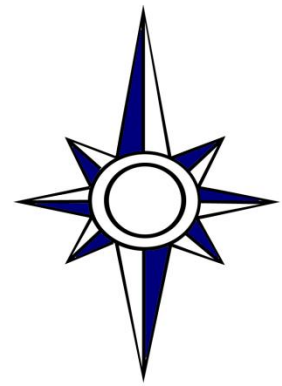


Comparative Connections

A Triannual E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations



US-Southeast Asia Relations:

Military Commitments and Human Rights Concerns

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In emphasizing the Southeast Asian component of the US rebalance to Asia, US officials have particularly noted the “whole of government” approach that involves economics, strengthening regional institutions, and expanding partnerships. Moreover, much of the motivation for the rebalance, according to these officials, comes from Southeast Asians pressing for US leadership. In the realm of defense, the US emphasizes assisting partners to improve their own capabilities and working within security-related institutions such as the East Asia Summit – the premier forum for political-security issues in Asia. Washington is supporting security improvements in a number of countries in the region, including the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Alongside these growing partnerships, however, are US criticisms of human rights problems in the Indochinese countries, Burma, and Indonesia that add friction to the relationships.

The “rebalance” and Southeast Asia

Although the Obama administration’s Asia rebalance emphasizes Southeast Asia and a “whole of government” approach, incorporating diplomacy, educational support, and international trade, the primary concerns of Southeast Asian leaders are fixed on US security relations. As National Security Adviser Tom Donilon stated in a major foreign policy address to The Asia Society in New York on March 11: “[T]he United States is implementing a comprehensive, multi-dimensional strategy: strengthening alliances, deepening partnerships with emerging powers, building a constructive relationship with China, empowering regional institutions, and helping to build a regional economic architecture that can sustain shared prosperity.” In the same speech, he averred that the US rebalance “is also a response to the strong demand signal from leaders and publics across the region for US leadership, economic engagement sustained attention to regional institutions and defense of international rules and norms.” Donilon also reiterated a point made a few months earlier that within Asia the rebalance is designed “to recognize the growing importance of Southeast Asia.”

In contrast to the Bush administration, whose security orientation to Southeast Asia seemed exclusively focused on counterterrorism, the Obama administration accentuates the buildup of traditional air and naval assets in the region, collaboration with partners and allies to develop their own defense capabilities, and cooperation with Asian states in regional political institutions, including ASEAN’s many iterations. Giving pride of place to the East Asia Summit (EAS) – which the US joined in 2011 – Donilon noted that the president would attend the summit every year and that the US goal is “to elevate the EAS as the premier forum for dealing with political and security issues in Asia.” Among the ASEAN states, the national security advisor singled out

US allies Thailand and the Philippines as well as Indonesia. The relationship with Jakarta is now termed a “Comprehensive Partnership,” recognizing the country’s important role as a leader in ASEAN-based political-security matters.

Linking East Asia to the Indian Ocean region on Feb. 26, in a statement before the US House Committee on Foreign Affairs titled “The Rebalance to Asia: Why South Asia Matters (Part I),” acting Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Joseph Yun described the Indian Ocean region and East Asia as strategically integrated. He noted that Washington’s ally, Australia, borders the Indian Ocean as did several ASEAN members, including Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. While acknowledging the negative effects of the sequestration budget cuts for the US Department of Defense, Yun stated they will not negatively affect “...in concrete terms – our firm and unwavering commitment to the Asia-Pacific region.” And, since the Seventh Fleet traverses the Indian Ocean as well as the China seas, at least for the US Navy, the two regions have been seen as an integrated theater for a long time. Yun insisted that the US Asian alliances and partnerships were of “fundamental importance to our future prosperity and security,” and that they “created the conditions for robust market and trade expansion.” Southeast Asian states have welcomed this engagement, according to Yun: “The most frequent message ... has been the same – the United States’ role in Asia is critical, and we want to see you even more engaged on all fronts – diplomatically, militarily, and economically.”

The specifics of the rebalance to Asia include a shift of 60 percent of US naval assets to the region by 2020, enhancement of the US air force presence by 2017 with additional *F-22s* and bombers, as well as ISR assets such as the *MQ-9 Reaper*, the *U-2*, and the *Global Hawk*. Marine rotations through Darwin were described by Deputy Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter in a March 20 speech in Jakarta as a “key first step” in more bilateral and multilateral exercises throughout the region. Carter also noted that the US is working to improve Philippine military capacities and is increasing “our rotational presence and partnerships with this key treaty ally.” In Singapore – a crucial strategic partner – this spring, the US is deploying the first of four scheduled Littoral Combat Ships (LCS), designed specifically to work with regional partners. (However, it should be noted that while the LCS is quite satisfactory for maritime law enforcement and other low-intensity missions, it is not a frigate that can form part of an open ocean naval formation. Limited in both fire power and the ability to defend itself, the ship is not designed to be a component of a main battle fleet.)

Secretary Carter surveyed the region, highlighting the November 2012 update of the US-Thailand Joint Vision Statement – the first in 50 years; a new Washington Declaration with New Zealand that improves maritime security cooperation; a new memorandum of understanding with Vietnam that also covers maritime security; and for Indonesia and Malaysia, the “build[ing] of partner capacity to conduct maritime security and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.” These statements by US military and diplomatic leaders are designed not only to reassure Southeast Asian counterparts of a continuing and enhanced US military presence, but also to show that the profile of US activities in the region will emphasize collaboration with partners and the buildup of these countries’ own maritime defense capacities so that they can better protect their own exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and maritime space claims under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Even the new ASEAN Secretary General Le Luong Minh in a Feb. 11 meeting with US Pacific Command (USPACOM) Commander Adm.

Samuel Locklear expressed ASEAN's appreciation for "the important role the United States plays in the region."

The most elaborate annual US military exercise in Southeast Asia is *Cobra Gold*, held in Thailand with several thousand military personnel from a number of Asian countries, though primarily involving US and Thai armed forces. Designed to demonstrate US state-of-the-art capabilities in land, sea, and air maneuvers, the 10-day exercise also provided collaboration opportunities for Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei, Singapore, and Indonesia as well as South Korea and Japan. While the exercises in recent years have emphasized humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and search and rescue, the 2013 *Cobra Gold* included a beach landing component that could be relevant to a hypothetical joint effort to take islands in the South China Sea that have been occupied by an adversary. Noteworthy, too, is that Burma sent observers for the first time to the staff planning and military medicine portions of the exercise. To round out ASEAN participants, Laos and Cambodia sent observers, while Thai, Malaysian, Singaporean, and Indonesian troops were deployed in the name of ASEAN.

One of the most prominent Southeast Asian security commentators, Kavi Chongkittavorn, whose widely read columns appear regularly in Bangkok's *The Nation* and *Khom Chat Luk*, although praising *Cobra Gold*'s comprehensive participation, expressed concern about Thai security relations with the US. Despite co-hosting *Cobra Gold* on Thai territory for 32 consecutive years, Kavi wrote of his disappointment in mid-February commentaries on Thailand's relative lack of interest compared to other ASEAN participants. He noted that Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia sent some of their best military strategists to the exercise to learn as much as they could about US military technologies and communications gear as well as joint operations with other forces. However, Thai participants were lower-level officers, frequently lacking English language capabilities – the language of the exercise – and seemed to view the 10 day event as an unwelcome disruption to their usual routine. Based on past experience, according to Kavi in the Feb. 11 *The Nation Online*, "Thai military leaders seldom read the reports or follow up with the lessons learned."

The other Southeast Asian state with which elaborate combined military maneuvers occur is the Philippines. The 29th *Balikatan* exercise was held April 5-17. It was preceded in December 2012 by a new Armed Forces of the Philippines Modernization Act that allocated nearly \$2 billion to upgrade the country's military capacity. That, in turn, was followed by discussions with the US assistant secretaries of state and defense, Kurt Campbell and Mark Lippert, as well as the USPACOM's Adm. Locklear. These talks focused on increasing military cooperation and possibly establishing US facilities for joint use in the Philippines. Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert del Rosario at the launch of the 12-day *Balikatan* declared: "For my country, we need to secure our borders and protect our territorial integrity more vigorously than we have before. *Balikatan*, with its complicated and complete set of exercises, is an important contribution in not only preparing our armed forces to work together but also in building my country's own capacity to defend itself."

Del Rosario went on to say that it was vital for the country to have more US forces rotate throughout the year in addition to those involved in *Balikatan*. Placing US exercises in the context of disputes in the South China Sea, he stated that *Balikatan* came "at a crucial time [as]

excessive and exaggerated maritime and territorial claims have not only created uncertainty but have undermined the rule of law; regional peace and stability had been placed at serious risk.”

In an endeavor to further solidify the US defense commitment to the Philippines by emphasizing the symmetrical nature of their defense treaty, on April 13, Foreign Secretary del Rosario and Defense Secretary Voltaire Guzman averred that in light of tensions on the Korean Peninsula, the Philippines was prepared to allow US forces the use of Philippine bases in the event of war with North Korea. Both Philippine secretaries emphasized that just as the defense treaty calls on the US to defend the Philippines, so the latter has an obligation to assist the US in its time of need.

Discussing the March visit of Deputy Secretary of Defense Carter, del Rosario implied that US officials endorsed the Philippine legal challenge to bring China before an UNCLOS arbitral tribunal that would interpret Chinese and Philippine obligations under the UNCLOS, specifically what the treaty means by territorial sea, contiguous zone, EEZ, and continental shelf. Additionally, the Philippines asked that the arbitral tribunal determine the legal status of features in the South China Sea and whether these features were qualified to obtain a maritime zone greater than 12 nautical miles. Manila believes that China’s claims violate UNCLOS and that if the arbitral tribunal agrees to hear the Philippine challenge, China’s legal interpretation of its extensive South China Sea claims would be shown to be inconsistent with the convention. Of course, China has rejected the Philippine legal challenge. Washington’s support for the Philippine presentation to the UN arbitral tribunal seems to fit with US support for any peaceful, legal, and UNCLOS-based efforts at resolving the South China Sea disputes.

The US is also strengthening its defense relationship with Indonesia. Since the US resumed military ties with Jakarta in 2005, joint exercises have focused on counter-piracy and enhanced maritime warfare techniques. During a Feb. 12 visit by US Seventh Fleet Commander Vice Adm. Scott Swift, Indonesian Navy Chief of Staff Vice Adm. Marsetio expressed a desire for increased naval exercises at a higher level of technical skill. Currently, the two navies engage annually in four significant exercises: *Flash Iron*, *Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET)*, *Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT)*, and *Salvex*. Swift expressed confidence that the Indonesian Navy would play a bigger role in the region.

Southeast Asian multilateralism in the rebalance

While Washington has long identified ASEAN as a premier international body for politico-security discussions in Asia, for the first time in 2013 under the auspices of the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM+) framework, the Association plans to hold its inaugural military exercise June 17-20. In early February during a visit to Brunei – ASEAN’s current rotating chair – Adm. Locklear announced that the US would provide a logistics ship, a medical team, and planning expertise for the event. He noted that the planners would be sent not to run the exercise but “to assist the military of Brunei in all of the complexities of planning such a large exercise.” The inaugural exercise will not be combat-oriented but will focus on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief/military medicine. It will involve 18 countries for the purpose of strengthening their interoperability. Locklear described the forthcoming event as landmark cooperation among the ASEAN defense forces and its dialogue partners, including the US, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, India, New Zealand, and Russia as stated in the Feb. 7

Brunei Times Online. During his visit, the PACOM commander also endorsed the conclusion of a code of conduct for the resource-rich South China Sea. He said a code of conduct would govern how military and law enforcement agencies from claimant countries interact in the disputed waters. Nonetheless, he demurred from any prospect of US intervention on ASEAN's behalf: "Ultimately, it will be up to ASEAN and China to come to terms with what the code of conduct looks like. We're very supportive of it and hope it comes quickly." He did go on, however, to support the Philippine submission of definitional claims concerning South China Sea features to a UN tribunal.

Both Deputy Secretary of Defense Carter and acting Assistant Secretary of State Yun in major statements over the past few months insisted that officials at the secretarial level from both departments would attend all ASEAN ministerial meetings as a sign of the US commitment to strengthen ASEAN-based regional institutions, including the EAS. In Feb. 26 testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Yun stated that the US "supported efforts to shape the Summit into the region's premier forum to discuss political and strategic issues." The EAS is seen as "defining the agenda for other ASEAN-related institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ADMM+."

Philippines: an embarrassing naval accident

For decades, US forces have exercised in and around the Philippines. In the course of these activities mistakes and accidents have occurred. One of the most embarrassing transpired on Jan. 17 when the US Navy minesweeper *USS Guardian* ran aground at the Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park, a coral sanctuary, designated by UNESCO in 1992 as a World Heritage Site. The Philippine Navy expressed dismay since there are designated sea lanes where ships are supposed to sail far from the reefs. Moreover, the marine park rangers were not allowed to board the US ship to inspect the damage and were told instead to contact the US Embassy in Manila. The accident occurred as US Navy ships were increasing the tempo of their visits to the Philippines for joint exercises, bunkering, and rest and recreation as part of the US rebalance.

While Vice Adm. Swift expressed regret over the grounding and the US armed forces newspaper *Stars and Stripes* attributed the accident to inaccurate navigational charts, a Palawan Congressman, Antonio Alvarez, on Jan. 21 accused the minesweeper of "willfully trespassing" on Philippine territory and not even reporting the incident to park authorities or the Philippine Navy. Other anti-American protests were sparked by the minesweeper's misfortune.

By late January, it was clear the *USS Guardian* could not be floated from the coral reef, and a decision was made to dismantle the vessel and remove it piece by piece. This plan kept salvage equipment in deeper water and minimized further damage to the reef. The loss of the vessel is a serious blow for the stressed US minesweeper force. Including the *Guardian*, 12 of its 14 ships are forward deployed and have been called upon to expand operations in the Persian Gulf.

Although initially rejecting Philippine involvement in the investigation of the minesweeper's mishap, when the decision was made to dismantle the ship, the US Navy shared its information with the Philippine Maritime Casualty Investigating Team for its own independent inquiry. On April 8, the two governments agreed that damage was inflicted on 2,345 sq. meters of coral,

much lower than the initial estimate of 4,000 sq. meters. The US has agreed to pay \$1.4 million in fines to the Philippines, though the fine paled in comparison to the estimated \$45 million salvage operation as reported in the April 8 Philippine *Inquirer.net*. There are longer term concerns: in a Feb. 15 *RSIS Commentaries* article, Australian naval expert Sam Bateman noted that archipelagic countries such as the Philippines are likely to take a harder line on warships moving through their waters. The Philippines, Indonesia, and China already have laws requiring countries to give prior notification of innocent passage in archipelagic waters. The US disputes this requirement and, as Bateman writes, this disagreement could stress bilateral relations at a time when the US Navy is increasing its activities in the region as part of the rebalance.

Burma: ethnic conflicts strain relations

Age-old ethnic conflicts predating both the military junta in the 1960s and the more liberal transition under Thein Sein have surged with Buddhist pogroms against Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine state and in the central part of the country as well as military clashes with the Kachin minority along the China border. Referencing the military attacks on Kachin villages while a government ceasefire was supposedly in place, on Jan. 9 US Ambassador to Burma Derek Mitchell expressed “concern,” but stopped short of condemning the attacks, possibly because of Washington’s two-year-old engagement with the new government. On Jan. 23, the US called on both sides to establish dialogue and for Burma to provide “unhindered access for UN and international aid agencies.” A day later, the embassy issued a statement that “strongly opposes the fighting” and implied the army was the sole aggressor.

Perhaps most disappointing to Burma’s ethnic minorities, however, were the Nobel laureate and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi’s remarks in Hawaii that expressed admiration for the Burmese military in contrast to her silence about its campaign against the Kachin. Suu Kyi’s apparent courtship of the military may well be related to her probable desire to run for president, an opportunity that could only occur if the country’s constitution is amended, since current provisions prohibit her candidacy.

While acknowledging that Burma still has a long way to go in human rights reforms, especially with respect to women, ethnic minorities, religious tolerance, land rights, and international standards on anti-corruption, and transparency, testimony by the State Department’s Special Representative for Burma W. Patrick Murphy before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission on Feb. 28 nevertheless praised the government for releasing political prisoners, establishing workers’ rights, relaxing media censorship, outlawing forced labor, and eliminating child soldiers. Murphy noted that the US government has responded by reestablishing a USAID Mission in Rangoon and supporting Burma’s reengagement with the World Bank, the Asia Development Bank, and the IMF. Washington has also modified earlier sanctions so that US businesses are better able to invest in the country.

Priscilla Clapp, a long-time Burma specialist in the State Department and former charge d’affaires in Rangoon, visited the country in March to assess the ethnic strife. She suggested it was at least partly instigated by elements within the military along with militant Buddhists who wanted to strengthen the army’s role in maintaining order. By April, estimates were that 13,000 Rohingyas had fled by sea, seeking refuge in Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, though many drowned in

the effort or were turned back by local authorities. In an early April interview with the *Washington Post*, Clapp stated she believed there were divisions between the uniformed military who feared a weakening of their role and the ex-generals who ran the government. Moreover, she pointed out that Burma had yet to sever its relations with North Korea, though the US continues to raise the issue with the government.

Human rights concerns persist in Indochina

In wide-ranging testimony before the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on March 21, acting Assistant Secretary of State Yun stated that the three Indochinese states (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia) continued to fall short on freedom of expression and open media as well as the arrest of dissidents. He also expressed disappointment in the November 2012 ASEAN Human Rights Declaration, which appears to validate its member-states' right to place national security concerns over individual liberties as well as continue to emphasize noninterference in members' internal affairs. Yun stated: "We urge ASEAN, in consultation with civil society, to amend and strengthen its Declaration to reflect a commitment to protect and advance fully the fundamental freedoms of its people and to bring the document in line with the ... UDHR and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights." Yun said the US will "work closely with our partners in the Asia-Pacific region to promote a variety of human rights and democracy issues [and] to strengthen judicial systems and rule of law."

In January, a court in central Vietnam convicted 14 writers and political activists for plotting to overthrow the government, with sentences ranging from three to 13 years. Members of the redemptory group in the Roman Catholic Church, the convicted had taken up the causes of governmental land seizures and corruption. The US Embassy in Hanoi issued a statement on Jan. 10 that the convictions "deeply troubled" the US government and called them "part of a disturbing human rights trend in Vietnam." The 14 were also accused of links to Viet Tan, an overseas Vietnamese group that lobbies for political change in Vietnam, one the Vietnamese government labels a terrorist organization – charges that the US says lack any evidence. The US statement averred that the conviction of these individuals was "inconsistent with Vietnam's obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as well as ... the Universal Declaration of Human Rights relating to freedom of expression and due process."

The convictions follow a pattern of jailing reporters and bloggers who protest the government's impunity in seizing land from poor people and then selling it to real estate and industrial interests. Vietnam is the sixth worst jailer of journalists in the world. As Southeast Asian specialist Carlyle Thayer pointed out in a Feb. 7 *Background Briefing*, the country's human rights record is a major obstacle to the conclusion of a strategic partnership with Washington.

The human rights situation in Laos is equally problematic. Currently, the US is expressing concern over the disappearance of a US-trained agricultural specialist, Somboth Samphone, who appeared to be abducted at a police checkpoint in December and has not been seen or heard from since. The US has been unable to obtain any information on what has happened to Somboth. Although Laos has initiated some liberal changes over the last few years, permitting the operation of nonprofit organizations and allowing the National Assembly to more openly debate government policy, general freedom of expression in the society is still not tolerated.

In March, Washington sent a team of investigators to look into the disappearance of Somboth and three other Laotian-Americans, but the government refused to give the team access to the southern province of Savannakhet where the other three disappeared. The US investigating team was seeking access to a site where a van was reportedly discovered with the remains of three bodies inside. Thomas Fuller, a Southeast Asia correspondent for the *New York Times*, noted on March 20 that Laotian security services have been linked to the assassination of Laotian dissidents seeking refuge in Thailand. Activists who challenge rampant land seizures are regularly arrested or disappear. Visiting Vientiane, Secretary of State John Kerry on March 25 asked the government to make public the results of its investigation into the Somboth disappearance to no avail. The governments of ASEAN have remained silent on the Laotian disappearances. Human Rights Watch claimed that ASEAN had failed its first test in Laos since the adoption of the ASEAN Declaration on Human Rights.

An assessment

Virtually all Southeast Asian states welcome the US rebalance to the Asia-Pacific, especially in light of China's growing naval and civilian maritime law enforcement fleets' presence throughout the South China Sea. While ASEAN states are building their own anti-access capabilities with aircraft and ship acquisitions, including submarines, they do not have the ability to balance the PRC presence – hence the gratitude for the US commitment to deploy the largest portion of its overseas air and naval assets to the western Pacific. Nevertheless, Southeast Asian leaders look askance at the political gridlock within the US Congress and between Congress and the White House that is embodied in sequestration. This potentially decade-long \$500 billion overall reduction in the US defense budget on top of the Obama administration's previous defense cuts have led to growing skepticism about Washington's ability to sustain the rebalance. If the US air and naval presence stagnates or declines over time while the PLA's increases, Southeast Asian security policies could well be modified to adjust to China's growing profile to the detriment of US interests in the region. The US government must come up with a budgetary alternative to sequestration – one that can reassure allies and partners in the region.

Chronology of US - Southeast Asian Relations

January - April 2013

Jan. 2, 2013: US condemns Burma's use of air strikes against Kachin rebels in northern Burma.

Jan. 4, 2013: US Ambassador to Malaysia Paul Jones meets Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin to discuss strengthening the American English Teaching Assistance program.

Jan. 8, 2013: The Islamist group Hizbut Tahir Indonesia (HIT) meets the Jakarta Provincial Government to protest the expansion and renovation of the US Embassy, saying it will strengthen the US ability to interfere in Indonesia's political affairs.

Jan. 8, 2013: Derek Mitchell, US ambassador to Burma, says he raised the Burmese military attacks on the Kachins with authorities in Naypyidaw but in a newspaper statement did not appear to condemn them.

Jan. 9, 2013: In response to a Vietnamese court conviction with long prison sentences for 14 bloggers and other political and social activists, the US embassy states it was “deeply troubled” with the convictions, which are seen as “part of a disturbing human rights trend in Vietnam.”

Jan. 16, 2013: US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton calls on the Lao government to investigate the disappearance of US-educated activist Sombath Somphone.

Jan. 17, 2013: The minesweeper, *USS Guardian*, runs aground causing extensive damage to Tubbataha Reef, a UNESCO world heritage site and Philippine national park located in the Sulu Sea near the island of Palawan.

Jan. 22, 2013: Philippines announces it submitted its dispute with China over territorial claims in the South China to a UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) arbitration tribunal.

Jan. 24, 2013: US Embassy in Rangoon issues a statement claiming the Burmese Army offensive in Kachin state is causing civilian casualties and undermining efforts at national reconciliation.

Jan. 25, 2013: US Ambassador to the Philippines Harry Thomas apologizes for the grounding of the *USS Guardian* on Tubbataha Reef and attributes the accident to faulty digital navigation charts, though an investigation into the cause continues.

Jan. 27, 2013: World Bank announces a long-awaited deal that allows Burma to clear part of its decades-old foreign debt. This opens the door for new lending to the country.

Jan. 28, 2013: Twenty of the world’s largest creditors, including the US, agree to cut nearly 50 percent of Burma’s foreign debt and provide a seven year grace period for the remainder.

Jan. 28-30, 2013: US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee delegation led by its chair Ed Royce visits the Philippines for discussions. They express regret for the grounding of the *USS Guardian* and voice support for Manila’s decision to bring South China Sea claims to arbitration under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Jan. 30, 2013: US and Timor-Leste navies begin their first *CARAT* exercise. US Coast Guard personnel are also participating. The exercise includes at sea and classroom components.

Feb. 8, 2013: US Pacific Command (USPACOM) Commander Adm. Samuel Locklear addresses the US-Indonesia Society in Jakarta on the US “rebalance” to the Asia-Pacific and the various components of the US-Indonesia Comprehensive Partnership.

Feb. 8, 2013: US State Department welcomes the Burmese government’s announcement of the formation of a Committee on Political Prisoners, including both officials and society members to review the potential release of all remaining political prisoners.

Feb. 11, 2013: US Ambassador to ASEAN David Carden and Adm. Locklear meet the new ASEAN Secretary General Le Luong Minh to discuss regional security concerns, including US support for “rules-based Asia-Pacific regional architecture.”

Feb. 11-21, 2013: The 32nd annual *Corbra Gold* exercise is held in Thailand involving 13,000 military personnel from a several Asian states plus observers from a dozen others.

Feb. 12, 2013: Secretary of State John Kerry telephones Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert del Rosario to reaffirm US support for Philippine territorial defense.

Feb. 12, 2013: Some 180 Filipinos, calling themselves the “Royal Army of Sulu,” land at the village of Tanduo in Lahad Datu town in Sabah and claim the region as part of the Sultanate of Sulu and North Borneo.

Feb. 19, 2013: US Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Michael Posner visits Phnom Penh and presses Cambodia to release Mam Sonondo, owner of Beehive Radio, who was sentenced to 29 years in prison for covering Cambodia’s military crackdown on demonstrators protesting land evictions. He also urges the government to permit the return of self-exiled opposition leader Sam Rainsy to run in the forthcoming July election.

Feb. 19, 2013: Burma and the US resume counter-narcotics cooperation. An agreement signed in Naypyidaw restarts joint opium poppy yield surveys and counter-narcotics training.

Feb. 21-March 1, 2013: Assistant Secretary of State Jose Fernandez, specializing in economic matters, visits the Philippines, Burma, Thailand, and Singapore to discuss commercial, trade policies, and regional economic integration.

Feb. 22, 2013: US Treasury Department eases sanctions on four Burmese banks, allowing them to do business with US companies, even though some bank officials are on a list of former junta military personnel who have been ostracized by the US.

March 4, 2013: Malaysian military engages in an assault on a group of armed Philippine nationals known as the Royal Sulu Army that is occupying parts of Sabah state.

March 9-12, 2013: The Sultan of Brunei visits the US and meets President Obama and Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel. Brunei chairs ASEAN this year and hosts the US-ASEAN Summit.

March 13, 2013: Singapore Foreign Minister K. Shammugan visits Washington for talks with Secretary of State John Kerry.

March 19, 2013: In the Philippines, US Deputy Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter assures Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert del Rosario that the US will continue efforts to strengthen the Philippine Armed Forces.

March 19, 2013: Deputy Secretary Carter meets Indonesia’s minister of defense and members of the ASEAN Committee of Permanent Representatives in Jakarta.

March 20, 2013: US registers its concern about Vietnam's allegation and China's denial that a Chinese boat fired at a Vietnamese fishing boat, setting its cabin ablaze near the Paracel Islands.

March 25, 2013: Secretary Kerry urges the Laotian government to make public the results of an investigation into the disappearance and possible abduction of Samboth Somphone.

April 1, 2013: Secretary Kerry meets Foreign Secretary del Rosario in Washington and seems to endorse an arbitration solution to the South China Sea conflicts.

April 1-4, 2013: Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong visits Washington for meetings at the White House, State Department, Pentagon, and the US Trade Representative.

April 5-17, 2013: The annual *Balikatan* US-Philippine military exercise is held, this year emphasizing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

April 8, 2013: Philippine government announces that the US Navy has turned over a variety of documents relating to the grounding of the *USS Guardian* on Tubbataha Reef so the Philippine Maritime Casualty Investigating Team can carry out its own assessment.

April 9, 2013: US Coast Guard Rear Adm. William Lee pledges US support for Vietnam's fishing protection force at a meeting in Maryland.

April 13, 2013: Foreign Secretary del Rosario says that US forces could be stationed at Philippine military bases under the terms of mutual support in the defense treaty if the US went to war with North Korea.

April 16, 2013: Philippine President Benigno Aquino expresses deep sympathy to the people of Boston in the aftermath of the bombing at the Boston Marathon.

April 16, 2013: Muhammadiyah, Indonesia's second largest Muslim organization, condemns the Boston Marathon bombers as "inhumane" and "humankind's common enemy."

April 18, 2013: The King and Queen of Thailand send a condolence message to President Obama over the Boston Marathon bombing.

April 18, 2013: The *USS Freedom*, a Littoral Combat Ship (LCS), arrives in Singapore for a 10-month deployment.

April 24, 2013: State Department welcomes Burma's release of 56 political prisoners as a gesture to the European Union's lifting of economic sanctions. However, the State Department also urges the government to release all remaining political prisoners estimated at 175.

April 24-25, 2013: ASEAN leaders meet in Brunei for their annual summit. The South China Sea conflicts and agreeing on an ASEAN Code of Conduct are high on the agenda.

