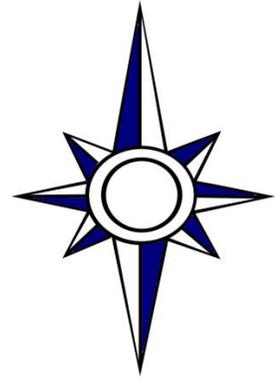


Comparative Connections

A Triannual E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations



US-Southeast Asia Relations: Diplomatic Gambits

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Senior US officials at multilateral ASEAN-based meetings in Southeast Asia have touted the Association's centrality for the Obama administration's rebalance to Asia. Both President Obama and Secretary of State Kerry have emphasized that ASEAN ensures that all states "big and small" can work together for Asia's security and prosperity. However, a US proposal at the East Asia Summit (EAS) that all South China Sea claimants "freeze" efforts to alter the status quo on the islets they control was not endorsed at the November meeting. In the Philippines, some progress was achieved by Washington and Manila in determining which military bases would become available for future visiting US forces to implement the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), though opponents have challenged its constitutionality in the Philippine Supreme Court. Indonesia's newly elected President Joko Widodo unveiled an ambitious maritime development program that has been praised by the US. Forging closer relations with Vietnam, the US partially lifted its arms embargo, promising support for the country's coastal maritime defense, including boats and surveillance aircraft. While relations with Burma continued to expand, US officials are concerned about the persistence of ethnic conflicts, particularly the persecution of Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State. US officials also expressed dismay over a Malaysian decision to retain the 1948 Sedition Act after the Najib government had promised to repeal it. And, despite US concern about the continued crackdown on dissent by the military government in Thailand, the annual *Cobra Gold* multinational military exercise will be held next year.

Rebalance update and ASEAN centrality

Southeast Asia remains central to the Obama administration's rebalance – a combination of enhanced cooperative security, economic growth, and multilateral diplomacy. In Southeast Asia, these efforts include strengthened alliance ties with the Philippines and Australia and growing partnerships with Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia. For Washington, these activities center on maritime security, freedom of navigation, and the peaceful settlement of disputes in the South China Sea. Over the past four months, both Secretary of State John Kerry and President Barack Obama focused on ASEAN's centrality for these endeavors. At the 30th anniversary of the US-ASEAN Business Council in Washington on Oct. 2, Kerry averred: "ASEAN really is front and center in the region's multilateral architecture, and we want it to remain there. ASEAN is central to upholding the rules-based system throughout the Asia-Pacific and the best way to ensure that countries big and small are going to have a voice as we work together..." Obama echoed these sentiments at the US-ASEAN Business Summit in Burma (Myanmar) on Nov. 13.

The leaders of the ASEAN states have hailed the continued US role in the region. Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak in a September speech at Georgetown University endorsed the US presence in the Pacific; Vietnam's deputy prime minister in a September address to The Asia Society in New York praised the US rebalance to Asia. Media commentary in the Philippines and Singapore seemed more skeptical, labeling the US response to China's provocations in the South China Sea as halfhearted.

Nevertheless, at the EAS in Nay Pyi Taw on Nov. 13, the United States, backed by Japan, reiterated Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Michael Fuch's July proposal that the South China Sea claimants agree to freeze all escalatory activities in disputed areas – a veiled reference to China's landfill extension efforts on selected Spratly Islands' reefs and shoals – and stop oil and gas exploration. The Philippines enthusiastically endorsed the proposal, while China rejected it. Although the EAS was once again the location for discussions of politically sensitive issues, the fact that the meeting of great and small states lasts for only three hours meant that it did not provide an opportunity for genuine negotiations but rather served as a venue for predetermined position statements. Nor, apparently, did this EAS gathering lead to any breakthrough in informal sideline discussions. Multilateral meetings remain in large part "talk shops."

Philippines: gearing up EDCA despite critics

The Philippines is the closest US ally in Southeast Asia. The defense treaty dates back to the 1950s. Although the relationship has experienced setbacks brought on by domestic Philippine politics that led to withdrawal of US forces in the 1990s, over the past two decades small numbers of US service personnel have returned to the archipelago country, primarily as trainers in Mindanao to assist the Philippine Armed Forces in counterinsurgency operations against the radical Islamist group Abu Sayyaf. By 2014, joint activities between the two countries' armed forces totaled 426 separate events for the year. Prominent was the annual *Philippines-US Amphibious Landing Exercise (PHIBLEX)* for two weeks in late September-early October involving 2,000 US and 700 Philippine military personnel, covering amphibious operations, tactical warfare simulation, and maritime security planning across several locales adjacent to the South China Sea (Philippines: West Philippine Sea).

These frequent bilateral security activities form a context for implementing the EDCA reached last April during President Obama's visit to the country. EDCA opens the door for US forces to operate from Philippine military bases on a rotational basis. Though no bases have yet been formally chosen, two are frequently discussed in Philippine media: the former US Navy facility at Subic Bay and Oyster Bay, which is located on the island of Palawan and about 160 km from the disputed Spratly Islands. EDCA provides opportunities for the construction of new facilities on Philippine bases that would be used by visiting US forces, but would be owned by the Philippines. According to Col. Ramon Zagala, the chief public affairs officer of the Philippine Armed Forces, the Oyster Bay location would enhance Philippine "defense capabilities westward to the West Philippine Sea." In other words, joint Philippine-US operations, from Oyster Bay could buttress the country's capabilities in the South China Sea. Environmentalists oppose the Oyster Bay expansion, however, arguing that military developments in the area would despoil mangroves and disturb fish spawning areas, thus damaging local livelihoods.

Soon after EDCA was negotiated last April, objections from nationalists and anti-Americans in the Philippine Congress were voiced. Petitions were filed in the Philippine Supreme Court to nullify the agreement, which was vigorously defended by the Aquino government. In an October filing by the solicitor general of the Philippines, EDCA was seen as necessary “to achieve a minimum credible defense to the manifold security concerns in the West Philippine Sea. [It] enhances the existing contractual security apparatus between the Philippines and the US set up through the Mutual Defense Treaty and the Visiting Forces Agreement.” Refuting the opposition claim that the EDCA required Philippine Senate ratification because it was a treaty, the solicitor general insisted the agreement was “only an implementation of existing treaties.” Several Supreme Court justices in mid-November during oral arguments on the petition to reject EDCA stated that the petitioners should argue their concerns before the Senate rather than the Supreme Court as the Court was not the proper venue.

Additional arguments against the EDCA are that it permits the US to establish bases in violation of the Philippine Constitution. Defenders point out that any new construction authorized by EDCA would take place on Philippine bases and, therefore, would belong to the Philippines. Perhaps the core complaint about EDCA is that it does not guarantee US involvement in the event of a direct military confrontation over disputed waters and land forms in the South China Sea. After all, the United States has often said that it does not take sides in the South China Sea territorial disputes. Nevertheless, in his April visit to Manila, President Obama assured the Philippines that the US commitment to the Mutual Defense Treaty was “iron clad.” Moreover, enhanced US-Philippine military exercises and more frequent US Navy port calls presumably would provide Manila with diplomatic leverage in its disputes with China and reinforce deterrence. Opponents doubt the deterrent value of the EDCA and point to the difference between the US commitment to defend Japan’s administration of the Senkaku Islands and the less definitive interpretation of what Washington would do in the event of, say, a Chinese attack on Scarborough Shoal or Philippine personnel patrolling the region.

In addition to revived US-Philippine military ties under EDCA, it is worth noting increased Japanese aid to the Philippines. Tokyo is providing 10 multi-role coast guard vessels. Manila is also impressed by Japan’s growing naval and air capabilities and sees its regional security interests going beyond Northeast Asia. In an early November visit to the Japanese capital, President Benigno Aquino thanked Prime Minister Abe Shinzo for the assistance and said that he viewed Japan as the Philippines’ closet ally after the US and hoped that “somewhere down the line we will have exercises with Japan.... [T]he only two strategic partners that the Philippines have are America and Japan.” However, it is unclear if Tokyo sees the bilateral relationship to be this close. Manila has also purchased 12 *FA-50* combat jets from South Korea, and in a December visit to Seoul, Aquino and President Park Geun-hye agreed to a comprehensive strategic partnership. As the Philippine president noted, the two countries are “sister democracies” that “face the same threats and challenges in an evolving region.”

Indonesia: Jokowi’s maritime doctrine and the United States

Indonesia’s new democratically elected President Joko Widodo (known more familiarly as Jokowi) has articulated an innovative approach to his country’s foreign and domestic challenges. With over 17,000 islands, an underfunded navy, inadequate port infrastructure,

while being plagued by piracy, illegal fishing, and smuggling, Jokowi has decided to place maritime affairs at the top of his agenda. In his address to the November EAS, he stated that his country would become a “global maritime nexus” linking the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. To achieve this goal, he would allocate new funds to improve Indonesia’s ports and shipping industry by increasing government appropriations and by seeking private investors. The Navy would be augmented to enhance maritime sovereignty and security. Finally, maritime diplomacy will be emphasized to work with partners to resolve conflicts involving territorial disputes, breaches of sovereignty, and environmental concerns such as marine pollution. Jokowi estimates that \$6 billion is needed just to improve Indonesia’s port infrastructure.

Indonesia’s Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi will press for the completion of a Code of Conduct (COC) for the South China Sea, which has been on the ASEAN-China agenda for years. The United States backs ASEAN efforts to conclude the interminable negotiations over the COC and will undoubtedly welcome these Indonesian initiatives, especially if they include a freeze on any activities that alter the status quo such as land fill extensions to accommodate new airstrips. The new Coordinating Minister for Politics, Law, and Security Tedjo Edy Purujanto has stated that he plans to unify various maritime agencies to create a coast guard. Underlying these maritime buildups is concern that China’s nine-dash line overlaps gas-rich waters to the east of Indonesia’s Natuna Islands. In March 2014, Indonesia’s armed forces commander cited this concern in noting that Jakarta was sending more *F-16* fighter jets to Natuna.

Jokowi has talked about increasing Indonesia’s defense budget from 0.8 to 1.5 percent of GDP within five years, concentrating on the Navy. If achieved, that would raise the country’s defense spending from about \$8 billion today to nearly \$20 billion by 2020. Currently, the Army receives the bulk of defense spending. The Navy, which currently deploys six frigates (with two more under construction) and assorted other vessels, hopes to acquire submarines from Japan and South Korea. The Air Force has 55 aircraft of various types. By contrast tiny Singapore possesses 143 aircraft, including advanced versions of US-supplied *F-15s* and *F-16s*.

US officials have expressed interest in improving maritime cooperation with Indonesia. Secretary Kerry, in a prelude to attending President Jokowi’s October inauguration, emphasized Indonesia’s importance as a major regional power: the world’s third largest democracy with the largest Muslim population. He also acknowledged Indonesia’s prominence in Asian international organizations. US Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus has applauded Jokowi’s commitment to strengthen Indonesia’s maritime sector, and in Medan, Sumatra, in late October, offered to exchange naval officers and develop a disaster mitigation program. In fact, the US and Indonesian navies have exercised together for many years through the annual *Cooperation Afloat, Readiness, and Training (CARAT)*, the *Komodo Multilateral Exercise*, the biannual *Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC)* and various exercises undertaken through the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+).

US eases arms embargo for Vietnam

Over the past few years, political relations between the United States and Vietnam have significantly improved. High-level visits have been exchanged, US Navy ships have docked in Vietnamese ports, and trade and investment have grown. However, two difficult issues remain

on the agenda that prevent more progress. For the US, it is Vietnam's human rights performance, particularly the incarceration of dissidents. For Vietnam, it has been the US arms embargo, especially on weapons that would increase Hanoi's coastal defense capabilities. Hanoi was gratified, therefore, when in early October the US partially lifted its prohibition on the sale of lethal weapons to Vietnam. The new more liberal policy would apply only to naval systems, according to the State Department and came about because Vietnam had ostensibly improved its human rights record. This rationale was immediately rejected, however, by Human Rights Watch, whose Asia director, John Sifton, declared: "Vietnam's record on political prisoners is bad and getting worse." Nevertheless, Washington hopes to strengthen Vietnam's Coast Guard, and last September the country's Navy Commander-in-Chief Adm. Nguyen Van Hien visited the US and talked with Navy Secretary Mabus about joint naval exercises. A few days before the partial lifting of the embargo was announced, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel stated that Vietnam's strategic location was a good reason to work more closely with the country. The specific weapons to be provided will be decided on a "case-by-case" basis and could include both boats and aircraft. (Washington approved the sale of non-lethal military equipment to Vietnam in 2006.)

Spokespersons in the State Department assured other states in the region (read: China) that the sale would not destabilize the arms balance and that the weapons systems purveyed would be strictly defensive and heavily focused on Vietnam's Coast Guard. However, given Hanoi's allegations that Chinese ships and aircraft regularly violate Vietnam's South China Sea claims, any buildup of Hanoi's maritime defensive capacity might be seen differently from Beijing. Among the first systems to be sold to Vietnam will probably be *P-3* maritime surveillance planes. The US Navy is replacing this model with the more capable *P-8*. Nevertheless, the older *P-3s* are able to loiter in anti-submarine warfare (ASW) mode for up to half a day. Western analyst Zachary Abuza stated, however, that the US sales would be mostly "symbolic" since Vietnam's arms are predominantly of Russian origin – the exception being ASW capabilities. In late 2013, Secretary Kerry authorized the sale of five unarmed fast patrol craft. Weapons for these may now be sold, and according to Carl Thayer, who follows Vietnam's military affairs, Hanoi may be interested in purchasing more of these cutters.

Hanoi's Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh seemed to diminish the importance of the partial lifting of the embargo in an early October visit to Washington. He cautioned: "Our relationship with the United States is just a comprehensive partnership. The sides want to strengthen the relationship to a more substantial and deeper level." For the US, however, any strengthening would have to involve greater human rights improvements, including greater freedom of expression as well as the release from prison of those who criticize the government. Moreover, bilateral negotiations with Washington on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) appear stalled, in part by Vietnam's insistence that the US and other developed states agree to delay Hanoi's tariff reductions because of its weaker economy as a developing country. Nevertheless, on the sidelines of the Nov. 14 ASEAN Summit in Myanmar, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung asked the US to lift completely the ban on lethal arms. Washington has not formally replied, though a number of US officials cite additional human rights progress as a condition for a full lifting of the embargo.

Two US partners are also involved in providing arms to Vietnam. Last August, Japan's foreign minister said his country would transfer six second-hand vessels and other equipment to improve Hanoi's maritime law enforcement. In September, the Japanese Diet discussed the provision of new patrol craft. In a December 2013 meeting, Prime Ministers Dung and Abe talked of their "convergence of interests in the East and South China Seas." India, too, has offered a \$100 million credit to Vietnam for the purpose of buying new naval vessels during Prime Minister Nguyen's October visit to New Delhi. While there is no coordination among Washington, Tokyo, and New Delhi, it is clear that all three are assisting Vietnam's efforts to improve maritime domain defense.

Myanmar: closer ties with political caution

Until 2012, the US saw Myanmar as an example of how a military dictatorship could evolve into a democracy with free elections, free media, and contending political parties. The Obama administration praised these developments – especially the reintegration of opposition political leader Aung San Sui Kyi into competitive politics – and lifted many of the economic sanctions that had been imposed during the decades of military rule. Nevertheless, the US Congress has been more skeptical with a bill working its way through committees that would restrict funding for security assistance to Myanmar until the country improves its human rights record, cuts military ties to North Korea, amends the constitution to weaken the military's political role, and ends the wars with the country's many ethnic minorities. In September, a representative of President Thein Sein urged Congress not to pass the bill because "it would further isolate our military which has been playing an important role in reforms and the democratic transition."

In late October, prior to travelling to Nay Pyi Taw for the EAS, President Obama telephoned President Thein Sein as well as Aung San Sui Kyi. Obama stressed the importance of taking "additional steps to address the tensions and humanitarian situation in Rakhine State" where bloody communal violence has occurred between majority Buddhists and minority Muslims. The US president called on Myanmar to revise the Rakhine Action Plan, which US Human Rights Watch said would entrench discriminatory policies that deprive Rohingyas of citizenship and lead to the forced resettlement of over 100,000 displaced Rohingyas into closed camps. Rohingya Muslims are deeply resented in Myanmar by many Buddhists who see them as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh though they have lived in Rakhine State for generations. (The main medical provider for Rakhine State's Muslims, Doctors without Borders, was forced to leave the state in May.)

At a press conference in early November, Aung San Suu Kyi declared that Myanmar's reforms had stalled and that the US has been "overly optimistic about the reform process." Civil rights organizations have noted that journalists once again are being arrested. Elements of Myanmar's Navy have worked with criminal gangs to traffic fleeing Muslims into international waters on their way to Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia. However, Washington has already lifted most of its sanctions against the Thein Sein government. Moreover, in mid-November, President Obama announced that Washington would begin sending Peace Corps volunteers to Myanmar in late 2015. On the other hand, US Ambassador Derek Mitchell has stated that the United States would not engage with the Myanmar military until it saw evidence of change.

US complains about Malaysian sedition law; Kuala Lumpur denies US surveillance flights from Malaysian territory

Washington's concern about human rights in Southeast Asian countries was articulated again in Malaysia. US Ambassador Joseph Yun in a Dec. 6 interview with the opposition newspaper *Malaysiakini* complained that the Najib government's decision to retain the Sedition Act after promising to scrap it raises human rights concerns and has a direct impact on basic freedoms. While acknowledging that the government's decision to keep the Sedition Act in place is "really an internal affair in this country," Yun nonetheless averred that the legislation encroaches on "freedom of speech and dealing with the very plural society in Malaysia." US Vice President Joseph Biden also weighed in, stating in a tweet that the 1948 Sedition Act was used "to stifle opposition." Foreign Minister Anifah Aman called in Yun and insisted that his remarks were "unwarranted and disappointing" and amounted to "interference." Opposition parliamentarians echoed the US ambassador's concerns, noting that the Sedition Act was employed not to promote national security but rather to court popular support at the recent general assembly of UMNO, Malaysia's ruling party.

In September, a curious incident in US-Malaysia relations occurred. US Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Jonathon Greenert at a Washington forum on Sept. 8 announced that Kuala Lumpur had offered use of a facility in east Malaysia from which *P-8* surveillance aircraft could monitor the southern sector of the South China Sea. This would provide intelligence collection capacity over the James Shoal area claimed by Malaysia but also at the southern tip of China's nine-dash line. Malaysia's state-run oil company Petronas is exploring for oil and gas in this region. During the search for missing Malaysian Airlines flight MH 370, Malaysia had allowed US Navy *P-8* flights from Malaysian bases.

Within a week of Adm. Greenert's announcement, Malaysian Defense Minister Hishammuddin Hussein denied that such an offer had been extended, although he did acknowledge that the US military regularly conducted joint exercises with their Malaysian counterparts, some of which were held around Borneo. Nevertheless, reports circulated that the two countries had been discussing facilities for US surveillance flights for some time before Greenert's announcement. The whole thing was either a misunderstanding or Greenert's statement was premature. Had such an agreement been struck, however, China would undoubtedly have complained, and the relatively calm China-Malaysian South China Sea relations could well have become agitated.

Thailand: *Cobra Gold* will proceed

Despite Washington's continued disappointment with the Thai military junta's rule since the coup in May and some 60 civilians who face trial in military courts as well as severe restrictions on freedom for dissent and the media, the US decided in October to continue with the annual *Cobra Gold* multilateral military exercise in 2015. The largest multi-service military exercise in Asia and a key part of the Obama administration's rebalance to Asia, *Cobra Gold* involves tens of thousands of troops from Thailand, the United States, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Myanmar and China send observers. Next year's exercise, however, will reportedly reduce live-fire combat training and instead emphasize noncombat operations and

military medicine. *Cobra Gold* consists of three tracks: field exercises, multinational staff planning exercises, and humanitarian exercises. The planning exercise includes computer simulations with multinational responses to changing scenarios. The themes emphasize humanitarian and disaster relief operations. These latter activities are particularly prized in the region because of Asia's susceptibility to typhoons, tsunamis, and earthquakes. Armed forces are frequently first responders to these events. Joint training on how to deal with them constitutes a very practical skill for the troops and comprises a significant takeaway for *Cobra Gold* participants.

Conclusion: South China Sea redux

Over the past several years, the Obama administration has repeatedly insisted that it does not take sides over South China Sea sovereignty disputes. The US has argued that disputes should be resolved peacefully through negotiations based on international law. Now, however, Washington appears to have taken a more proactive position. In mid-December, the State Department published a detailed rebuttal to the Chinese nine-dash line claim to about 90 percent of the South China Sea. The State Department document argues essentially that China's claim ignores the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and contravenes its provisions. Both the Philippines and Vietnam praised the US analysis. Moreover, the day before the US report was released, Hanoi submitted its own position paper to the UN Arbitral Tribunal that appears to endorse Manila's request for Arbitral Tribunal rulings. It seems that the United States and Vietnam have aligned with Manila's submission. China's consistent rejection of UN jurisdiction in these matters is in stark contrast and appears to place the PRC outside the limits of international maritime law.

Chronology of US - Southeast Asian Relations September - December 2014

Aug. 27-Sept. 5, 2014: Malaysian and US forces inaugurate their first joint military exercises in Sabah at the location where southern Philippine gunmen invaded last year.

Sept. 2, 2014: Philippine National Bureau of Investigation arrests three members of an anti-China group called USAFFE, which takes its name from the former US Armed Forces in the Far East during World War II, who plotted to bomb Manila's international airport using an improvised explosive device.

Sept. 8, 2014: US Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Jonathan Greenert speaking in Washington states that Malaysia has invited the US to fly *P-8 Poseidon* surveillance flights from east Malaysia over the South China Sea. The supposed offer is subsequently denied by Malaysian Defense Minister Hishammuddin Hussein.

Sept. 11, 2014: Amnesty International issues a report on the situation in Thailand, condemning the detention by the military of civilians and the limits placed on freedom of expression.

Sept. 12, 2014: Myanmar President's Office urges the US Congress not to pass a bill that would restrict funding to the country's military because of human rights concerns.

Sept. 15-19, 2014: Vietnam's Deputy Prime Minister Vu Van Ninh heads a delegation to Washington to discuss key issues in the Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations as well as trade and investment opportunities.

Sept. 20-24, 2014: Philippine President Benigno Aquino visits the US to promote business relations. He also delivers a policy speech at Harvard's Kennedy School and attends the UN Climate Change Summit in New York.

Sept. 20-28, 2014: Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak visits the US for the UN General Assembly. On Sept. 25, he delivers the keynote address to the Malaysia-US Business Forum to promote investment in his country.

Sept. 24, 2014: US Treasury Department imposes terrorism sanctions on four individuals affiliated with Indonesia's Jemmah Islamiya as part of a global financial crackdown on individuals supporting terrorism.

Sept. 26, 2014: US-ASEAN Ministerial Meeting is held on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York.

Sept. 29-Oct. 10, 2014: Annual *Philippine-US Amphibious Landing Exercise (PHIBLEX)* is held on Palawan and the Zambales region with 700 Philippine and 2,000 US participants.

Oct. 1-2, 2014: Vietnam's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Pham Binh visits the US. The Obama administration partially lifts the lethal weapons ban on Vietnam.

Oct. 7, 2014: Myanmar announces that it will release over 3,000 prisoners, including former military intelligence officers.

Oct. 14, 2014: US Pacific Command Commander Adm. Samuel Locklear visits the Philippines and meets counterpart Adm. Gregorio Catapay. They sign accords for 426 joint activities.

Oct. 15, 2014: US Marine Pfc. Joseph Pemberton is accused of killing a transgendered Filipino on Oct. 11 in an Olongapo City hotel room.

Oct. 20, 2014: In Jakarta to attend the inauguration of Indonesia's President Joko Widodo, Secretary of State John Kerry discusses cooperation in stopping the flow of militants to Syria.

Oct. 20-24, 2014: Elements of the US, Singapore, and Japanese navies take part in a joint exercise in the South China Sea, emphasizing gunnery skills and formation cruising.

Oct. 25, 2014: US Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus applauds President Jokowi's commitment to strengthen maritime security and offers US cooperation.

Oct. 30, 2014: In separate phone calls to Myanmar President Thein Sein and opposition leader Aung San Sui Kyi, President Obama stresses the need to address communal tensions, forge a nationwide ceasefire pact, and hold credible general elections next year.

Nov. 12-14, 2014: President Obama visits Myanmar for an official visit and an East Asia Summit meeting. On the sideline of the EAS meeting, he also meets Vietnam's prime minister and Indonesia's president.

Nov. 24-26, 2014: Two Vietnamese frigates make the first-ever port call by Vietnam's Navy in the Philippines as part of goodwill visit.

Dec. 4, 2014: US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee passes a resolution calling for a peaceful settlement of maritime conflicts in the South and East China Seas and condemns any coercive actions in those regions. The resolution also urges ASEAN and all other claimants to move toward a formal code of conduct for these waters.

Dec. 15, 2014: Philippine government prosecutors charge US Marine Pfc. Joseph Pemberton with murder in the killing of a Filipino, saying the suspect acknowledged attacking the victim after he found out she was a transgender woman.

Dec. 24, 2014: While on an unannounced visit to Hawaii, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak has a golf outing with President Obama.