements between Mindanao and Borneo. The US Coast Guard has refurbished a 40-year old *Hamilton*-class cutter for the Philippines. It is the biggest ship ever acquired by the Philippine Navy and is currently deployed off Palawan near the Spratly Islands. Additional retired *Hamilton*-class cutters could also be sold to the Philippines.

In early June, the Philippine Embassy in Washington announced that it was shopping for excess US defense equipment under the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) program. Ambassador Jose Cuisa, Jr. asked his country's Department of National Defense and Armed Forces to provide him with a wish list of military equipment they need to shore up the country's defenses. In late June, the Philippines new Foreign Secretary Albert Del Rosario, speaking at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, tabled a new approach to acquiring US military items by leasing rather than buying them. At a subsequent joint news conference, Secretary Clinton stated that the US is "determined and committed to supporting the defense of the Philippines [and] what are the additional assets that the Philippines needs and how we can best provide them." Philippine President Benigno Aquino III has allocated \$254 million to upgrade the navy, and the visiting foreign secretary noted that "an operational lease [of] fairly new equipment "would permit his country to stretch the purchasing power of that sum. (However, the United States has not leased military equipment to other countries since the end of World War II.) Manila's wish list includes frigates, modern combat aircraft, and two submarines. While the US regularly provides military assistance to the Philippines, local critics complain that the equipment is frequently "third hand" after being extensively used in Thailand and South Korea. Washington has also agreed to boost Philippine intelligence capabilities in the South China Sea by sharing US intelligence. In late July, it also sent a *P3 Orion* surveillance aircraft to help the Philippine military search for two kidnapped Americans in Mindanao.

In addition to acquiring more military hardware to defend its South China Sea claims, Manila is also seeking an unequivocal US commitment to defend the Philippines in the event of a military confrontation with China. Philippine legislators and media commentators emphasize that US statements about Washington's obligations under the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty between the Philippines and US have been ambiguous. Manila's argument is based on a letter exchanged

between Foreign Affairs Secretaries Cyrus Vance and Carlos Romulo in 1979, in which the Philippines claims that an armed attack on Philippine forces anywhere in the Pacific, including the South China Sea, will trigger a US response. The US commitment, according to this interpretation, is not confined to the Philippines metropolitan territory. In recent months, the US position on the question of its obligation seems to stop short of an automatic involvement with US forces. In late May, Ambassador Thomas stated on board the visiting US aircraft carrier *USS Carl Vinson* that “we are dedicated to being your partner whenever you are in harm’s way.” Nevertheless, on June 12, embassy spokesperson Rebecca Thompson responded to a Malacanang statement that the US would honor the Mutual Defense Treaty if Manila’s spat with China escalated to war by saying that “The US does not take sides in regional territorial disputes.” After media pushback that Washington was renegeing on its commitment, Thompson attempted to smooth the troubled diplomatic waters by saying “When I said, ‘The US does not take sides in regional territorial disputes,’ I was talking about the current dispute over boundaries – an issue separate from what the US would do in the hypothetical event of conflict.” President Aquino put a positive spin on the discussion by claiming, “Perhaps the presence of our treaty partner, the United States of America, ensures that all of us will have freedom of navigation (and) will conform to international law.”

Washington’s interpretation of the scope of the Mutual Defense Treaty seems to be that the Spratlys are located in a part of the Pacific Ocean. Therefore, Manila could invoke the treaty if its forces were attacked in the area it claims. This would lead each signatory to consult and determine what action, if any, it might take. The implication is not that the US would be required to use force. Rather, because the US is a treaty partner with the Philippines, China cannot assert that events in the South China Sea, including the contested islands, are not any of Washington’s business.

Progress on the Thai-Cambodian border dispute?

The Preah Vihear temple complex dispute persists despite ASEAN efforts to mediate through Indonesia’s good offices – the Association’s current chair. While the temple complex itself was awarded to Cambodia by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 1962, the adjacent land, which provides access to the temple, remains in dispute and is occupied by Thailand. Enmeshed in nationalist politics in both countries, skirmishes in 2011 have killed 30 people and sent tens of thousands of villagers fleeing. Thai and Cambodian foreign ministers agreed on May 10 to permit Indonesian observers to be sent to the border as part of a “package solution” that would include meetings of the Border Committees of both sides to coincide with the deployment of the Indonesian soldiers. The sticking point was that the Border Committees were also to determine the disposition of Thai and Cambodian troops before the Indonesian personnel arrived.

Prior to the Thai election this July, which was won by exiled former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra’s sister, Yingluck, Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva dug in his heels, insisting that no international observers could be deployed in the disputed area until Cambodia withdrew its forces and removed all buildings under its control from the 4.6 km location. At that point, exasperated, Cambodia asked the ICJ for a clarification of its 1962 ruling on the temple and its surrounding territory. On July 18, the Court issued a preliminary judgment proposing that both sides withdraw their forces, creating a “provisional demilitarized zone.” Recognizing an

ASEAN role in settling the confrontation, the ICJ ruled that ASEAN officers be stationed in the area to observe the ceasefire. Both sides have said they accepted the ICJ ruling, but Thailand still insisted that its withdrawal would only occur under the framework of the joint Thai-Cambodian Border Committee. Secretary of State Clinton on July 22 endorsed ASEAN as the best forum for the pair to resolve their differences and criticized outgoing Prime Minister Abhisit's "childish language" in delaying troop withdrawals. Although Prime Minister Yingluck has openly stated she wants to reconcile with Cambodia, she could face a nationalist backlash on Preah Vihear because Thailand is prohibited by the ICJ ruling from blocking any access to the temple. Nor has agreement been reached on the specifics of Indonesian troop deployments. All of this is so difficult because the ICJ must still decide a subsequent case dealing with the temple that concerns the ownership of the area around the complex. That could take another two years.

The killing of bin Laden and other terrorist concerns

In May, the US Department of Homeland Security placed Thailand and the Philippines on a new terrorism risk list because they allegedly "promote, produce, or protect terrorist organizations or their members." The report also noted that both countries cooperated with US counterterrorism policy, but – according to a Homeland Security spokesperson in early July – "may have been included on the list because of the backgrounds of arrestees, not because of the country's government itself." Also related to terrorism were Southeast Asian reactions to the May 1, US Special Forces killing of al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak on May 2 stated that bin Laden's death did not mean that al Qaeda would be destroyed and that it would remain "an inspiration of such militants." It should be noted that in 2010, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) tried to recruit students from Malaysian universities and a cell of foreigners were discovered and its members deported. Indonesian President Yudhoyono's office neither applauded nor condemned the killing and reaffirmed the country's fight against terrorism. The country's top Islamic body, the Indonesia Ulema Council, condemned the US burial of bin Laden's body at sea. Philippine President Aquino hailed the al Qaeda leader's death as "a signal defeat for the forces of extremism and terrorism."

In Indonesia, the four-month trial of radical cleric and JI founder Abu Bakar Bashir ended in mid-June with his conviction on terrorism charges based on his role in mobilizing and financing a militant group's armed training camp in Aceh. The group was discovered and suppressed by the police last year. Bashir denied any involvement – as he had in past judicial proceedings going all the way back to the 2002 Bali bombings. As in his previous judicial appearances, he claimed that Indonesian authorities fabricated the charges against him at the behest of the US and the Jews. Nevertheless, Bashir admitted raising money for the Jamash Anshorut Tauhid (JAT), but only for spiritual purposes. The US and Australia have long pressed Indonesia to bring Bashir and groups he supports to justice. His 15-year sentence is far shorter than the life sentence prosecutors had sought, though given his advanced age that may be a distinction without a difference. The radical cleric characterized it as a "ruling ... by the friends of the devil, and it is *haram* [forbidden in Islam] for me to accept it." On June 17, Sydney Jones, an expert on Indonesia for the International Crisis Group, warned that "officials need to ensure that [Bashir] does not lead a regular praying session from inside. He's got to be treated like a high-risk individual rather than a celebrity ... to keep him from contact with other inmates who could

be affected by his preaching.” She went on to note that prison mosques in Indonesia have been a significant source of radicalization, resulting in recidivism of those inmates exposed to it.

Finally, Indonesia’s most notorious terrorist fugitive, Umar Patek, a JI explosives expert wanted by the US, Australia, and the Philippines, was captured in Pakistan in January and held by its intelligence agency (ISI) until being repatriated to Indonesia in August. Patek is accused of being one of the masterminds behind the 2002 Bali bombings, although Indonesian officials were reluctant to extradite him because Jakarta’s anti-terrorism law came into effect after Bali and because his radical supporters could precipitate unrest and exploit any trial as a propaganda vehicle. The CIA provided intelligence that led to Patek’s arrest in Abbotabad, near bin Laden’s hideout. But, Pakistan authorities say that US officials did not seek to interrogate him, while Indonesian authorities have done so. On the other hand, the National Anti-Terror Agency of Indonesia was reported to have requested that Pakistan hand Patek over to the US, as was the case earlier with another JI Bali bombing perpetrator, Hambali, who was arrested in Thailand in 2003 with the help of US intelligence and later flown to Guantanamo Bay. However, Islamabad’s anger at Washington in the wake of the bin Laden killing may have led the ISI to reject Jakarta’s request that he be sent to the US and instead insist that the Indonesians take him. By mid-August, Indonesian officials were hopeful that Patek would provide valuable information on JI and other Southeast Asian terror networks he had contacted.

Washington distrust toward Burma continues

US efforts to assess the degree of political openness in the post-November 2010 Burmese regime have revealed only minimal flickers of change from its military predecessor. Its newspapers remain under government control and the Parliament meeting in the remote new capital Naypyidaw has permitted the small number of opposition legislators to ask difficult questions. But for the most part, the government has ignored them. Political prisoners remain locked up. Washington sent a high-level State Department official in May to consult Burma’s leaders and then, in early August, appointed a new special envoy to Burma – Derek Mitchell, formerly deputy assistant secretary of defense for Asian and Pacific security affairs. Mitchell’s brief is to develop a cohesive international approach to US policy. In effect, Washington is employing a carrot-and-stick policy with renewed engagement on one hand and even harsher economic sanctions on the other, including a near-total trade ban. Benchmarks for the removal of sanctions center on the release of over 2,000 political prisoners, reconciliation with the political opposition and ethnic minorities, increased respect for human rights norms, and adherence to UN nonproliferation agreements. None of these seems remotely on the horizon. These stipulations were repeated most recently by Secretary of State Clinton at the ARF in July.

Clinton also told ASEAN that Washington did not favor Burma’s chairmanship of the Association in 2014 unless significant reforms were carried out. Ambassador Mitchell echoed these concerns at his Senate confirmation hearing. While Mitchell said he plans to coordinate actions toward Burma with international partners, including ASEAN, China, India, and Europe, the continued hard line by the US suggests that collaboration may be difficult to achieve. India and ASEAN have adopted a more positive set of proposals for Burma’s new government in all likelihood to reduce Naypyidaw’s tilt toward China. The US emphasis on democracy and human rights, while commendable, seems to run counter to Washington’s geostrategic interests.

Meanwhile, the recent breakdown in ceasefire agreements with Burma's ethnic minorities appears to be leading the country closer to civil war.

The only significant loosening of political control by the new government is found in its meetings with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and her continued freedom to move throughout the country to greet her supporters. In late June, Aung San endorsed a US proposal to ask the United Nations to establish an international commission on human rights abuses in Burma. She hoped that such a commission would not be a tribunal on past behavior but rather a way to make sure that abuses do not recur. So far, Naypyidaw has done nothing to interfere with her criticisms of the regime.

Vietnam: human rights concerns alongside military cooperation

Hanoi's heavy-handed treatment of civil rights and democracy activists continues to strain US-Vietnam relations. At the end of May, in one of the biggest political trials in recent years, a Vietnamese court sentenced seven land rights campaigners and democracy activists to between two and eight years in jail for "attempting to overthrow the peoples administration." The activists had been helping residents of southern Ben Tre province file letters of complaint over loss of their land to local authorities, who then sold the land to developers. This is a common practice in local jurisdictions and a major source of corruption and grass roots unrest. Three of the accused were reported to be members of *Viet Ten*, a US-based opposition group that calls itself non-violent and pro-democracy but has been labeled a "terrorist group" by the Vietnamese government. The week before the verdict was announced, five US House of Representative members wrote to Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung that the trial constitutes "a stain on your government's increasingly troublesome religious freedom record." A separate letter by Loretta Sanchez, the Democratic co-chair of the Congressional Caucus on Vietnam, called the trial "a grave miscarriage of justice," accusing Hanoi of employing violence against the detainees at the time of their arrest and denying defense lawyers access to their clients. Amnesty International has noted that over the past two years Vietnam has sentenced dozens of peaceful political critics to long prison terms.

Despite the ongoing political tensions between Washington and Hanoi over civil rights, the two armed forces continue to build a stronger relationship. On Aug. 1, they signed their first formal military agreement since the end of the Vietnam War in the mid-1970s. The document deals with military medicine and provides for exchanges and research collaboration. Two weeks earlier, the Vietnamese and US navies engaged in joint noncombatant evacuation exercises off Vietnam's central coast, northeast of the Chinese-occupied Paracel Islands. The PRC's top military officer Gen. Chen Bingde called the timing of the US-Vietnam exercise "inappropriate" – in a statement during talks with his US counterpart, Adm. Mike Mullen.

Whither ASEAN as a politico-security organization

In 2015 ASEAN is scheduled to become a full-fledged Community consisting of three components – political-security, economics, and societal-human rights. The first of these has received the most international attention when conflicts among ASEAN members are not peacefully resolved and when an ASEAN member state commits violence against its own

people. Notable examples of these problems include Burma's attacks on its citizens, spats over disputed islands in the South China Sea, and the ongoing border conflict between Cambodia and Thailand. ASEAN's efforts to address the last, while well-meaning, have been notably unsuccessful and possibly counterproductive – such as when Indonesia supported Cambodia's efforts to drag Thailand before the UN Security Council, appearing to take Hun Sen's side in the dispute. Additionally, the question of whether Burma will take over the chairmanship of the Association in 2014 remains unresolved. Human Rights Watch stated that such an eventuality would make ASEAN the “laughing stock of nongovernmental forums.” The US was the first non-ASEAN country to send a dedicated ambassador to the ASEAN secretariat. Moreover, the Obama administration has placed considerable emphasis on ASEAN's key role in Asian politico-security organizations. Yet, ASEAN's integration continues to be problematic, and its ability to speak with a single authoritative voice on politico-security matters remains uncertain and at best premature. US reliance on a strong ASEAN lead for multilateral Asian security issues might well be reconsidered.

Chronology of US - Southeast Asian Relations

May - August 2011

May 3, 2011: US-based Human Rights Watch issues a report condemning the Thai government for not prosecuting those responsible for killings during the 2010 anti-government demonstrations in Bangkok.

May 7-8, 2011: ASEAN heads meet in Jakarta and discuss mediation of the Thai-Cambodian military conflict on the Preah Vihear temple grounds. No solution is reached.

May 11-20, 2011: The 2011 *Cooperation Afloat and Readiness Training (CARAT)* Thai-US exercises focus on maritime interdiction, combined operations at sea, anti-piracy and anti-smuggling. As in the past, interoperability of the participating navies is stressed.

May 14, 2011: Philippine President Benigno Aquino III visits the aircraft carrier *USS Carl Vinson*. Philippine officials say no message was implied in the visit; it was just “routine.”

May 18, 2011: Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Joseph Yun meets Burma's Foreign Minister Wunna Maung Lwin.

May 18-21, 2011: ASEAN Defense Ministers meet in Indonesia.

May 19, 2011: Deputy Assistant Secretary Yun meets Nobel Prize winner and Burma opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi in Rangoon. He also meets several leaders of the new government.

May 23, 2011: Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and the Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell visits Kuala Lumpur to discuss global terrorism, trade policy, and the role of US armed forces in the Pacific.

May 25-June 1, 2011: The US and Indonesian navies hold their 17th *CARAT* exercise with three US warships participating and a total of 1,600 Navy and Marine personnel.

May 28, 2011: Deputy Assistant Secretary Yun, visiting Burma, states the US is seeking “common ground” with the new government. Nevertheless, the Obama administration has extended economic sanctions.

May 30, 2011: Members of the US Congress criticize Vietnam for convicting seven land rights activists and sentencing them to between two and eight years in jail for “subversion.”

June 1, 2011: US Pacific Command Commander Adm. Robert Willard in an address to Malaysia’s Institute for Security and Strategic Studies Asia-Pacific Roundtable praises cooperation between the two countries’ navies and urges peaceful negotiation to resolve South China Sea conflicts.

June 2, 2011: Sen. John McCain meets Burma opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi in Rangoon and pledges support for democracy restoration.

June 3-5, 2011: The 10th annual Shangri-La Asia-Pacific Security Dialogue is held in Singapore.

June 8, 2011: Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell arrives in Surabaya, Indonesia, to prepare for the East Asia Summit, which President Obama will attend in November.

June 10, 2011: US Marines complete a training program for Thai police and military on the use of nonlethal force for crowd control one year after the Thai military killed 91 in an anti-coup insurrection in Bangkok.

June 13, 2011: Sen. James Webb introduces Senate resolution condemning China’s use of force in the South China Sea and calling for peaceful, multilateral negotiations of maritime disputes.

June 14, 2011: US Ambassador to the Philippines Harry Thomas states that the US is committed to helping the Philippines in any dispute over the South China Sea.

June 15-25, 2011: The US Navy leads a naval counter-terrorist (*SEACAT*) exercise in the Sulu Sea with ships from the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and Brunei.

June 16, 2011: Radical Indonesian cleric Abu Bakar Bashir, the spiritual founder of Al Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiyah, is convicted of terrorism and sentenced to 15 years in jail.

June 16-17, 2011: US and Vietnam hold their fourth Political, Security, and Defense Dialogue in Washington. Under Secretary of State William Burns and Assistant Secretary Campbell meet Vice Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh to discuss the strategic dimensions of the relationship.

June 23, 2011: Secretary of State Clinton meets Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Del Rosario and affirms US security commitments.

June 24, 2011: Director of National Intelligence James Clapper meets Secretary del Rosario and promises to share intelligence on the regional maritime situation.

June 25, 2011: The State Department announces the US is consulting with other countries to establish a UN commission of inquiry to investigate human rights violations in Burma.

June 27, 2011: The four remaining top leaders of the Khmer Rouge go before the UN-backed genocide tribunal in Phnom Penh for offenses committed between 1975 and 1979.

June 27, 2011: The US Senate passes a resolution sponsored by Sen. Webb deploring China's use of force against Philippine and Vietnamese ships.

June 27-28,, 2011: Singapore complains that the US State Department's annual Trafficking in Persons Report was riddled with "inaccuracies" about the city-state's actual record. Malaysia similarly complains.

June 28-July 8, 2011: US and Philippine navies hold their annual *CARAT* exercise in the waters east of Palawan.

July 3, 2011: Thailand's Pheu Thai Party led by Yingluck Shinawatra wins an absolute parliamentary majority in Thailand's national election over the governing Democratic Party.

July 4, 2011: Burma's Deputy Chief of Mission to the US requests political asylum, citing the flawed elections in his country, conflicts with ethnic minority groups, and continued threats against Aung San Suu Kyi.

July 8, 2011: A US Federal Court of Appeals rules that Indonesian villagers in Aceh have the right to sue Exxon-Mobil in US courts for alleged human rights abuses dating back to 2001.

July 15, 2011: Three US Navy ships begin a seven-day exercise with the Vietnamese Navy. Rear Adm. Tom Carney states the long-planned exercise demonstrates America's ongoing presence in the Western Pacific and South China Sea.

July 18, 2011: The International Court of Justice rules that Thailand and Cambodia should withdraw their forces from a disputed border area adjacent to the Preah Vihear temple.

July 19, 2011: Sen. Webb calls on the State Department to clarify US treaty commitments to aid the Philippines in the event China uses force in the South China Sea.

July 20, 2011: China and ASEAN agree to a set of guidelines that would be part of a revised Code of Conduct on the South China Sea disputes. Secretary of State Clinton praises the new guidelines as "an important first step."

July 22, 2011: Secretary Clinton at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) gathering in Bali urges ASEAN to convince Burma to become more "seriously involved with the international community" including domestic political reforms and "nonproliferation agreements."

July 23, 2011: The ARF convenes with Secretary Clinton attending. She urges South China Sea disputants to back their claims with legal evidence – a challenge to China’s declaration of sovereignty over vast stretches of the region.

July 26, 2011: Secretary Clinton in Hong Kong calls on Asian states to move from “a hodgepodge of inconsistent and partial bilateral [trade] agreements” to “true regional integration.”

July 27-29, 2011: ASEAN naval chiefs meet formally for the first time in Hanoi.

Aug. 1, 2011: The US and Vietnam open their first formal military relationship with a collaborative agreement in military medicine.

Aug. 2, 2011: Derek Mitchell, recently deputy assistant secretary of defense, is appointed to be special envoy to Burma to help develop a cohesive international policy toward the country.

Aug. 6, 2011: The *USS George Washington* calls in Loem Chabang, Thailand. Sailors on board engage in civic action as well as tourism.

Aug. 11, 2011: Umar Patek, one of Southeast Asia’s most wanted terrorists, is extradited from Pakistan to Indonesia.

Aug. 13, 2011: The aircraft carrier *USS George Washington* calls in Vietnam, receiving Vietnamese officials and US embassy personnel.

Aug. 14-29, 2011: Naval forces of the US and Singapore conduct their 17th *CARAT* exercise.

Aug. 24, 2011: In a letter to Secretary Clinton, 16 US senators urge Vietnam to free dissident priest Nguyen Van Ly, saying his arrest could jeopardize Washington’s growing ties with Hanoi.

Aug. 25, 2011: Thai-Cambodian Regional Border Committee meeting is held in Thailand’s northeastern Nakhon Ratchasima province to discuss several issues including troop withdrawal.

Aug. 27, 2011: Presidential election is held in Singapore; former Deputy Prime Minister Tony Tan wins.

Aug. 29, 2011: Two Vietnamese democracy activists are among more than 10,000 prisoners granted amnesty by Hanoi to mark the country’s National Day.

Aug. 31, 2011: Philippine Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario says Kristie Kenney was “a dismal failure in helping the Filipinos defend our democracy” following the release of her leaked comments criticizing the country’s democracy icon Corazon Aquino.