

U.S. - Southeast Asia Relations:  
**Mixed Reactions in Southeast Asia  
to the U.S. War on Terrorism**

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Southeast Asian states displayed a range of reactions to U.S. President George Bush's call for international support for the war on terrorism. Enthusiastic endorsement characterized the Philippine response as well as more quiet backing from Singapore. Thailand's support was slower and more tentative. Both Indonesia and Malaysia, while deploring the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States, tempered their sympathy with warnings that the U.S. not target Islam generally. Most of these reactions can be explained by the domestic politics of each state and the Muslim proportions of their respective populations.

**Overview**

While the Southeast Asian states declared their sympathy for the United States in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, their willingness to become a part of the U.S.-initiated global war on terrorism varied. The strongest response came from Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, who fully backed the U.S. with the offer of Philippine air bases and troops. She also accepted U.S. advisors to assist the Philippine military in its hunt for the Abu Sayyaf kidnapper-terrorists on the southern island of Basilan. President Macapagal-Arroyo undoubtedly hoped that her enthusiastic support would lead to substantial new U.S. military and economic aid. She has not been disappointed.

At the other extreme are Indonesia and Malaysia, both with predominantly Muslim populations. Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri, on a visit to the U.S. one week after the atrocities, denounced the attacks in the strongest possible terms. Back home, however, she tempered her remarks by warning that the U.S. war on terrorism did not give one country the right to attack another. The Indonesian president was repositioning herself to take account of the strong Muslim parties in Parliament and more general Islamic opposition to U.S. attacks on Afghanistan.

In late August, before the terrorist attacks on the United States, the heads of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore held a series of meetings on how to deal with Islamic extremists. Of particular concern is the large number of Malaysian, Indonesian,

and Filipino Muslim students who have been going to overseas Islamic religious schools where they come under the influence of hard line Islamic teachers. The attacks on the U.S. have accelerated efforts by the ASEAN members listed above to reduce the number of young men going abroad for religious study as well as to share intelligence on the activities of Islamists in their countries. These efforts are being undertaken independently of the U.S.-backed global coalition so that Malaysia and Indonesia can participate without appearing to be under a U.S. umbrella.

While ASEAN leaders in Brunei signed a declaration on joint action to counter terrorism at its seventh summit in early November, the declaration calls for little more than the exchange of information on terrorist activities. No operational coordination to seek out and hunt down terrorists operating cross-nationally was discussed, revealing once again ASEAN's limitations as a security mechanism.

### **The Philippines: A Staunch U.S. Ally and Aid Recipient**

Faced with a ruthless, if small, radical insurgent Islamist group in the southern Philippines –the Abu Sayyaf – and a persistent communist flare-up in Luzon, President Macapagal-Arroyo saw some immediate benefits in associating the Philippines with the U.S. war on terrorism. In desperate need of U.S. aid for a sputtering economy and military assistance to armed forces whose hardware had deteriorated to an almost unusable state, the Philippine offer of political support to Washington was accompanied by a substantial shopping list.

Soon after the Sept. 11 attack, President Macapagal-Arroyo enunciated an anti-terror policy that matched those of America's NATO allies, including close cooperation with the United States, making Philippine air space and facilities available – including Clark Air Base and Subic port – to transiting U.S. forces; the enactment on Sept. 30 of anti-money laundering legislation. and even combat troops to Afghanistan if requested by the United Nations.

The Philippines is particularly keen on obtaining U.S. arms and technical assistance to enhance its ability to suppress the Abu Sayyaf, which operates from the southern Philippines but has also conducted a kidnapping raid in Malaysia's Sabah. The Abu Sayyaf's kidnapping operations have reportedly netted the group some \$20 million in ransoms, some of which goes to buy support from the local population in Mindanao and some to purchase arms and other supplies. While a number of Philippine analysts believe that the Abu Sayyaf has become simply a criminal gang, the Sept. 11 attacks led to greater scrutiny, including its earlier links to al-Qaeda.

U.S. officials have stated that the Abu Sayyaf links to Usama bin Laden are sufficient reason to expand military assistance to the Philippines, though there is no evidence of these relations in recent years probably because kidnapping proceeds have provided Abu Sayyaf with more than enough money.

President Macapagal-Arroyo's visit to Washington in November as Southeast Asia's most vocal supporter of the U.S. war on terrorism was rewarded with a sizable military and economic assistance package. Some \$100 million in military aid was immediately provided over a five year program with another \$150 million under negotiation. The package included a C-130 transport plane, helicopters, a patrol boat, armored personnel carriers, 30,000 M-16 rifles, and anti-terrorist training. Left-leaning Congressmen and other Philippine nationalists are not so enthusiastic about the new embrace of the U.S., however, fearing that it could restore the old neocolonial relationship that had been broken a decade ago with the exit of U.S. forces from Clark and Subic.

In October, approximately 30 U.S. military anti-terrorist specialists visited Philippine forces in Mindanao to assess equipment needs and discuss strategy in hunting down the Abu Sayyaf, which has managed to elude the Philippine Army on Basilan and Sulu islands. Currently, the insurgents hold three hostages, two of which are a U.S. missionary couple. U.S. advisors with the Philippine forces beginning in January will be permitted to carry weapons for self-defense.

The Philippines has also led an effort to obtain ASEAN's endorsement for a regional anti-terrorist campaign as well as the creation of a core anti-terrorist group composed of the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia. The tripartite core group would focus on international linkages among extremists from each country. President Megawati suggested broadening the anti-terror coalition to include Singapore and Thailand (thus making it the original ASEAN Five); the association tabled this proposal for further research. Nevertheless, Macapagal-Arroyo has offered to hold anti-terrorist simulation exercises among the five, all of whom have agreed to participate.

### **Indonesia: Pulled in Two Directions**

Confronting radical Islamic groups in Indonesia fighting in Aceh, Sulewesi, and the Moluccas, as well as parts of Java, President Megawati had to tread carefully in responding to the U.S. anti-terrorism campaign. In early October, she issued a political statement condemning terrorism and stating Indonesia's readiness to cooperate with any UN collective action. The statement avoids endorsing U.S. retaliation against Afghanistan and "calls on all parties to avoid open war." However, in reaction to efforts by some Islamic radicals to seek out Americans for expulsion as well as violent anti-U.S. demonstrations, the Indonesian president insisted that such actions be halted, warning that "sanctions" will be imposed if they are not.

The Indonesian Ulemas Council, a group of top Islamic leaders, called on Muslims to prepare for *jihad* if Afghanistan is attacked. Although Islamic radicals account for only a small portion of the population in the world's largest Islamic country, they have upset domestic stability in a number of locations and undermined the Indonesian government's efforts to entice foreign investors to come back. Exacerbating the domestic situation are divisions within the army and between the police and army over how to deal with religious strife. Indonesia's traditional tolerant religious pluralism is under assault; the religious conflict between Christians and Muslims that had been suppressed for decades

under former President Suharto has erupted with the political shift to democracy since 1999.

Nevertheless, the bedrock of Islam in Indonesia consists of a pair of moderate, broadly-based organizations, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, which claim a membership that totals one-fourth of the population. They advocate the maintenance of a clear boundary between politics and religion and in early November discussed the development of a joint strategy to counter small militant religious groups. One of its leaders, the rector of the Syarif Hidayatullah State Institute of Islamic Studies, stated that demonstrations by radicals against the U.S. and its Western allies tarnished the image of Islam in Indonesia as a tolerant and moderate religion that emphasized peace and harmony. While small-scale anti-U.S. demonstrations have occurred in many Indonesian cities, of the 10,000 Americans living in the country, it is estimated that less than 500 have left. In a two-pronged strategy, President Megawati has deplored the loss of civilian lives in Afghanistan as a result of U.S. bombing while authorizing the police to crack down on anti-U.S. demonstrations throughout the country. Indonesian Vice President Hamzah Haz also condemned the anti-U.S. rallies as damaging to the country's economic recovery.

Indonesia has displayed ambivalence toward U.S. efforts to block financial support for terrorist movements. There are literally thousands of Islamic charities in Southeast Asia. To scrutinize those in Indonesia risks a significant Muslim backlash. Moreover, neither the Finance Ministry nor Bank Indonesia is equipped to monitor the thousands of financial transactions coming from overseas to non-governmental organizations. Nevertheless, in late October, an apparent compromise was reached whereby Indonesia agreed to freeze the bank assets of terrorism suspects identified by the U.S. but avoided any large-scale review of all Islamic charitable activities.

In exchange for Indonesia's general endorsement of the U.S.-led anti-terrorism campaign, President Megawati was promised \$530 million in financial aid after her September visit to Washington. In late October, the U.S. Senate also indicated that military ties could be restored if a number of political conditions are met involving the prosecution of those who killed UN aid workers in West Timor, stronger evidence of civilian control of the military, and the release of political detainees.

In sum, the Indonesian government deserves stronger political, economic, and military ties with Washington and other Western powers but must temper its ardor in order not to exacerbate tensions with militant Islamic elements that view the West as having embarked on an anti-Islamic crusade. Indonesia's economic recovery depends heavily on reassuring Western investors that the country's future is secure, while Megawati's own political future depends on defusing militant muslims. Needless to say, these are complex and not entirely compatible tasks.

### **Malaysia: An Arms-Length Policy**

As in Indonesia, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed must also address Islamic sensibilities in his response to the U.S. war on terrorism. Like Megawati, Mahathir is the leader of a moderate Islamic state who must face his own extremists while avoiding riling the masses. His primary fear is that Washington's anti-terror campaign and U.S. pressure on Malaysia to cooperate will give rise to militant activities in the country. In fact, the prime minister had used the threat of militant Islam to crack down on the primary opposition Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) even before the attacks on the U.S.

Since Sept. 11, U.S. media reported that Malaysia was one of the countries the FBI asked to hand over suspected terrorists. Mahathir responded by saying, according to *The New Straits Times*, that although extremist groups exist in Malaysia, they "are directing their attacks at us, and we can take care of them. They are not attacking the United States." Mahathir is also concerned that the U.S. war in Afghanistan could destabilize the Islamic world and, by implication, make it harder for moderates such as himself to rule. To the contrary, however, the fundamentalism of PAS has fragmented the other members of the opposition coalition leading to its virtual disintegration and thus strengthening the ruling Barisan Nasional. More moderate Malays, who had been attracted to the opposition coalition, have become alienated by PAS's vitriolic anti-U.S. rhetoric and demonstrations in front of the U.S. Embassy.

Malaysia has also protested, as has Indonesia, against the U.S. State Department's November decision to place more stringent visa application procedures on Muslim men from Malaysia and 24 other countries, though the Malaysian press noted Secretary of State Colin Powell's statement that the new restrictions would be temporary. Even the head of Malaysia's opposition Chinese party, the Democratic Action Party (DAP), warned that the new visa restrictions would only strengthen the impression that the U.S. is waging war on Islam.

Within ASEAN, Mahathir opposed any resolution backing U.S. military action and argued that the group should only endorse a UN General Assembly resolution condemning terrorism. At its early November leaders' meeting, however, ASEAN rejected Mahathir's attempt to go on record against U.S. actions in Afghanistan and instead issued a statement condemning terrorism and the attacks on the U.S. as "an attack against humanity and an assault on all of us."

### **Thailand: A Reluctant Ally**

Two days after the attacks on the U.S., the Thai Foreign Ministry stated that the country would stand with the U.S. "as always." Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, however, has taken a more ambivalent position. Initially he insisted that Thailand would wait for a joint ASEAN resolution and that any use of Thai bases by U.S. forces would require ASEAN approval. Other Thai officials dismissed these qualms, insisting that U.S. use of U-Tapao airbase was a matter of Thai sovereignty only and U.S.-Thai agreements. Thaksin offered a guarded endorsement of the U.S. airstrikes on Afghanistan on the grounds that U.S. action "was a result of the UN's decision to dismantle and end the networks of terrorism."

Thailand's reluctant support for U.S. actions is a product of sensitivity toward Muslim communities in the south. The Muslim Organization of Thailand has called for a national boycott of U.S. goods and services while thousands of southern Muslims have demonstrated against the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan. At the same time, a top Muslim organization leader opposed terrorist attacks saying they were against Islam's prohibition of harming innocent people.

Thailand has supported U.S. efforts to block the funding of terrorists and had passed an anti-money laundering law prior to Sept. 11, motivated by the need to control drug trafficking. Bangkok also announced that Cobra Gold 2002, an annual joint U.S.-Thailand military exercise, would include an anti-terrorist training arrangement.

### **Implications for U.S. Policy**

Although Southeast Asia is not a major theater for the U.S. war on terrorism and because Southeast Asian leaders have their own agendas in both endorsing and condemning U.S. actions in Afghanistan (and beyond), Washington should be cognizant that its anti-terror campaign is closely watched in the region. To maximize Southeast Asian support for U.S. actions, particularly the monitoring of Islamic extremists and their overseas funding, the Bush administration should continue to emphasize that its efforts are directed at terror and not Islam. In each Southeast Asian state, Washington must demonstrate that cooperation with the U.S. is mutually beneficial and will not exacerbate the political troubles of regional governments.

### **Chronology of U.S.-Southeast Asia Relations October – December 2001**

**Oct. 2, 2001:** U.S. Ambassador to Cambodia Kent Widemann says he is confident the Hun Sen government is prepared to conduct a trial of the surviving Khmer Rouge leaders, although the UN has not yet been invited to initiate and help fund the tribunal.

**Oct. 2, 2001:** The Philippines announces that the U.S. has made a number of authorized overflights of the country to the Arabian Gulf area; a presidential spokesman says the U.S. would have to make a formal request for each overflight in the future.

**Oct. 3, 2001:** The Central Islamic Committee of Thailand asks the government to refrain from providing military bases to the U.S. for reprisal attacks on Afghanistan.

**Oct. 3, 2001:** Vietnam welcomes the U.S. Senate's ratification of the Vietnam-U.S. Trade Agreement.

**Oct. 4, 2001:** U.S. Ambassador Robert Gelbard castigates the Indonesian government for not providing proper protection to Americans who are being threatened by radical groups.

**Oct. 4, 2001:** Elements of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the southern Philippines threaten to retaliate against U.S. civilians if Afghanistan is attacked.

**Oct. 4, 2001:** Indonesia issues a political statement against terrorism and condemns anti-U.S. protests and harassment of Americans in Indonesia.

**Oct. 5, 2001:** U.S. Ambassador to Thailand Richard Hecklinger states that the main form of cooperation against terrorism asked from Thailand is the sharing of intelligence and the enhancement of coordination between law enforcement agencies of both countries.

**Oct. 6, 2001:** A U.S. Federal court finds Indonesian Gen. Tommy Lumintang liable for human rights violations in the 1999 East Timor elections and awards \$66 million in damages to a group of East Timor plaintiffs.

**Oct. 6, 2001:** The Philippines pledges to help the U.S. pursue the flow of money from al-Qaeda to terrorist networks in the Philippines.

**Oct. 8, 2001:** Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra states that Thailand supports U.S. strikes against the Taliban because they are authorized by the UN resolution against terrorism.

**Oct. 9, 2001:** Ralph Boyce sworn in as U.S. Ambassador to Indonesia.

**Oct. 9, 2001:** Anti-U.S. demonstrations erupt in four major Indonesian cities in the wake of U.S. air strikes in Afghanistan.

**Oct. 10, 2001:** The Philippines announces that the U.S. will send military advisors to Mindanao to provide training for Philippine forces in their hunt for terrorists linked to the al-Qaeda network.

**Oct. 10, 2001:** Thai Defense Minister Gen. Chavalit Yongchaiyudh dismisses reports that U.S. warplanes are using U-Tapao airbase to refuel on the way to Afghanistan. The Thai-U.S. military cooperation agreement allows U.S. planes to refuel in Thailand but not to stage attacks on third countries from Thai soil.

**Oct. 12, 2001:** Indonesian Vice President Hamzah Haz urges the U.S. to stop air attacks on Afghanistan and present solid proof to the world that Usama bin Laden was responsible for the Sept. 11 attacks.

**Oct. 12, 2001:** Police use water cannons to disperse some 4,000 demonstrators gathered around the U.S. Embassy in Kuala Lumpur to protest U.S. air attacks on Afghanistan.

**Oct. 15, 2001:** Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar warns that prolonged military attacks on Afghanistan could destabilize the Islamic world.

**Oct. 18, 2001:** Thailand orders 30 second-hand Huey helicopters from the United States to be added to the 90 already in service. Provided as a free gift by the U.S., Thailand will still pay \$1 million per aircraft for refurbishment and transportation.

**Oct. 19, 2001:** Thailand refuses a U.S. request to station supply ships in the Gulf of Thailand.

**Oct. 22, 2001:** The Council of Muslim Organizations of Thailand calls for a boycott of U.S. products while the war in Afghanistan continues.

**Nov. 1, 2001:** Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri urges the U.S. to halt military attacks on Afghanistan during Ramadan.

**Nov. 2, 2001:** Indonesia, after a long delay, agrees to freeze bank accounts of terrorist suspects as the U.S. has requested.

**Nov. 4, 2001:** U.S. officials claim that the Philippine terrorist group Abu Sayyaf has links to Usama bin Laden, though Philippine specialists do not believe the relationship has been active for about a decade.

**Nov. 5, 2001:** ASEAN summit in Brunei adopts a declaration of joint action to counter terrorism.

**Nov. 8, 2001:** The U.S. Senate introduced several new conditions before direct military-to-military relations can be restored with Indonesia including the punishment of the individuals who murdered three humanitarian aid workers in West Timor, establishing a civilian audit of armed forces expenditures, and granting humanitarian workers access to Aceh, West Timor, West Papua, and the Moluccas.

**Nov. 8, 2001:** Indonesia's two largest moderate Muslim organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, discuss adopting a common strategy to counter small militant religious groups that have tarnished Indonesian Islam's reputation through violent demonstrations against the U.S. and its allies.

**Nov. 11, 2001:** The U.S. State Department announces a five-fold increase in military financing to the Philippines from \$2 million to \$19 million in the 2003 budget.

**Nov. 11, 2001:** Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad condemns new U.S. visa restrictions on Muslims from several countries including Malaysia.

**Nov. 15, 2001:** Indonesian authorities criticize the new U.S. visa restrictions on Muslims from 25 countries as discriminating and undermining the U.S. claim that it is targeting terrorists not Islam.

**Nov. 20, 2001:** At a White House meeting, President Bush promises President Macapagal-Arroyo all the aid she needed to fight the Abu Sayyaf terrorists. He pledged up to \$100 million in security assistance and a further \$1 billion in trade benefits.

**Nov. 21, 2001:** A Thai military source states that the 2002 "Cobra Gold" exercise would include an anti-terrorist scenario involving U.S. special forces.



**Nov. 28, 2001:** Hanoi ratifies a far reaching trade agreement with the U.S. that will lead to an average cut in U.S. tariffs on Vietnamese goods to about 4 percent.

**Dec. 7, 2001:** U.S. lists the Philippine communist insurgent guerrillas on Washington's terrorist list, a development hailed by the Philippine military.

**Dec. 10 and 18, 2001:** The U.S. Senate and House respectively pass separate resolutions thanking the Philippines for its support and sympathy since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

**Dec. 11, 2001:** U.S. praises the Thai military for its peacekeeping leadership role in East Timor and its drug suppression activities in Thailand.

**Dec. 18, 2001:** Thai Prime Minister Thaksin's visit to Washington is greeted with disappointment in the Thai press. Little of consequence in either economic or political benefits occurred, perhaps because of Thailand's tentative support of the U.S. anti-terrorist campaign.