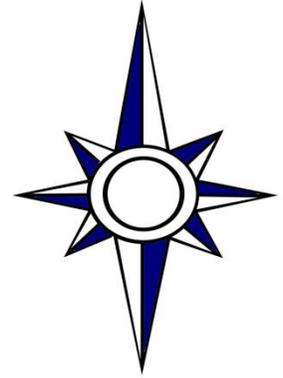


# Comparative Connections

A Quarterly E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations



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## **US-Southeast Asia Relations:**

### **Growing Enmeshment in Regional Affairs**

The United States significantly raised its political profile in Southeast Asia this quarter, inserting itself in South China Sea disputes, announcing its plan to join the East Asia Summit, convening the second US-ASEAN summit, and creating an ambitious agenda for participation in a variety of Southeast Asia programs. On the South China Sea issue, Secretary of State Clinton proposed multilateral discussions under ASEAN auspices – an idea that did not appear, however, in the ASEAN-US summit communiqué in late September. The US inaugurated naval exercises with Vietnam in early August, coinciding with the visit of the aircraft carrier *USS George Washington*. Washington is considering new financial sanctions against Burma, recognizing that more engagement with the military regime has not yielded the expected results. The presence of US military trainers in the southern Philippines continues to rile leftist and nationalist legislators. As a sign of growing warmth in US-Malaysian relations, Kuala Lumpur is sending a small contingent of medical personnel to Afghanistan. The Indonesian-US Comprehensive Partnership was launched in Washington in September, signifying Jakarta's special importance to the US. Washington also restored military-to-military relations with *Kopassus*, the Indonesian Special Forces unit that has been accused of egregious human rights violations in Timor, Papua, and Aceh.

### **Secretary Clinton asserts US interests in the South China Sea**

At the late July meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Hanoi, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stepped into the tangled dispute between China and several of its Southeast Asian neighbors over a string of strategically located islets in the South China Sea. Working around intense Chinese lobbying to keep the topic off the ARF agenda, Clinton – cooperating with Vietnam and some other Spratly Islands claimants – launched an appeal for “a collaborative diplomatic process by all claimants for resolving the serious territorial disputes without coercion.” The ground work for the US initiative was laid through visits to the region by top State Department officials, including Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell and Undersecretary of State William Burns. Clinton reiterated the well-known US position that Washington remained neutral with respect to the several nations' claims to the Spratlys. (China, Taiwan, and Vietnam claim all the islands, while the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei assert more limited ownership.) She also noted – as the US had in the past – that Washington was committed to preserving unimpeded maritime passage through waters around the Spratly and Paracel Islands. What is new is Clinton's offer to facilitate multilateral talks on the islands' future through ASEAN. Although ASEAN has been involved on the margins of the South China Sea islands disputes – in 1995 when China's occupation of Mischief Reef was first discovered and in 2002 by promoting a Declaration of Conduct on peaceful resolution of the

disputes – ASEAN had never offered to mediate. Yet, Clinton’s proposal undoubtedly was preceded by discussions with ASEAN member countries. Of the 27 countries attending the ARF meeting, 12 endorsed the US proposal for creating a dispute settlement mechanism.

China may well have been blindsided by the coordinated US effort that probably began after senior Chinese officials in March added the South China Sea to their country’s “core interests” toward which China would brook no interference. Vietnam, Philippine, and Malaysian officials have voiced their concerns to the US about Beijing’s growing assertiveness in the South China Sea, and Hanoi has particularly been seeking to internationalize settlement of the dispute. By contrast, Beijing has insisted that negotiations must be strictly bilateral. US Pacific Command (PACOM) Commander Adm. Robert Willard in a July 19 interview with *Defense News* stated that Chinese forces have confronted Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines in these contested areas. China’s naval buildup has permitted Beijing to increase its military presence in the region where it has escorted Chinese fishing trawlers. Southeast Asian states are also boosting their naval forces with Vietnam, Singapore, and Malaysia acquiring submarines. Thus, the potential for South China Sea skirmishes seems to be increasing.

In addition to freedom of navigation and exploration of the South China Sea seabed for minerals and fossil fuels, US interests in these waters include intelligence gathering to monitor submarine movements from the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Navy’s submarine base near Sanya on Hainan Island as well as mapping the South China Sea floor that would make detection of Chinese submarines easier. The US Navy deploys the oceanographic research vessel *Impeccable* through these seas towing sonar gear to listen for Chinese submarines and to map the sea bottom – both activities considered legal according to the US interpretation of the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. (China views the treaty differently, insisting that its 200 nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone is equivalent to national waters and thus prohibits activities by other countries’ military ships.)

Since the ARF meeting, ASEAN states have remained publicly silent on Clinton’s proposal, although officials from these countries are reported to quietly support Washington’s gambit. There was one curious dissent from the Philippines on Aug. 9, when Philippine Foreign Secretary Alberto Romulo stated that the ASEAN states did not need US help in solving the South China Sea disputes. Nevertheless, diplomats in the Philippines were subsequently given private assurances that Manila welcomes views from all stakeholders, including those offered by Clinton. Later, at the ASEAN-US meeting in New York, Philippine President Benigno Aquino made it even clearer that the Philippines saw resolution of the South China Sea issue as a “collaborative diplomatic process” and strongly supported drafting a formal code of conduct.

Indonesia, though possessing no claim to the Spratly Islands, stated at the ARF meeting that no country should dominate the disputed area in the South China Sea. And, on July 8, Indonesia’s UN delegation sent a diplomatic note that for the first time openly challenged China’s claim to the entire South China Sea. Indonesia may be concerned that China’s claims to the Natuna gas fields could lead Beijing to dispute Indonesia’s ownership.

In a mid-August visit to the Philippines, Adm. Willard asserted that the US would maintain a South China Sea presence for many years to insure free navigation through its waters – a

traditional US strategic goal in the Pacific. Responding to Willard, Philippine Armed Forces Chief of Staff Gen. Ricardo Davide, Jr. stated that Philippine naval strength was negligible and, therefore, unable to defend the country's Spratly claims. Gen. Davide noted that unlike Vietnam and Malaysia, which are purchasing submarines to back their claims, Manila cannot defend the islands it has designated part of its national territory.

With Secretary Clinton's intervention at the July ARF gathering, the US has urged ASEAN to seize the diplomatic initiative for resolving the South China Sea disputes in direct opposition to China's insistence that ASEAN as an association has no standing in the debate and that the four Southeast Asian claimants should not consult together prior to ASEAN-China meetings on the Declaration of Conduct. The US initiative can be seen as part of a larger engagement policy that is updating relations with official allies the Philippines and Thailand, strengthening bonds with partners like Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam and even forging new ties with states Washington had shunned such as Cambodia, Laos, and to a lesser extent, Burma. Following its signature on ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2009 – a prerequisite for membership in the East Asia Summit (EAS) – Washington has established the Lower Mekong Initiative to assist Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand on a range of environmental, social, and infrastructure issues. The US has also pledged to send a permanent representative to the ASEAN secretariat in Jakarta. Washington restored full military relations with Indonesia, opened the annual *Cobra Gold* exercises to Malaysia, and has begun security training with Cambodia. The US is also joining the EAS, in which Washington had previously displayed little interest.

### **US promotes defense ties with Vietnam but continues human rights criticism**

The US inaugurated joint military activity with Vietnam on Aug. 8 as part of the commemoration of the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of normalized ties. The nuclear-powered aircraft carrier *USS George Washington* visited off the coast of Da Nang and the destroyer *USS John McCain* making a port call and conducting the first-ever joint naval exercises that included search and rescue, damage control, maintenance, emergency repair, and fire-control operations. During the visit, Vietnam's Foreign Ministry announced that Hanoi has begun negotiations with the US on a nuclear cooperation agreement.

Political and economic relations between the two countries have been on the upswing for some time. From a low of \$600 million in 2000 when Hanoi and Washington signed a bilateral trade agreement, trade jumped to \$15 billion in 2009. Washington has also supported Vietnam's bid to join the World Trade Organization, and despite the current global economic crisis, remains one of the country's largest foreign investors. Defense cooperation actually began two decades ago with Vietnam assisting US military forensic specialists' search for MIA remains and has progressed to regular bilateral strategic dialogues covering peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, nonproliferation, and maritime security, according to State Department official Joseph Yun in an interview with *Vietnam Net* published July 17.

Positive political, economic, and defense developments are tempered, however, by persistent US concerns about human rights. In her July visit to Hanoi, Secretary Clinton stated that the very fact that Vietnam "is on the path to becoming a great nation with an unlimited potential ... is among the reasons we express concern about arrest and conviction of people for peaceful dissent,

attacks on religious groups, and curbs on internet freedom.” Earlier, on July 7, a visiting group of US senators pressed Vietnam to allow free trade unions if it wants to liberalize trade with the US through a proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement. Hanoi’s Deputy Prime Minister Pham Gia Khiem responded to these criticisms on July 23 by noting that human rights are rooted in each country’s unique historical circumstances. He went on to say that President Obama had observed that countries should be allowed to choose their own paths and that human rights should not be imposed from outside.

Hanoi remains careful in its public descriptions of closer defense relations with the US. On Aug. 16, Deputy Defense Minister Nguyen Chi Vinh rejected as “wrong information” that Vietnam was forming a tacit alliance with the US or taking sides with one country against another. Rather, Vietnam is developing defense relations with a number of countries and has also entered into defense dialogues with many states, among them the US and China.

### **US expands presence in regional gatherings**

Emerging from the ARF meeting in Hanoi, Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa stated that ASEAN has agreed to invite the US and Russia to join the 16-nation EAS, which holds an annual meeting that coincides with the yearly ASEAN summit. Focusing primarily on trade, the EAS also covers security and environmental issues. The Bush administration displayed little interest in joining the EAS, seeing little additional value in a one-day gathering of a large number of heads of state when the same topics were covered by the ARF and ASEAN-US dialogues. However, China’s more assertive South China Sea actions of the last two years coupled with several Southeast Asian states’ appeals to Washington have led the Obama administration to reconsider Washington’s reticence. Moreover, on July 23, Secretary Clinton stated that President Obama would host an ASEAN-US summit, subsequently set for Sept. 24. Clinton went on to describe both ASEAN and the ARF “as important pieces of a strong, effective architecture for security and prosperity in Asia. So we seek both to support these institutions and work closely with them.” While Obama won’t be able to attend this year’s EAS in October, Clinton would be there, and the president will attend next year. Stressing its future potential, Clinton said that US looks forward “to engaging with the East Asia Summit as it seeks to become a foundational security and political institution in this century.” In another sign of growing US engagement in the region, Clinton noted that US Defense Secretary Robert Gates would join the ASEAN Defense Ministers Plus 8 Meeting (ADMM+8) scheduled for October in Vietnam. Secretary Clinton will be in Hanoi at the same time for the EAS.

### **Problems with Burma persist**

Despite efforts by the Obama administration to reassess relations with Burma, Washington decided Aug. 17 to support the creation of a UN commission of inquiry into crimes against humanity and war crimes in that country, a sign that the US is adopting a tougher policy against a regime long accused of murdering and raping its political foes. The US is also considering tightening financial sanctions against the military junta, though a senior administration official said that any new sanctions are “not aimed at the people of Burma but at its leadership.” Human rights organizations welcomed the news.

At the ASEAN summit in mid-July, several ministers stated that Burma's forthcoming general elections could be credible only if opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest. Concern was also expressed at the ASEAN gathering about news reports that Burma had received nuclear and missile technology from North Korea. The junta's possible nuclear ambitions would be at odds with Southeast Asia's nuclear-weapon free zone treaty, to which Burma is a signatory. In August, the Washington-based National Democratic Institute released a report on Burma's upcoming election, branding it "fundamentally undemocratic" and "clearly designed to guarantee a predetermined outcome, and, therefore, does not meet even the very minimum of international standards." The NDI report concluded that "Nothing in the behavior of the regime over the past 20 years has signaled anything other than a commitment to hold power at any cost."

### **US military role in Philippines remains controversial**

The only Southeast Asian country in which US armed forces are regularly stationed is the Philippines. There, a few hundred US Special Forces rotate to the southern region to train the Philippine military in counterinsurgency against the Al Qaeda-affiliated Abu Sayyaf and to engage in civic action such as medical treatment and school construction in local villages. Begun in 1999, these activities are generally welcomed by the local population but are a source of intense criticism by nationalist and leftist legislators and media. US diplomats in the Philippines frequently have to deny that these forces are engaged in combat and restate that their mission is solely to train their Philippine allies. Thus, in mid-July, the new US ambassador, Harry Thomas, and visiting Undersecretary of State Burns insisted that the US troops were in the Philippines only for training and always at Manila's invitation. Both Philippine and US officials say that the US forces' presence is covered by the two countries' Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA). Opponents of the US deployment claim their presence amounts to a mini-occupation and that it violates a provision in the Philippine Constitution prohibiting the permanent deployment of foreign troops in the country.

Appeals to review the VFA are raised frequently in the Philippine Congress, and Secretary of Foreign Affairs Romulo in mid-August stated that he has recommended the Aquino government do so. Romulo is particularly concerned with jurisdictional provisions for US troops that may commit offenses in the Philippines and wants to see a comparison of the Philippine VFA with those of other countries where US forces are deployed. Some Philippine lawmakers, led by Sen. Miriam Defensor Santiago, go further by insisting that the VFA is not valid because it was not ratified by the US Senate. (The US signed the VFA as an executive agreement, while the Philippine Senate ratified it as a treaty.) The Philippine Department of National Defense stated on Aug. 18 that it is satisfied with the VFA as currently written, while visiting Adm. Robert Willard stated that the US regards it as an "important" agreement.

In September, the US announced an increase in financial support to the Philippine National Police from 400 to 600 million pesos for construction of police stations, equipment procurement, and overseas training programs. The US also donated several machine gun-equipped speedboats to the Maritime Police for operation in the western and southern parts of the archipelago. And, in late July, Washington pledged \$18.4 million worth of precision-guided missiles (PGMs) for use against militants in the south. Philippine military officials have also

asked for unmanned drones to hunt down Abu Sayyaf in the region. The PGMs will be the first missiles in the Philippine weapon inventory. The Philippine armed forces are significantly underfunded and ill-equipped. Since 2000, the State Department has provided about \$500 million for military and development aid for the southern Philippines in addition to another \$73 million in counter-terrorism aid.

Concern over corruption in the distribution of aid that characterized previous Philippine governments was addressed by the Aquino administration in early August after the government-based US Millennium Challenge Corporation approved a \$434 million aid package. Washington had withheld support from the Arroyo administration because it was not doing enough to fight corruption. Ambassador Thomas said approval of the pact showed Washington's faith in the new administration and its commitment to fight corruption.

### **US relations with Malaysia continue upswing, though human rights concerns persist**

Emphasizing Malaysia's contribution to the global Muslim community as well as support for US anti-radicalism, in mid-July Kuala Lumpur announced the dispatch of 40 military personnel for humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. In addition to medical specialists, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak told President Obama last April that Malaysia was prepared to train Afghan police and civilian administrators. The two heads of state agreed that security cooperation would enhance their overall relationship.

On July 21, Sen. James Webb, at a hearing of the Asian Subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, praised economic ties with Malaysia, noting that the US is Malaysia's top export market with two-way trade topping \$44 billion. Nevertheless, Webb also expressed concern over "some disturbing trends in Malaysia, including cases of suppressing religious freedoms, exerting control over the justice system, and quieting dissenting political voices." A dispute to which Webb indirectly alluded is the controversial sodomy trial of Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim. With many supporters in Washington over what has been seen in the US as a political prosecution of Prime Minister Najib's rival, Anwar stumbled when he labeled Malaysian government policies as "Zionist" in hopes of discrediting the prime minister. Instead, he succeeded only in dismaying US supporters who have seen Anwar as an advocate of religious pluralism and political moderation.

### **US-Indonesia relations: action on several fronts**

The 2009 Comprehensive Partnership between Indonesia and the US convened the first meeting of its Joint Commission led by Foreign Minister Natalegawa and Secretary of State Clinton in Washington on Sept. 17. An Indonesian Foreign Ministry spokesman stated the commission "is recognition that America places Indonesia in a different position compared to other countries ... that Indonesia is becoming an important partner for the US in the Southeast Asian region." With six working groups, the commission features a US commitment to build Indonesia's capacity to provide world-class university education and within five years to double the number of US and Indonesian students studying in each other's country. (Currently, many more Indonesians are studying in China than in the US.) In late July, US Ambassador Cameron Hume stated that Washington would provide \$150 million to promote Indonesian higher education.

On the security front, the US Department of Defense and Indonesia's Defense Ministry have signed a framework agreement that provides for security dialogue, education, and training, equipment sales, and maritime security cooperation. The Indonesian Air Force is also sending two C-130 cargo aircraft per year to the US for overhaul and maintenance under a Defense Department grant. But, most significant politically was the July 22 decision to resume military ties with Indonesian Special Forces (*Kopassus*) after a 12-year hiatus. Announced by Secretary Gates in Jakarta, he pointed to "the progress that Indonesia and its military has made in terms of reform and professionalization since the fall of Suharto...." The US is particularly interested in training *Kopassus* in cooperation with US intelligence and counter-insurgency agencies.

Nevertheless, some members of the US Congress oppose the restoration of ties with *Kopassus* until perpetrators of atrocities in East Timor, Aceh, and Papua have been brought to justice. Mindful of these concerns, Secretary Gates insisted that the initial steps in the restoration of relations "do not signal any lessening of the importance we place on human rights and accountability." Indonesian human rights organizations say *Kopassus* continues to perpetrate abuses, especially in Papua, a mineral-rich island with a secessionist movement. Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont – the leader of the Congressional opposition to renewed US links to *Kopassus* – was dismayed at the lifting of the ban: "*Kopassus* has a long history of abuses and remains unrepentant. I deeply regret that before starting down the road of reengagement, our country did not obtain and *Kopassus* did not accept the necessary reforms we have long sought."

The Defense Department says the unit, which numbers around 5,000, has reformed and that engagement will help bring about further changes. *Kopassus* deploys overseas for peacekeeping and has long been a source of Indonesia's leadership. Moreover, US officials say that military training is not on the immediate agenda. Rather, engagement will start with staff-to-staff meetings. Additionally, US military education through the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program emphasizes civil-military relations and includes human rights instruction. Still, Washington reserves the right to vet individual *Kopassus* members before they participate in US programs. It is probably not a coincidence that the US-*Kopassus* relationship was restored soon after the commander of *Kopassus*, Maj. Gen. Lodewigh Paulus, suggested that the unit might develop ties with China if the US training ban was not lifted. And, it should be noted that the Defense Department decision is not the end of the issue. A US Congressional vote continues to ban *Kopassus* forces from training in the US, though the ban does not apply to military education.

Detachment 88 – a specially trained Indonesian National Police counterterrorism task force – has been considered one of the country's most effective units, tracking, arresting, and sometimes killing some of the most notorious radical Islamists in the country. Trained and equipped by Australian Federal Police and the US FBI, Detachment 88 is advertised as one of the best Southeast Asian police operations. Nevertheless, over the past three years, the elite unit has been criticized for its propensity to kill insurgents, forgoing potentially valuable intelligence and giving radicals a rallying cry against the government. Detachment 88's increased violence against dissident activists in the Moluccas led to a US ban on training, quietly imposed in 2008 but only recently publicized by the US Embassy in Jakarta. Detachment 88's national commander, Tito Karnarian, tried to distance the unit's central authority from the Molucca

brutalities by claiming in mid-September that the Molucca Detachment 88 was not under his control but rather that of the local police – a somewhat unconvincing denial.

The spiritual leader of the notorious Jemmah Islamiya (JI) – the radical Islamist Al Qaeda-linked group behind the 2002 Bali bombings and subsequent Indonesian explosions – Abu Bakar Bashir, was arrested again as part of an ongoing government crackdown on Islamist militants following the February discovery of a training camp in Aceh. Arrested on Aug. 9 in West Java, Bashir was accused of being involved in a new strain of militant Islam in Indonesia. Bashir is charged with chairing the new organization called the Jamaah Ansharut Tæeihid (JAT). It claims to target not just the US and allied countries but also anyone opposed to the imposition of Islamic law – meaning many high-level Indonesian leaders. The elderly Indonesian cleric is accused of setting up and funding the training camp in Aceh. Unlike earlier arrests in 2002, when Bashir was only charged with spiritual leadership of JI, this time he is accused of direct involvement and funding of the terrorist camp and agreeing to head a new organization called Al Qaeda in Aceh. As in his earlier incarceration, Bashir claims that the US is behind his arrest. Police investigations insist there is evidence showing the Aceh group was planning to attack foreign embassies and hotels to reproduce mayhem on the scale of the 2008 attacks in Mumbai, India. Bashir has refused to be interrogated by Detachment 88 because he labels it a proxy for the US and Israel.

### **Ongoing concerns about Thai politics**

Hoping to mediate the political standoff in Thailand between Prime Minister Abhisit’s Bangkok-centered “Yellow Shirt” supporters and the “Red Shirt” supporters of rural, northern Thai exiled former billionaire Prime Minister Thaksin, Assistant Secretary of State Campbell offered US good offices last May before the Thai government’s violent crackdown on the opposition. (For background, see the July 2010 issue of *Comparative Connections*.) The Thai government declined Campbell’s offer and sent special envoy Kiat Sittheeamorn to Washington to rebuke and urge the Obama administration to refrain from further interference in the conflict. In a mid-July interview with *Asia Times Online*, Kiat stated that although the US has always been ready to extend a “helping hand” when asked, “it is up to us to request, and we have not asked ... [T]here was a lack of understanding of a very complex situation.”

In early July, however, the Abhisit government welcomed the US House of Representatives July 2 resolution backing Abhisit’s national reconciliation roadmap and calling on both sides to end the crisis through peaceful and democratic means. The pro-Abhisit resolution was passed despite the dispatch of ex-Prime Minister Thaksin’s legal advisor, Noppadon Pattana, to Washington to meet with some Congressmen and explain the “Red Shirt” position. In mid-July, the US Embassy in Bangkok refused to receive a “Red Shirt” letter to the US House of Representatives asking it to rescind its pro-government resolution.

Thai officials have also criticized efforts by US Ambassador Eric John to mediate, leading to reports of a State Department probe into the envoy’s tenure in Thailand. Influential US expatriates in the country circulated a petition, according to the July 20 *Asia Times Online*, opposing John’s nomination as the next US ambassador to Burma, reasoning that his interventions in Thai politics have been “indiscreet, ill-advised and counter-productive” and that

he lacks the “cultural sensitivity or interpersonal skills for negotiations in Southeast Asia.” Also, in mid-July, Undersecretary Burns began an extensive Southeast Asia trip in Thailand for a “strategic dialogue” with Thai officials. It is uncertain whether he raised the domestic Thai political situation in his discussions.

### **Pressure to extradite Russian arms dealer Victor Bout**

For the past decade, Washington has been trying to bring a notorious Russian arms dealer, Victor Bout, to trial in the US for gun running and support for terrorism. Bout, who inspired the Nicholas Cage film *Lord of War*, is suspected of trafficking weapons to rogue regimes, rebels, and insurgents across the globe. Caught in a March 2008 sting operation in Bangkok arranged by US Drug Enforcement Agency operatives posing as FARC revolutionaries from Colombia, Bout has been incarcerated in Thailand, fighting extradition to the US. In mid-August, the Obama administration summoned the Thai ambassador to “emphasize that this is of the highest priority to the United States.” On the other side, Russia had been pressuring Thailand not to extradite Mr. Bout. On Aug. 20, a Thai Appeals Court overturned a lower court decision to keep Bout in Thailand and granted Washington’s extradition request. The US Justice Department applauded the Appeals Court decision and dispatched an aircraft to retrieve the accused arms dealer and take him to the US where he would face a host of charges, including abetting terrorism. The Russians are particularly concerned that Bout may be willing to plea bargain his projected sentence in the US in exchange for information on the murky intersection of Russian military intelligence and organized crime. However, in late September, Bout remained in a Thai jail as Thai courts work their way through fresh charges against him for money laundering. These new allegations were lodged by the US to keep Bout locked up before the Court of Appeals granted extradition. However, now the new charges must be examined before extradition can proceed, and both the US and Russian governments are pressing the Thai courts to rule in their favor.

### **Human rights concerns bedevil US-Cambodian military relations**

The largest multinational military exercise in the Asia-Pacific this year, *Angkor Sentinel*, was held in Cambodia in mid-July. Co-sponsored by the US Pacific Command and jointly run by the Departments of State and Defense, its purpose is to train peacekeepers with more than 1,000 personnel from 23 countries participating. The US Defense Department has funded construction of a \$1.8 million training center for the initiative. The Cambodian unit selected to host the event – ACO Tank Command Headquarters in Kompong Speu province – according to US-based Human Rights Watch is, however, notorious for human rights abuses, forcing farmers off their land and destroying their crops and homes in support of business interests connected to Cambodian government elites. In a statement issued on July 8 protesting the *Angkor Sentinel* exercise, Human Rights Watch stated that the ACO Tank Command and “many military units are little more than guns for hire, not the defenders of the Cambodian people. The US should not be training corrupt and abusive military units for global peacekeeping.” The Human Rights Watch allegations elicited a defensive reaction from Undersecretary Burns on July 18, as the peacekeeping training exercise got under way. Burns stated that US military aid to Cambodia was essential to a “healthy political system” and that “[a]ny military relationship we conduct ... is

consistent with US law ... [W]e vet very carefully participants from Cambodia and other countries.”

Thailand did not attend *Angkor Sentinel* with some Thai military officers expressing dismay that Washington was showing increased strategic interest in a country that has become more of a regional security problem than a partner in light of border disputes with Thailand and Hun Sen’s perceived meddling in Thai domestic politics. With respect to Thai-Cambodian tensions, in a meeting at the UN on Sept. 22, Assistant Secretary Campbell urged Thai Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya to compromise on the border issue and hoped that Thailand would exercise restraint.

### **Looking ahead: growing US enmeshment**

“In for a penny, in for a pound” is an old English expression that could well describe the Obama administration’s recent enmeshment in Southeast Asian regional activities. This past quarter Washington decided to be “in for a pound” by inserting itself in the South China Sea dispute, applying for membership (along with Russia) in the EAS, and holding an ASEAN-US summit on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. Added to these have been a multilateral military peacekeeping training exercise in Cambodia, joint US-Vietnam naval training exercises, discussions with Hanoi on sharing nuclear fuel, and Washington’s announcement that it will reengage with *Kopassus*, Indonesia’s Special Forces unit.

The two-hour ASEAN-US summit luncheon on Sept. 24 laid out an ambitious policy agenda for Washington that President Obama characterized as “unprecedented cooperation.” Covering economic development aid, public diplomacy, trade, security cooperation, and broadband wireless communication, the agenda was so diverse that the leaders agreed to set priorities, placing education, trade, and forestry at the top of their list for cooperation. The underlying concerns over the South China Sea and Burma’s coming elections, although not emphasized, received attention as well. The concluding joint statement included a veiled reference to the need to maintain peace, maritime security, and the flow of goods and freedom of navigation “in accordance with universally agreed principles of international law” – points stated by Secretary Clinton when raising the South China Sea dispute at the July ARF meeting, though there was no mention of her ARF proposal for multilateral talks, an idea China opposes. On Burma, with which the US has seemed increasingly disillusioned, ASEAN’s preference was honored as the joint statement called for continued US engagement as well as urging the military regime to insure free and fair elections, an increasingly remote prospect.

With its upcoming membership in the EAS and Secretary Gates’ attendance at the ADMM+8, the US will belong to every Asia-Pacific organization it is eligible to join. The Obama administration has decided to raise the US profile in regional political, economic, and security architecture. This will mean more high-level trips to the region as well as the need to craft policy positions on a variety of issues that heretofore have not occupied a significant position on US government agendas. There is, however, one more step Washington should take to solidify its public position in Southeast Asia: appointment of a new resident ambassador to ASEAN now that Scot Marciel has moved on. Southeast Asia appears once more after several years to be a region of importance to the US.

## **Chronology of US-Southeast Asian Relations**

### **July – September 2010**

**June 29, 2010:** Scot Marciel, currently deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asia and US ambassador to ASEAN, is nominated to be ambassador to Indonesia.

**June 30, 2010:** US Ambassador to Indonesia Cameron Hume dedicates \$56 million in coastal and shipboard radars, helping Indonesia to create one of the world's largest integrated maritime surveillance systems.

**June 30, 2010:** US Senate Foreign Relations Committee votes to extend sanctions on Burma for one more year because of the junta's civil rights abuses. The sanctions have been extended annually since the 2003 Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act came into force.

**July 1, 2010:** US House of Representatives passes a resolution endorsing Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva's 5-point reconciliation roadmap. Thailand's Foreign Ministry welcomes the resolution.

**July 2, 2010:** Vietnam and the US sign a Memorandum of Understanding to jointly prevent the illegal transport of nuclear and other radioactive materials. The US Department of Energy will provide Hanoi with container scanners for radioactive detection.

**July 5-19, 2010:** The US and Singapore Navies and the US Coast Guard engage in a Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercise, emphasizing interoperability in anti-air, anti-surface and anti-submarine warfare.

**July 12, 2010:** Vietnam and the US celebrate 15 years of diplomatic relations in ceremonies in both Hanoi and Washington DC.

**July 12-31, 2010:** US Pacific Command and the Cambodian military co-host the 2010 Global Peace Operations Initiative to help train peacekeepers. More than 1,000 military personnel from 23 Asia-Pacific countries participate.

**July 13, 2010:** Laotian Foreign Minister Thonglison Sisoulith visits Washington to meet Secretary of State Hillary Clinton – the first visit by a top Laotian official since the 1975 communist victory in that nation.

**July 13, 2010:** In Houston, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong states that his country is a full participant in the global process that fights illicit money flows.

**July 14, 2010:** US Navy Seals and Indonesian frogmen conduct a VIP protection exercise in Surabaya.

**July 17-18, 2010:** US Undersecretary of State William Burns in Phnom Penh defends US military aid to Cambodia despite domestic abuses attributed to Cambodian military units.

**July 17-31, 2010:** The US and Indonesian Air Forces hold a joint exercise in Indonesia involving 110 US and 155 Indonesian personnel that emphasizes logistics, intelligence, and parachuting.

**July 18-24, 2010:** The US Embassy in Phnom Penh and the Cambodian government conduct a weeklong celebration of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic relations.

**July 20-21, 2010:** Undersecretary Burns visits Manila, affirming support for the new government of President Benigno Aquino III and discusses human rights, combatting human trafficking, anti-corruption, and transparency.

**July 22, 2010:** Secretary Clinton visits Vietnam to celebrate 15 years of diplomatic relations and criticizes the government for jailing democracy advocates, religious groups, and establishing curbs on networking websites.

**July 22, 2010:** Secretary Clinton meets foreign ministers of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam to discuss a framework for the Lower Mekong River Initiative to which Washington has pledged \$187 million for environmental, education, and health programs.

**July 23, 2010:** Secretary Clinton at the ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in Hanoi proffers a US mediation role for the protracted Spratly and Paracel Islands disputes involving Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines, Taiwan, and China.

**July 24, 2010:** An international war crimes court in Phnom Penh convicts the chief prison warden and torturer of the Khmer Rouge period, Kaing Guek Ear – known as Duch – of crimes against humanity and sentences him to 19 years in prison, taking 16 years from a 35-year sentence for time already served.

**July 28, 2010:** The US Navy hospital ship *Mercy* anchors off Ambon, Indonesia, to provide medical services to the local population.

**July 28, 2010:** Cambodia's first-ever multinational military exercise led by the US Defense and State Departments, *Angkor Sentinel 10*, ends. Its purpose was peacekeeper training.

**Aug. 4-7, 2010:** The Pacific Fleet command ship, *USS Blue Ridge*, visits Manila for a four-day goodwill visit.

**Aug. 5, 2010:** State Department spokesman Phillip Crowley states that the US and Vietnam are discussing the provision of civilian nuclear technology to Vietnam.

**Aug. 7, 2010:** High-level Vietnamese civilian and military officials are flown to the US nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, *USS George Washington*, steaming 200 miles off Vietnam's east coast – the first such visit.

**Aug. 10, 2010:** The destroyer *USS John McCain* arrives in Danang for the first joint US-Vietnam naval exercise that focuses on search and rescue and damage control.

**Aug. 16, 2010:** US Ambassador-designate Scot Marciel arrives in Jakarta.

**Aug. 17, 2010:** The US and Vietnam hold their first-ever defense talks in Hanoi, described by Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Robert Sher as extremely productive and successful.

**Aug. 20, 2010:** Thailand agrees to extradite Russian arms merchant Victor Bout to the US on arms trafficking charges.

**Sept. 4, 2010:** *USS George Washington* arrives in Manila for a goodwill visit.

**Sept. 9, 2010:** Indonesian President Yudhoyono urges President Obama to intervene personally to stop the proposed Koran burning threatened by a Florida pastor to commemorate the 9/11 anniversary. Malaysia also calls on the US to stop the pastor.

**Sept. 14, 2010:** Paul W. Jones assumes his post as the US ambassador to Malaysia.

**Sept. 14, 2010:** Vietnam's Ambassador to the US Le Cong Phung states that the two countries are in an excellent period of bilateral relations.

**Sept. 17, 2010:** Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell asks Thai Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya to seek a compromise with Cambodia over the Preah Vihear temple grounds dispute.

**Sept. 17, 2010:** Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegowa and Secretary Clinton hold inaugural meeting in Washington of the two countries' Joint Commission – a follow on to the Comprehensive Partnership signed by Presidents Obama and Yudhoyono in 2009.

**Sept. 24, 2010:** President Obama convenes a luncheon meeting for this year's ASEAN-US summit on the sidelines of the annual meeting of the UN General Assembly in New York. Topping the agenda are discussions of Burma's forthcoming "elections," the South China Sea disputes, and a variety of social, political, and economic proposals.