High-level visits to Southeast Asia this quarter found President Obama in Indonesia to inaugurate a Comprehensive Partnership, Secretary of Defense Gates in Malaysia and Vietnam, and Secretary of State Clinton in several Southeast Asian states, a trip that was highlighted by her acceptance of US membership in the East Asian Summit and attendance at the Lower Mekong Initiative meeting. Obama praised Jakarta’s democratic politics and insisted that the multifaceted relations with Jakarta demonstrate that Washington is concerned with much more than counterterrorism in its relations with the Muslim world. In Vietnam, both Clinton and Gates reiterated the US position from the July ASEAN Regional Forum that the South China Sea disputes be resolved peacefully through multilateral diplomacy led by ASEAN. Clinton expressed Washington’s appreciation that China had entered discussions with ASEAN on formalizing a Code of Conduct on the South China Sea. In all her Southeast Asian stops, she emphasized the importance of human rights. While deploring the faulty election in Burma, the US welcomed Aung San Suu Kyi’s release from house arrest and the prospect for more openness in Burmese politics.

President Obama in Indonesia: the fourth try is the charm

After three abortive attempts to visit Indonesia – his boyhood home and arguably Southeast Asia’s most important country – President Barack Obama finally succeeded on Nov. 9-10 to considerable Indonesian public acclaim. The three earlier postponements, however, strained US relations with Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono who declined Obama’s invitation to the second US-ASEAN Leaders Meeting held in September on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. In a Nov. 6 Op-Ed in The New York Times, Obama listed the primary reasons for Indonesia’s significance to the US: (1) its membership in the G20, (2) its incoming chairmanship of ASEAN – a market of more than 600 million people, integrating into a free trade area to which the US annually exports $80 billion in goods and services, and (3) as the focus of a new comprehensive partnership.

Formalizing the Comprehensive Partnership, initially proposed by President Yudhoyono more than a year ago, was the visit’s primary achievement. US adherence constitutes one component of a region-wide effort to demonstrate that the US is committed to maintaining a multi-dimensional presence in Southeast Asia. Toward that end, the US-Indonesian Comprehensive Partnership encompasses higher education, climate change, trade and investment, maritime security, and counterterrorism. Put another way, the enhanced bilateral relationship now covers politics, economics, and security. On the trade and investment dimension, the US Export-Import Bank immediately established a $1 billion line of credit to facilitate trade while working groups
were set up to develop ways of implementing the other partnership components. At a Nov. 9 press conference following the announcement of the Comprehensive Partnership, President Obama stated that the US is “leading again” in Asia as demonstrated by its “deepening” relations with Asian countries.

Obama also praised Indonesia’s commitment to democracy, a theme the US has emphasized for several years. He went on to note that the new Comprehensive Partnership shows that “we are building bridges and expanding our interactions with Muslim countries so that they’re not solely focused on security issues.” During his predecessor’s administration, a common Southeast Asian complaint about the US was its alleged single-minded concern with terrorism. While Presidents Obama and Yudhoyono reaffirmed their joint commitments to counter terrorism, Obama commended Indonesia for a “spirit of tolerance that is written into your constitution, symbolized in your mosques and churches and temples, and embodied in your people.” While acknowledging that mistrust of the US continues in the Muslim world, Obama said that his country is working to eliminate those misunderstandings.

Nevertheless, there were some negative undertones during Obama’s visit. Prior to his arrival, leftist student groups demonstrated against his coming, calling the US “imperialist” and warning that the Comprehensive Partnership Agreement would subordinate Indonesia to US foreign policy. Islamist groups took a different tack, insisting that the Obama visit would hurt Muslims worldwide because the US president “has so far been a loyal supporter of Israel which has been butchering Muslims in Palestine....”

Cognizant of these objections, President Yudhoyono, meeting with the Indonesian Muslims Intellectual Association (ICMI), emphasized that Indonesia was under no pressure from the US economically or militarily and that the Obama visit did not mean that Indonesia is dependent on the US. Moreover, the Indonesian legislature urged protesters to stop their demonstrations because Obama’s visit would benefit Indonesia. And, Indonesia’s two largest Muslim organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, emphasized the importance of welcoming President Obama as a follow-up to his Cairo visit in June 2009, where he said the US would seek “a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world.”

Two prominent Indonesian MPs took a more measured view of the US president’s visit, seeing it as primarily ceremonial with little substance and much too brief. Only time will tell if the Comprehensive Partnership becomes the basis for an enhanced relationship.

On military matters, President Obama’s visit provided an opportunity to discuss renewed cooperation between the US military and the Indonesian Special Forces (Kopassus) that had been agreed in an earlier visit by Defense Secretary Robert Gates. Additionally, Jakarta is considering a US offer to provide the Indonesian Air Force with two squadrons of retrofitted used F-16A/Bs at one-third the price of a new aircraft. (The US had offered the latest version of F-16C/Ds, but Indonesia declined because of budget limitations.) While the offer of 24 secondhand F-16s would more than double the current Indonesian inventory of 10 F-16s, some Indonesian legislators expressed reservations about their maintenance costs; others saw the US offer as part of Washington’s effort to strengthen bilateral ties inherent in the new Comprehensive Partnership. By late 2010, no decision had been made by the Indonesian armed forces.
Indonesia’s radical Islamist cleric, Abu Bakar Bashir, spiritual leader of Al Qaeda-backed Jemmah Islamiyah and more recently involved in Al Qaeda in Aceh, is on trial for raising funds for a military-style training camp in that province. Bashir denies involvement and insists that Indonesia’s anti-terrorist police squad, Detachment 88, arrested him on orders from Australia and the US. (Canberra and Washington provided funds and trainers from the Australian Federal Police and the US Federal Bureau of Investigation to set up Detachment 88 in the wake of the 2002 Bali bombing. While it has arrested or killed several hundred terrorists and significantly reduced their actions, Detachment 88 has also been accused of harsh tactics and preferring to kill rather than capture.) The Pentagon has renewed a training program for Indonesia’s Kopassus to assist the police in counterterrorism. US officials are particularly concerned about the effectiveness of Jakarta’s rehabilitation program for captured terrorists, as some jailed militants have returned to fight after their release, and the ability to track militants once they are freed has been imperfect. To help monitor Indonesian terrorist movements, the US is providing helicopters, radar systems, and small boats to assist Indonesia in the creation of an interdiction force for use among its own islands as well as between Indonesia and the southern Philippines.

**US full court diplomatic press in Southeast Asia**

The past year has witnessed a full-court press by the US in its Southeast Asian diplomacy. Capped by President Obama’s Indonesia visit in November, also included were Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s initiatives at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in July, her subsequent attendance at the East Asia Summit (EAS), and Defense Secretary Robert Gates’ participation in the October ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus 8 (ADMM+), also in Hanoi. All of these added to Obama’s brief US-ASEAN Leaders Meeting in September on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York. These meetings constitute the highest-ranking US attention to Southeast Asia for some time and serve the political goal of emphasizing the region’s continued importance to the US as well as Washington’s plans to remain a major player in the region. At the ADMM+, Gates elaborated on Clinton’s earlier ARF projection that America’s Asian “bilateral relationships be supplemented by strong multilateral institutions.” Undoubtedly with China in mind, he averred: “[W]e must establish both shared ‘rules of the road’ and pursue greater transparency – meaning that as we improve our capabilities, we must discuss these developments together.” More specifically, he cited competing territorial claims in the South China Sea that “should be settled peacefully, without force or coercion, through collaborative diplomatic processes....” Summing up, Gates praised ASEAN South China Sea claimants’ efforts to develop the 2002 ASEAN Declaration on a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea islands disputes and reiterated that the US is “ready to help facilitate such initiatives.” China has accused the US of meddling in these affairs and has insisted there is no need for any US mediation.

In an Oct. 28 policy address in Honolulu prior to a two-week regional tour taking her to Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea, Secretary Clinton said she was “encouraged by China’s recent steps to enter discussions with ASEAN about a more formal binding code of conduct” on the South China Sea disputes. Although an ASEAN-China working group on the subject has been in existence for some time, it has made no progress either in resolving the disputes among claimants or changing the Declaration on Conduct into a more formal code. Southeast Asian states’ support for Washington’s July ARF
proposal that ASEAN play a major role in resolving the South China Sea conflicts probably led to Beijing’s subsequent agreement to discuss with ASEAN as a whole – not just the claimants bilaterally – the formalization of a code of conduct. From Washington’s perspective, these developments would be part of a larger plan to pressure China to honor accepted standards for sharing oceans and airspace and to cease the harassment of ships and aircraft traveling in international transit lanes.

At the ADMM+, although China sought to keep discussions of the South China Sea off the agenda, the conflict was mentioned by the US, South Korea, Japan, Vietnam and several other Southeast Asian states. However, the final statement made no mention of the disputes. Later, in Tokyo, ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan stated that ASEAN would convene multilateral talks on the South China Sea and seek China’s participation. In effect, Surin’s offer echoed Secretary Clinton’s proposal at the July ARF gathering. Then, at the East Asia Summit (EAS) in late October, Clinton applauded “China’s recent steps to enter discussions with ASEAN about a more formal binding code of conduct.”

A working group representing China and ASEAN met in December to establish technical details on how a code could be formulated. The US has indicated it is willing to assist if requested. Although China still insists that the territorial disputes in the South China Sea should be resolved bilaterally with the claimants, the fact that China has accepted ASEAN as the negotiating partner for a new, formal code of conduct means that Beijing has abandoned its insistence that all South China Sea discussions be exclusively bilateral. This development has also raised ASEAN’s regional security status. Washington’s ASEAN consultations on the South China Sea that began prior to the July ARF meeting seem to have led to a dominant ASEAN strategy to which China has now reluctantly agreed. Extending this prospect, US Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Gary Roughhead on Nov. 10 stated that since the Chinese and US navies were working together effectively in the Somali basin, perhaps that cooperation “should be replicated in the South China Sea....”

Solidifying regional security architecture

During the George W. Bush administration, Southeast Asians perceived – not entirely accurately – that the US was indifferent to regional politico-security organizations. Instead, Washington concentrated on bilateral ties with friendly countries primarily to enhance counterterrorism capabilities. Neither ASEAN nor the ARF featured prominently in US diplomacy. From its beginning, the Obama administration worked to alter that perception. In an article written for the November/December 2010 issue of Foreign Affairs, Secretary Clinton averred: “The United States is investing in strengthening global structures such as the G20 and regional institutions such as ... the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.” She went on to note a “new global architecture of cooperation ... includes not only the East and West but also the North and South.”

Illustrative of this new architecture is the October ADMM+ held in Hanoi. Leading the way were visits to all ASEAN states and the Association’s dialogue partners by Vietnamese defense officials to discuss the ADMM+ structure and agenda. While the meeting of all ASEAN defense ministers is relatively new (2006), including Russia and the US was a first. As Ernest Bower of the US Center for Strategic and International Studies noted, US membership demonstrated an
ASEAN “desire to include the United States formally in Asia’s newly developing security infrastructure.” The ADMM+ agenda replicates the ARF’s, focusing on the nontraditional security concerns of humanitarian and disaster relief, maritime security broadly defined, counterterrorism, and peacekeeping operations. The one traditional security issue and ASEAN’s most contentious – the South China Sea – was omitted from the official agenda. Nevertheless, Secretary Gates and several Southeast Asian ministers raised the issue in their remarks, with Gates reiterating the US offer to facilitate discussion between ASEAN and Beijing on a full code of conduct; by late 2010, that offer has yet to be accepted. Moreover, given the sensitivity of military discussions, although some of the bigger powers urged that the meeting be made an annual event, ASEAN states agreed that the ADMM+ would convene only every three years with the next meeting scheduled for Brunei in 2013. Vietnam’s Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung declared this inaugural meeting a success and urged the countries involved to use other ASEAN tools to ensure peace and security in the region, particularly the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (a nonaggression pact) and Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone Treaty.

As Barry Desker, dean of Singapore’s Rajaratnam School of International Studies, noted, the ADMM+ moves ASEAN “a step closer to the realization of the ASEAN Security Community [because] ASEAN will be at the centre of the ADMM Plus Eight.” In an Oct. 15 RSIS Commentary, Desker underlined the fact that the ADMM+ is not a military alliance nor is it designed to cope with traditional security issues such as bilateral conflicts or territorial disputes. Nevertheless, he sees the ADMM+ adding an important dimension absent from the ARF, which is a gathering dominated by foreign ministers. The ADMM+ could become the key institution in the Asia-Pacific promoting practical cooperation among its participants’ armed forces, including meetings of defense and intelligence chiefs. Despite these early hopes, however, there remains a nagging sense that the new architecture is redundant, that the ARF, the ADMM+, and the EAS have similar memberships and agendas, while prospects for addressing traditional security concerns lag. Where are the forums to address Asia’s growing military modernization, the rise of incidents at sea, and whether countries can enforce vast oceanic claims under international law?

The ASEAN Summit did continue, nonetheless, its involvement in members’ internal affairs, thus demonstrating that the ASEAN’s Political-Security Community is viable. Once again, in its Oct. 29 meeting, ASEAN called on Burma to hold free, fair, and inclusive polls in the national elections scheduled for Nov. 7. ASEAN also asked Burma’s ruling junta to allow a joint ASEAN team of observers to monitor the election – a request rebuffed by the ruling generals who stated only UN representatives and resident diplomats would be permitted to observe. The foreign ministers of ASEAN’s two most democratic states – Indonesia and the Philippines – stated that Burma suffers from a credibility deficit and that a non-inclusive election is little more than a farce, referring to the incarceration of political opponents, most particularly opposition leader and Nobel-laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

**Bilateral initiatives in Secretary Clinton’s Southeast Asia visits**

In the realm of bilateral relations with Southeast Asian states, human rights concerns remained a high priority for Secretary Clinton. Days before her arrival in Hanoi, a number of labor activists, political bloggers, and Catholic parishioners were detained or convicted of political
dissidence. The US Embassy complained that these government actions “contradict Vietnam’s own commitment to internationally accepted standards of human rights. We urge ... Vietnam to release these individuals.” US congressional members also urged Clinton to press Hanoi on the politicization of the judicial system, which they claimed has been used to curb political speech and action.

On a more positive note, the back-to-back visits of Secretary Clinton and Secretary Gates underscored the growing security relationship between the US and Vietnam. Hanoi’s Vice Minister of Defense Nguyen Chi Vinh mused in a press interview: “It is always good to have a new friend. It is even better when that friend used to be our foe.” He may well have had in mind that the two countries held their first security dialogue in August, recent visits of US Navy ships, and the number of Vietnamese officers currently studying in US military service academies. Vietnam and the US are also reported to be discussing an agreement that would give Vietnam access to US nuclear energy technology for electricity production. Vietnamese officials are also interested in US military sales, including technology and spare parts for elements of Hanoi’s army inventory consisting of Vietnam War era equipment. Finally, at the close of the EAS on Oct. 30, in response to a reporter’s question, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung announced that Vietnam was prepared to open the port facility at Cam Ranh Bay, formerly used by both the US and Russia. Nguyen said the port would be available on a commercial basis for “naval ships for all countries including submarines when they need our services.” He went on to state that the port would be developed with Russian assistance primarily because Moscow is selling six Kilo-class submarines to Vietnam. The deal includes a provision for building a berth to maintain and repair these submarines, reported Carl Thayer, a Vietnam specialist at the Australian Defence Force Academy.

After her visit to Vietnam, Secretary Clinton visited Cambodia from Oct. 30-Nov. 1. Stressing the importance of human rights once more and the Cambodian government’s need to accept a credible political opposition, she weighed in on the future of the Khmer Rouge tribunal, which recently achieved its first conviction after years of trial preparation and millions of dollars in foreign assistance to support the special court. A second trial is expected to start next year for the four top surviving Khmer Rouge leaders. Its costs could reach $60 million to which Clinton pledged US support. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen has insisted the trials will stop there, although the United Nations also wishes to bring lower level members of the Khmer Rouge to justice. Critics accuse the Cambodian leader of wanting to limit the court’s scope to prevent his political allies from being indicted. Hun Sen was once a Khmer Rouge officer, and many of his inner circle are also former Khmer Rouge.

On other matters, Secretary Clinton threw her support behind the UN human rights office in Cambodia, which Hun Sen has threatened to close because of its alleged political interference. She noted the office’s technical assistance to the Cambodian government on dealing with human trafficking, human rights, and rule of law – all “very complementary to which the Cambodian government is committed to doing, and we think the work is important and we would like to see it continue.” Clinton also discussed the disposition of a $445 million Cambodian debt to the US dating back to the Lon Nol government in the 1970s. Phnom Penh says the debt should be cancelled, but Washington prefers to see the money spent in Cambodia on improving education and environmental protection. Speaking at a concluding joint press
conference, Clinton cautioned Cambodia not to become too dependent on any one country (read: China). There are a number of issues Phnom Penh could raise with Beijing, including the dams China built along the upper reaches of the Mekong River that threaten the water supply in the downstream countries. Cambodia has leaned toward China in regional international politics, for example, supporting Beijing’s bilateral approach to the Spratly Islands dispute rather than an ASEAN role.

Secretary Clinton’s Nov. 2 visit to Malaysia emphasized counterterrorism and security cooperation. Malaysia is providing medical services in Afghanistan and generally supports US efforts there. Moreover, Prime Minister Najib Razak has been emphasizing the importance of religious moderates speaking out in all major world faith groups as the best way of marginalizing the extremists who advocate violence. Clinton applauded Malaysia as a significant partner and a leader in the Asia-Pacific region in promoting religious moderation. She also endorsed the prime minister’s call for a “global movement of moderates to combat extremism.” Choosing not to meet personally with opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, currently on trial for sodomy, a prosecution that is considered by Washington to be politically motivated, Clinton made it clear that “the United States believes that it is important for all aspects of the case to be conducted fairly and transparently and in a way that increases confidence in the rule of law in Malaysia.”

Out of deference to the sensitivity of the case and improved US relations with Malaysia, Secretary Clinton only spoke with Anwar by phone. She said, nevertheless, that US officials are in regular contact with him and “we are watching his case very closely.” Malaysian Foreign Minister Anifah Aman assured Clinton that Anwar would receive a “fair and open trial.” Finally, she praised Malaysia’s new legislation designed to combat nuclear proliferation.

In her last Southeast Asian stop, before going on to New Zealand, Secretary Clinton went to Papua New Guinea (PNG) where she focused on its abysmal human rights situation, particularly concerning women who have been victimized in tribal hunts for sorcerers. Noted for massive corruption, the PNG government expects a windfall from the discovery of large deposits of natural gas and other minerals. To avoid further fueling government impunity toward its own people, Clinton urged political leaders to embrace an anti-corruption agenda and a commitment to good governance as the best ways to move the country toward prosperity. She said the US would work on a program with Exxon Mobil – holding the natural gas exploration contract – to “end the culture of violence against women and girls.” One sign of the pervasiveness of violence in the country is the fact that the police force is outnumbered by private security guards, who often must protect their employers from the police as well as other marauders. PNG Prime Minister Somare has denied the reports of depredations in his country against women.

**Visiting Forces Agreement continues to dominate Philippine-US military relations**

For nationalists and leftists in the Philippine Congress, the US-Philippine Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) is a perennial source of controversy. When he was a senator, President Benigno Aquino III advocated review and amendment of the VFA to make it more equitable, particularly with respect to criminal proceedings involving US military people. Now, as president, he has been called upon to fulfill his legislative pledge by his former colleagues in the Congress. US Amb. Harry Thomas on Oct. 4 said the US will agree to a Philippine review and
that US forces will remain in the Philippines as long as Manila wants them. Thomas stressed that the US provides training, intelligence, and financial support to the cash-strapped Philippine armed forces to help suppress radical Islamist groups such as the Sulu-based Abu Sayyaf. At no time are there more than 500-600 US Special Forces in the southern Philippines to train Philippine soldiers. The ambassador insisted: “We are temporary guests of the Philippine government. We don’t have bases here. We have no construction here.” In fact, he continued, the US is building a base in Guam and may well need up to 50,000 Filipino workers to construct it. (The Philippine Constitution forbids foreign military bases and the permanent deployment of foreign forces.)

Opponents of the VFA fall into two camps. The more radical group, led by Sen. Miriam Defensor-Santiago, argues that the US Special Forces in the south are actually a permanent presence and, therefore, in violation of the Philippine Constitution. Nevertheless, in March 2010, the Philippine Supreme Court upheld the 1999 VFA’s constitutionality, saying it was “duly concurred in by the Philippine Senate and has been recognized as a treaty by the United States.” The Court went on to say the VFA is an implementing agreement of the 1951 Philippine-US Mutual Defense Treaty. In fact, however, the US describes the VFA as an “executive agreement” in that it was not ratified by the US Senate. Indeed, all the US VFAs are executive agreements, not treaties.

The other opposition camp accepts the VFA’s validity but claims it is unfair to the Philippines because it permits the US to retain custody of service people convicted of crimes in the Philippines. In addition to the several hundred US forces in Mindanao, some 4,000 to 5,000 US military personnel take part annually in exercises in Luzon and US Navy ships regularly visit Philippine ports. President Aquino’s thoughts on the VFA review seem to align with the second camp. Through a review of the VFA, Manila should be able to improve its equity and leverage additional military assistance through US Foreign Military Sales programs at a reduced price as well as more surplus US military equipment as aid. The Philippine realist viewpoint was best expressed by Senate President Juan Ponce Enrile who, on Nov. 23, stated that the Philippines did not possess the military capacity to defend its territories and that US treaty commitments, military aid, and training were essential “to balance the capability of other countries to attack us.” Although Enrile did not mention China, the Spratly Islands were discussed in the Philippine Senate debate as a potential flashpoint.

**Burma: a “sham” election and the release of Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest**

After disenfranchising Nobel Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi and her opposition political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), refusing suffrage to millions of ethnic minorities, and guaranteeing the military a quarter of all seats in the Parliament, Burma held its first elections in 20 years on Nov. 7. ASEAN and UN offers to send observers were rebuffed. Indonesia and the Philippines – ASEAN’s most democratic members denounced the elections as a sham; the Association’s more authoritarian regimes, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam endorsed the polls. Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia took a more pragmatic stance, saying that Southeast Asia had no choice but to live with the result. ASEAN’s Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan expressed guarded optimism by saying: “There will be opportunities, openings, and new space after the elections, and more room for engagement.” Immediately after the vote,
President Obama and Secretary Clinton along with many other Western leaders decried the vote as neither free nor fair. Clinton said Washington would maintain “rigorous sanctions” against the Burmese regime if it continues to abuse human rights, ignores dialogue with the opposition, and holds political prisoners. Burma’s military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party declared victory with 80 percent of the vote, and ASEAN’s current chair – Vietnam’s Foreign Minister Pham Gia Khiem – on Nov. 15 welcomed the elections as a “significant step forward in the implementation of Burma’s seven-point roadmap for democracy.” It seems that ASEAN has decided to take the lemon of Burma’s faulty election and make lemonade from it.

Soon after the election, on Nov. 13, Aung San Suu Kyi was released from seven years of house arrest. Western capitals celebrated, and President Obama enthused: “She is a hero of mine and a source of inspiration for all who work to advance human rights in Burma and the world.” ASEAN leaders also welcomed Suu Kyi’s release, though Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa, on Nov. 14, said that ASEAN should focus on Burma’s next challenge: “national reconciliation” and that Suu Kyi should be allowed to work on Burma’s “future democratization.” On the same day, Secretary Clinton urged Burma’s leaders “to break with their repressive policies and begin an inclusive dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi and other democratic and ethnic leaders.” (By late December, no such dialogues had begun.)

Suu Kyi has said she is reconsidering her stand on economic sanctions against the Burmese government “only on the grounds of whether or not the sanctions are hurting the people....” But, she also cautioned Washington to assess whether engagement with the regime is working and not to wear “rose colored glasses.” The US has called upon Burmese authorities to release all the country’s 2,100 political prisoners. On the diplomatic front, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell, who is leading talks with Burma, said during an India visit that Burma is smuggling in nuclear materials – possibly from North Korea – and that Rangoon could become a proliferator and nuclear threat to South Asia. The Indians replied that the nuclear threat to South Asia comes from Pakistan about which the US has done nothing.

The “Lord of War” finally extradited to the United States

After two and one-half years in a Thai jail, Victor Bout, a Russian citizen, better known as the “Lord of War,” was extradited on terrorism charges to the US on Nov. 16. An arms dealer who has allegedly supplied weapons to insurgents, drug cartels, and terrorist organizations in Africa, South America, and the Middle East, Bout was arrested in Bangkok in March 2008 in a sting operation conducted by US undercover agents. Bout’s extradition was vigorously contested by Russia, and Thailand was caught in the middle, not wanting to offend either country. In October, Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva urged the two countries to resolve the issue on their own. Moscow is concerned that Bout, with connections to Russian military intelligence, may be willing to provide US authorities with sensitive information in exchange for leniency. The Russian Foreign Ministry on Nov. 18 claimed that that “the illegal extradition resulted from unprecedented US political pressure on the government and judiciary of Thailand.” Bangkok rebutted the Russian claim. (Ironically, for a time Bout’s airplanes were delivering freight to Iraq under a Pentagon contract.)
Summing up

This past quarter seemed to validate Secretary Clinton claim made in the Obama administration’s first year that “the United States is back!” in Southeast Asia. Between them, President Obama and Secretary Clinton visited four of the 10 ASEAN countries in November. Clinton was in Vietnam both to accept the invitation for the US to join the EAS and to hold a meeting of the Lower Mekong Initiative, a partnership with four mainland Southeast Asian countries – Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam focused on sustainable development. She also visited Cambodia and Malaysia. In Indonesia, Obama launched the Comprehensive Partnership, and Secretary of Defense Gates traveled to Hanoi for the ADMM+ gathering. Underlying this enhanced US posture in Southeast Asia is Washington’s recognition that ASEAN is the core of both regional security and economic activities and that the US must play a major role in regional affairs as well as continuing to strengthen bilateral ties. While both the region and the US view this heightened profile as part of an Asian balance of power toward China, Washington chooses to emphasize that its presence is a contribution to regional stability and prosperity, that is, as a positive-sum enterprise in which China also has a constructive role to play.

Chronology of US-Southeast Asian Relations

October – December 2010

Oct. 2, 2010: The aircraft carrier USS George Washington arrives in Thailand for a five-day visit with a crew of 6,250 and 80 aircraft aboard.

Oct. 3, 2010: US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Joseph Yun in a Congressional hearing states that the US is concerned about reports of human rights abuses in Papua and supports implementation of the 2001 Special Autonomy Law for that Indonesian province.

Oct. 4, 2010: US Ambassador to the Philippines Harry Thomas urges ASEAN and China to make their 2002 Declaration of Conduct on the Spratly islands into a legally binding code. He says the US would be willing to assist ASEAN in this endeavor.

Oct. 4, 2010: Thailand asks the US for a mid-life upgrade of 18 F-16A/B aircraft worth about $700 million.

Oct. 11, 2010: US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, speaking at the Vietnam National University, praises the development of defense ties between the two countries represented by the August visit of the USS John McCain as well as Vietnam’s observer status at recent Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercises.

Oct. 12, 2010: The US and Philippine navies conduct bilateral CARAT and PHILBEX exercises. Nearly 4,000 personnel from both countries participate in an amphibious landing exercise to enhance interoperability.
Oct. 12, 2010: The ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus 8 (ADMM+) convenes in Hanoi, with Secretary Gates in attendance.

Oct. 19, 2010: Responding to an Obama administration request, Malaysia sends a military medical continent to Afghanistan to serve with the International Security Assistance Force.

Oct. 21, 2010: USS Essex, participating in PHILBEX, responds to an appeal from the Philippine government to provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in the wake of Typhoon Megi.

Oct. 25, 2010: US military personnel deliver more than 170,000 pounds of relief supplies to victims of Typhoon Megi. USAID announces an additional $800,000 for disaster relief.

Oct. 26, 2010: Over 1,000 US and Cambodian sailors engage in the first at-sea US-Cambodian CARAT exercise. The US Navy also conducts bilateral CARAT exercises with Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, and Bangladesh.

Oct. 26, 2010: UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon turns down an appeal by Thai opposition Red Shirts to intervene with the Thai government on the investigation of deaths of their members during the April-May riots in Bangkok.

Oct. 27, 2010: US State Department spokesman Philip Crowley accuses the Burmese junta of “craven manipulation” of the upcoming election and says all political prisoners should be immediately released and that Aung San Suu Kyi should be allowed to participate.

Oct. 27, 2010: US congressmen call on Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to raise human rights issues in her Vietnam visit after the ASEAN Summit.

Oct. 28, 2010: President Barack Obama and Secretary Clinton send condolences to Indonesia for the families of victims of the Oct. 25 earthquake-generated tsunami in Mentawai, West Sumatra.

Oct. 31-Nov. 1, 2010: Secretary Clinton visits Cambodia, emphasizing human rights.

Nov. 1-3, 2010: Secretary Clinton visits Malaysia, emphasizing the country’s role as a center for moderate Islam.

Nov. 2, 2010: US Ambassador to Indonesia Scot Marciel stresses that America’s “good relationship” with the country will be maintained despite Democratic Party losses in the US midterm elections.

Nov. 3, 2010: Secretary Clinton visits Papua New Guinea, promoting human rights in the violence-prone country.

Nov. 4, 2010: The US and New Zealand sign a new partnership document, the Wellington Declaration, which covers general defense cooperation, nuclear nonproliferation, and South Pacific and Antarctic cooperation.
Nov. 8, 2010: Secretary Clinton and Secretary Gates attend the annual Australia-US Ministerial talks in Canberra where Australia’s role in Afghanistan, cyber security, and counterterrorism are on the agenda.

Nov. 9, 2010: Speaking in Jakarta, President Obama pledges to send humanitarian aid to victims of the Mount Merapi eruptions in Central Java and the tsunami in Mentawai. Obama and Indonesian President Susilio Bamgang Yudhoyono initial a Comprehensive Partnership Agreement covering several areas of policy cooperation.

Nov. 9, 2010: Secretary Gates holds discussions in Kuala Lumpur with Malaysian Defense Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi.

Nov. 13, 2010: Burmese Nobel-laureate Aung San Suu Kyi is freed from seven years of house arrest in Rangoon following the military junta’s rigged election victory. President Obama praises her steadfast efforts to promote genuine democracy.

Nov. 16, 2010: Russian arms dealer Victor Bout, held in a Thai jail since his 2008 arrest, is extradited to stand trial in the US for arms trafficking to terrorist groups.

Nov. 24, 2010: US Army Chief of Staff General George Casey visits Vietnam, hoping to boost military-to-military relations.


Dec. 13, 2010: Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Michael Somare “steps aside” in anticipation of facing a leadership tribunal for failure to submit full income returns to the Ombudsman Commission. He appoints Deputy Prime Minister Sam Abal as acting prime minister.

Dec. 22, 2010: Thailand lifts a state of emergency in Bangkok and three neighboring areas, seven months after a military crackdown on anti-government “Red Shirt” protests.

Dec. 23, 2010: Thongsing Thammavong is appointed prime minister of Laos after the surprise resignation of Bouasone Bouphavanh.