

U.S-Southeast Asia Relations: In the Shadow of Iraq

by Richard W. Baker
Special Assistant to the President, East-West Center

U.S. relations with the Southeast Asian states in the first quarter of 2003 were dominated first by the anticipation and then by the reality of the war on Iraq. Other issues in bilateral and regional relations continued, and the Iraq conflict was not central to U.S. relations with every country of the region during the period, but the conflict was the overriding focus of attention. While there was a range of reactions in the region – from solid support to vocal condemnation – the main response, from governments and peoples, was critical of the U.S. approach. With the outcome – or at least the length and destructiveness – of the war increasingly uncertain as the quarter came to an end, there was at least a danger that this episode would cause lasting damage in terms of how the U.S. and its international role are viewed around the region.

Indonesia: After a Step Forward, a Step Back

U.S. relations with Indonesia are in many respects the bellwether of U.S. relations with the broader Southeast Asian community. This reflects both Indonesia's weight in the region (it has half the population of the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations – ASEAN) and the volatility that has characterized the relationship since the Dili massacres of 1991 led to Congressionally imposed restrictions on U.S. security assistance to Indonesia.

The Bali bombing on Oct. 12, 2002 galvanized the government of President Megawati Sukarnoputri to a previously unseen level of determination to deal with the problem of terrorism, as well as a new willingness to cooperate both with its Southeast Asian neighbors and others, including Australia and the United States. As a result, the Indonesian government was able relatively quickly to arrest a number of suspects in the bombing including several key figures. As of mid-January, 17 suspects were in custody. Simultaneously, the government arrested on different charges Muslim cleric and teacher Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, believed to be the founder and spiritual leader of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) group that was believed to be behind the Bali bombings as well as other activities in Singapore and Malaysia. In late January, the police formally recommended to the prosecutor that Ba'asyir be charged with treason. In early February, the Indonesians arrested JI's operational planner for Indonesia, as well as the alleged leader of a JI cell in the country. Finally, in another incident involving Americans but not

connected with the Bali bombings, Indonesia invited the FBI to join the investigation of the fatal shootings of two American teachers at Timika in Papua province near the huge Freeport copper mine site.

On March 6, the Parliament finally passed an antiterrorism bill that had been under discussion for nearly a year and whose substance had already been put into effect in a decree issued by Megawati in mid-October after the Bali bombing.

However, the Megawati government remains fundamentally weak and politically beleaguered on the home front. This weakness was illustrated when an economically necessary reduction of subsidies on fuel, electricity, and telephone service at the start of the year led to massive public dissatisfaction and, after barely two weeks, a government agreement to repeal or reconsider the changes. The government's weakness will likely only increase as political competition intensifies in anticipation of the next national elections in 2004 – in which Megawati, her vice president, and two of her three senior coordinating ministers are all probable presidential contenders.

Partly because of the government's weakness, other areas in the U.S.-Indonesia relationship encountered difficulties during the quarter. The Indonesian government reacted strongly to a U.S. announcement on Jan. 16 adding Indonesia (among others) to the list of countries whose citizens in the United States are required to register as part of the counterterrorism measures. Megawati responded by urging Indonesians not to visit the U.S. unless absolutely necessary, and Foreign Minister Hasan Wirayudha publicly questioned the impact of the measure on joint antiterrorism efforts.

Although U.S. training programs for the Indonesian police and intelligence cooperation continue, and the Congress in late January cleared the way to making Indonesians eligible for limited participation in U.S. military training courses, other restrictions including prohibition of most equipment sales remain. The U.S. ambassador and other senior officials publicly reiterated the position that the Indonesian government needs to do better on military accountability if relations with the United States are to be fully restored. A U.S. press report at end of January claiming that the FBI had identified Indonesian Army personnel as responsible for the Timika shootings – though denied by the U.S. Embassy – illustrated the continuing obstacles to progress in this aspect of the relationship.

Other events served to underline the continuing differences over human rights and military accountability. In early February, a Indonesian National Military (TNI) officer stated in court that one of his men had murdered Papuan leader Theys Eluay in November 2001, confirming suspicions that the military was behind the murder but still evading the question of command responsibility. The last of the first round of trials of (mostly military) figures charged with human rights violations in East Timor ended on March 12 with the sentencing of a brigadier general (the highest army officer charged in Indonesian court) to a period of four years in prison, six years below the mandatory minimum for the offense. And when prosecutors in East Timor in late February charged former armed forces commander Gen. Wiranto, six other military officers, and the former Indonesian governor of the province with crimes against humanity, the Indonesian

government, which had already stated it would not produce defendants for Timorese proceedings, had no reaction. So despite some procedural progress, a wide gulf remains as to the appropriate substance of Indonesian actions on such human rights issues.

Finally, press reports in late February said that a military draft of a bill on the TNI contained an article (19) giving the military authority to deploy troops without civilian authorization in emergency circumstances. Article 19 was quickly dubbed the “*kudeta*” provision and provoked strong criticism in political and expert circles. The attitude of the Indonesian military toward reform of its role, and therefore the future of U.S. relations with the Indonesian military, remains highly problematic.

Above all, the issue of Iraq dominated discussion of the U.S. in Indonesia during this period. The most striking aspect of the Indonesian reaction was the virtual unanimity of Indonesian moderates – Muslim and otherwise – in rejecting the U.S. approach. The former president and former leader of the largest Islamic social organization *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU), Abdurrahman Wahid, announced his opposition to any attack on Iraq on Jan. 27. On the same day, the current leader of NU, Hasyim Muzadi, and Syafi’i Ma’arif, the leader of the almost equally large modernist (but moderate) organization *Muhammadiyah*, and announced that they were declining invitations from the U.S. Congress to the National Prayer Breakfast in early February; Muzadi told the press that the breakfast was “no longer relevant” because of Iraq. Foreign Minister Wirayudha in early March said that Indonesia rejected the “second resolution” on Iraq proposed by the U.S., Britain, and Spain, aligning Indonesia with the majority on the Security Council.

Following the commencement of the military operation on March 20, President Megawati denounced the unilateral action, calling it an act of aggression that violates international law and urging the UN Security Council to hold an emergency session to try to stop the war. Coordinating Minister for People’s Welfare Jusuf Kalla, who had been the architect of settlement agreements in two bitter communal conflicts within Indonesia, emerged from a meeting of religious leaders (Christian as well as Islamic) to read a statement declaring that: “The war on Iraq is a war against humanity.” Muhammadiyah leader Syafi’i called President Bush a “war criminal.” And the NU youth wing called for the expulsion of U.S. diplomats from Indonesia within 48 hours and threatened that the people would implement the expulsion forcibly if the government did not.

One of the few senior government figures to defend continuing cooperation with the United States was the coordinating minister for political and security affairs, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. But Susilo made his case on purely pragmatic grounds, arguing that good relations with the U.S. are important to Indonesia’s economy, such as continuation of assistance from the International Monetary Fund.

A series of public demonstrations against the war occurred in Jakarta and other major cities, starting before the actual attack; 100,000 demonstrators staged a peaceful march to the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta on March 30. However, no serious violence or attacks on U.S. citizens have occurred – yet. This was variously attributed to determination by the

authorities to keep matters under control and to generally more sober attitudes in the aftermath of the Bali incident.

Malaysia: Steady on Two Tracks

Malaysia continued its well-established pattern under maverick nationalist Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad of strident rhetorical differences with the United States coupled with quiet but effective cooperation on the operational level.

During the quarter, Mahathir sustained his reputation for outspoken independence. In January, he stated that he neither supported attacking North Korea nor accommodating North Korea's nuclear weapons. In late February, he met with North Korea's second-ranked leader Kim Yong-nam at the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit meeting and seemed to support North Korea's desire for direct talks with the United States. He also defended the right of North Korea to test its weapons (in this case a short-range missile test on Feb. 24). In the first weeks of February, he opposed proposals urging Iraq's Saddam Hussein to go into exile, and praised the NATO council for blocking a resolution providing emergency military support for Turkey related to the impending conflict in Iraq. In his speech opening the NAM summit in Kuala Lumpur on Feb. 24, he called for outlawing war.

At the same time, just after the summit meeting U.S. Ambassador Marie Huhtala stated to the press that Malaysia's position on Iraq hadn't harmed diplomatic relations between the two countries. This suggested an acceptance of Mahathir's strong and colorful character and the domestic political context for Mahathir's statements, as well as a consciousness that various practical aspects of U.S.-Malaysian security cooperation, including in counterterrorism, were proceeding largely unaffected by the public differences over Iraq.

When hostilities began, Mahathir was away on a two-month "leave," and his deputy Abdullah Ahmad Badawi – designated to succeed Mahathir when the latter retires in October – was making a trial run as acting prime minister. Badawi, generally considered more of a consensus politician and less shrill than Mahathir, said that Malaysia regretted the attack as unapproved by the UN and contrary to international law. He expressed doubt that Iraq could actually threaten other countries, and declared, "War is not the way to settle conflicts." He also expressed concern for the impact of the war on the global campaign against terrorism (in which Malaysia has been cooperating closely with the U.S.). However, at the same time he appealed to the Malaysian populace to be restrained in expressing anti-American sentiments.

Singapore: Defiantly Onside

In contrast to the governments of largely Muslim Indonesia and Malaysia, the government of Singapore, which has only a minority Muslim population, has been unabashedly supportive of the U.S. approach on Iraq.

Characteristically, the Singaporeans were blunt, uncompromising, and also unchallenged by domestic opinion. Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong put his government's position on the war – and its differences from its neighbors' approaches – quite concisely in a speech in Tokyo on March 28. He stated his belief that moderate Muslims in both Indonesia and Malaysia understand – as the government had convinced Singapore's Muslims – that the war on Iraq is not “to destroy Islam,” or “to hit out at a Muslim country” but rather “to remove the weapons of mass destruction from Saddam Hussein.”

Goh noted that if the Indonesian government sided with Washington it would not win the 2004 election, so it allowed demonstrations but insisted that these be moderate and peaceful. He also commented that while Malaysia had been more outspoken, its government had banned all demonstrations except one organized by the government. As for Singapore, he said, “We take different positions out of our own national interest.” In the case of Iraq, the calculus is that Baghdad's weapons of mass destruction pose a grave danger, and that if these weapons were to fall into the hands of terrorists they could also become a threat to Singapore. The Singapore government's position is that Southeast Asia would not be immune to the instability and chaos that would be caused by the proliferation of such weapons.

The Philippines: Caught in the Middle

Like the government of Singapore, the Philippines government of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo also seeks cooperation with the U.S., and also has a Muslim minority population that does not figure prominently in national foreign-policy making. Otherwise, however, Arroyo faces a very different domestic context from that in Singapore. Arroyo, who at the end of 2002 had announced her decision not to seek another term as president, faces both strong competition from other politicians, especially in the legislature, and intense nationalistic feelings especially toward anything that looks like a return to the period of U.S. military presence and extraterritorial rights in the Philippines. Nationalistic opposition had been aroused in 2002 when 1,500 U.S. troops were deployed ostensibly on a training mission, but, in fact, to support the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) campaign against the Abu Sayyaf group in the southern islands. More than half of the group stayed on after the nominal end of the exercise in July. A 10-year logistics agreement was signed in November, and there was a widespread belief that the U.S. was seeking renewed general military access to the Philippines.

These sensitivities were reflected in both the government's and popular attitudes toward the impending war on Iraq. In early January, Arroyo's press secretary stated that the government was taking a “noncommittal” position on the U.S. request for general support in the war. At the end of January, a group of 88 Catholic bishops urged the government not to support unilateral U.S. action in Iraq.

Against this background, a Pentagon announcement on Feb. 21 that Marines and Special Forces troops were being sent to the Philippines to support the Philippine Army in eliminating the remnant of the Abu Sayyaf group on Jolo Island backfired badly. Whether there had been miscommunication between the two governments or Arroyo had

simply miscalculated, the idea that U.S. troops would be engaged in combat on Philippine soil caused an immediate political outcry. Arroyo almost equally rapidly backpedaled. On Feb. 23 her press spokesman said the government “would not allow” U.S. troops to perform a combat role because this went against provisions of the Philippines constitution. By the 28th, U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, after a meeting with the Philippines Defense Secretary Angelo Reyes in Washington, said that no combat troops would be sent, but there might be “training” and intelligence cooperation. The large deployment was shelved, although a pre-arranged year-long training program following up the 2002 exercise and involving some 300 U.S. troops including 70 Special Forces personnel proceeded as scheduled starting Feb. 23.

A further reflection of the renewed awkwardness in U.S.-Philippines relations came on March 13, when Arroyo announced the postponement of a planned April 2-5 visit to the U.S., because of the war. After the start of the Iraq campaign on March 20, however, Arroyo said that the Philippines, as a member of the “coalition of the willing” with the U.S., was giving “political and moral” support to the effort to eliminate Baghdad’s weapons of mass destruction. She also said her government was considering eventually sending peacekeepers to Iraq.

Mainland Southeast Asia: Other Concerns

The five northern tier ASEAN states – Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam – continued the pattern of the previous quarter of broad support for regional counterterrorism cooperation, combined with practical focus on individual issues of more direct concern.

In late February, the Burmese military government launched an overture to the U.S. calling for lifting of sanctions and opening a “constructive dialogue” about the bilateral relationship. This initiative was undertaken following – and presumably in response to – indications from the Bush administration of increasing frustration and impatience with the lack of progress on talks with the Burmese opposition. The government had promised to hold talks in 2002, when opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi had been released from house arrest. But other than some small gestures, little had materialized. In early 2003, the Bush administration sent clear signals that it was running out of patience. It refused to certify that Burma was making progress on restricting the narcotics trade, and it threatened to increase sanctions on Burmese exports to the U.S.

The Burmese overture to the U.S. for dialogue (which seemed unlikely to succeed in the short term) was only one element of the regime’s strategy. The other major strand is a continuing courtship of closer ties with neighboring countries – China, India, Bangladesh, and Thailand – in order to reduce its dependence on the U.S. and the West. Particularly noteworthy in this regard was a visit to China in January by the top Burmese general, in which deals were signed for \$200 million in loans and \$5 million in grants. The Burmese leaders clearly hope to play on U.S. concerns over growing Chinese influence into Southeast Asia.

Somewhat like the government in the Philippines, the Thai government clearly felt uncomfortable about the U.S. campaign against Iraq. Thailand's minority Muslim population from the southern area of the country has a more integrated role in the country's politics than is the case with the Muslim minority in the southern Philippines. So reactions to the impending war in the Thai Muslim community, similar to those of Muslims elsewhere in the region, had some significance at the level of national politics. The Thai media also generally opposed the war, and a majority in the Parliament opposed any military action without UN approval. The outbreak of hostilities triggered a series of peaceful protest demonstrations in Bangkok and the south.

In this situation, the Thai government attempted to take a middle position. The government did not support the U.S.-UK-Spanish Security Council resolution authorizing the use of force. After March 20, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra emphasized continuing alliance cooperation with the United States but also publicly called on the U.S. to exercise maximum caution in trying to avoid civilian casualties. Thaksin ruled out a combat role for Thai forces, while holding open the possibility of a Thai role in the rebuilding phase in Iraq under UN auspices. The Thai tightrope act seemed likely to be put to an even more severe test if the Iraq war extended into May, when the annual "Cobra Gold" U.S.-Thai military exercise was scheduled to take place, with an emphasis on counterterrorism and including an element in southern Thailand.

Cambodia is largely preoccupied with domestic political maneuvering in the run up to a national election on July 27. However, one positive step in Cambodia's international relations took place during the quarter, when the government reached agreement with the United Nations on March 17 on the establishment of a special court to try those most responsible for the Khmer Rouge genocide in the 1970s. If the agreement is approved by the UN General Assembly and the Cambodian legislature, this would go a long way toward removing a longstanding irritant in Cambodia's relations with the United States as well as the UN.

U.S.-Vietnam relations remained on a lower key. The Vietnamese government, predictably, "vehemently" condemned the attack on Iraq, but the more significant event in the bilateral relationship during the quarter was a verbal war over catfish. On Jan. 27 the U.S. imposed tariff penalties on Vietnamese catfish exports to the U.S. as a result of an antidumping suit filed by U.S. catfish farmers. Sharply increased sales of this unlikely commodity had been one of the major positive outcomes for Vietnam of the conclusion of a bilateral trade agreement with the U.S. in December 2001.

The Outlook

The relationships between Washington and governments in Southeast Asia will suffer various degrees of strain in the short term due to the Iraq war. However, it is very likely that these official relationships will be at least patched up relatively quickly, on the simple basis of practicality and mutual self-interest. However, the real collateral damage of the Iraq war in Southeast Asia may be trust in America on the part of the publics and societies – especially, though not exclusively, the Islamic communities. The campaign

against Iraq has caused a major loss of trust and confidence on the part of many mainstream Southeast Asians in the United States and its role in the world.

If the war itself is relatively short and the innocent victims are relatively few in number, and if a more representative government is put in place relatively quickly, the immediate anger at the United States will likely cool. But the more fundamental doubts about U.S. responsibility, sensibility, and even the basic motivations of the U.S. government, may not be as easily answered. The U.S. may face a major challenge to convince a lot of reasonable, moderate people in Southeast Asia (as elsewhere around the world) that the U.S. will use its power well, and that the world will really be a safer place under an American Imperium. As the first quarter of 2003 ended, this was a very open question.

Chronology of U.S.-Southeast Asia Relations

January - March 2003

Jan 1, 2003: Indonesian government removes subsidies on fuel, electricity, and telephone charges; prices rise by 22 percent.

Jan. 3, 2003: Seven members of Indonesian Army Special Forces unit, Kopassus, go on trial for the murder of Papuan independence leader Theys Eluay in November 2001.

Jan. 6, 2003: Indonesian police present first case to prosecutors against Bali bombing suspect known as Amrozi.

Jan. 6-12, 2003: Burma's junta leader Senior Gen. Than Shwe arrives in China for six-day visit.

Jan. 10, 2003: Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs announces discovery of close ties between Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and other Islamic militant groups in Southeast Asia. A Ministry White Paper indicates JI militants were trained at the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) base in the Philippines.

Jan. 14, 2003: Indonesian police arrest two Bali bombing suspects, bringing the number of people detained to approximately 17.

Jan. 16, 2003: U.S. adopts new measures requiring visiting male citizens from Indonesia, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, and Bangladesh to register with U.S. immigration authorities and provide fingerprints.

Jan. 17, 2003: Indonesia protests new measures by the U.S. immigration authorities.

Jan. 21, 2003: Indonesian police recommend prosecutors charge Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, with treason (for plotting to assassinate President Megawati Sukarnoputri) and for a series of bomb attacks on Christmas Eve in 2000.

Jan. 23, 2003: U.S. Senate votes 61-36 to defeat an amendment barring funding for Indonesians in the U.S. International Military Education and Training (IMET), thereby making Indonesian military officers eligible for IMET.

Jan. 28, 2003: U.S. Commerce Department finds Vietnam guilty of dumping catfish on the U.S. market. Vietnamese imports could face tariffs if ruling is upheld by U.S. government.

Feb. 3, 2003: Indonesia Lt. Gen. Erwin Mappaseng announces arrest of Mas Slamet Kastari, leader of the Singapore branch of JI, and Noor Din, a citizen of Malaysia.

Feb. 6, 2003: Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi is awarded \$1 million Al Neuharth Free Spirit of the Year prize for her advocacy of democracy in Burma by the U.S.-based Freedom Forum Foundation.

Feb. 6, 2003: Malaysian PM Mahathir announces there will be no early general election before his retirement in October.

Feb. 11, 2003: President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo orders Philippine troops to suspend fighting with Muslim rebels after seven militants and one soldier were killed in renewed clashes on the southern island of Mindanao. Clashes erupted after the army sent 3,000 soldiers into the area to confront about 1,000 Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) fighters.

Feb. 15, 2003: The Philippines asks Malaysia for help in restarting peace talks with the MILF despite clashes in Mindanao.

Feb. 21, 2003: The U.S. announces that 350 Special Operations forces, supported by additional troops offshore, will be sent to the Philippines to conduct joint operations with Filipino combat patrols fighting Muslim rebels in the southern Philippines.

Feb. 22, 2003: Philippines presidential spokesman announces that U.S. troops coming to the island of Jolo to help local forces fight Muslim rebels will be barred from engaging in offensive combat operations.

Feb. 25, 2003: The UN charges former Indonesian armed forces chief, Gen. Wiranto, six other military officers, and the former Indonesian governor of East Timor, Abilio Soares, with crimes against humanity for violence surrounding East Timor's 1999 vote for independence. The charges carry a maximum penalty of 25 years' imprisonment under East Timorese law.

Feb. 28, 2003: U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld meets with Philippines Defense Secretary Angelo Reyes, announces that no U.S. combat troops will be sent to the Philippines to help fight Muslim rebels.

Feb. 28, 2003: Philippine President Macapagal-Arroyo orders military to defeat the Abu Sayyaf within 90 days, while chief of the armed forces announces that commanders who fail to perform will be replaced.

March 4, 2003: A bomb explodes near a crowded shelter outside an airport in the southern Philippines, killing 21 (including one American) and injures 144 (including three Americans). A second bomb explodes outside a nearby health center in Tagum, killing one and injuring three.

March 5, 2003: President Macapagal-Arroyo announces, despite the terrorist bombing, there will be no combat role for U.S. troops in the southern Philippines.

March 6, 2003: Indonesia's Parliament passes antiterror law issued by President Megawati after the Bali bombings. The regulations allow police to use intelligence data as the basis for arrests.

March 9, 2003: A group of 100,000 participate in a peaceful demonstration in Surabaya, organized by the country's largest Islamic organization, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), against military action in Iraq.

March 12, 2003: Indonesian Brig. Gen. Noer Muis is sentenced to five years in prison for failing to prevent massacres of 1,000 civilians during East Timor's vote for independence in 1999.

March 13, 2003: President Macapagal-Arroyo announces postponement of planned April 2-5 visit to the U.S., because of the Iraq war.

March 17, 2003: The UN and Cambodia reach agreement in Phnom Penh, to establish a special court to try those most responsible for the Khmer Rouge genocide in which an estimated 1.7 million people died in the 1970s. The agreement must now be approved by the United Nations General Assembly and by the Cambodian legislature.

March 18, 2003: Indonesia Security Minister Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono announces that Indonesia calls on the UN Security Council to hold an emergency meeting on Iraq, and on the international community to continue work toward a peaceful solution.

March 20, 2003: President Megawati announces Indonesia's opposition to the U.S.-led attack on Iraq and calls for an urgent UN meeting.

March 20 2003: Malaysia's Deputy PM Abdullah Ahmad Badawi calls the U.S.-led attack on Iraq "a black mark in history" and further states "the world now seeing might is right," during a national address.

March 21, 2003: 7,000 demonstrators protest the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in Malaysia and burn British and U.S. flags and effigies of the two countries' leaders in Kota Bharu city, the capital of Kelantan state.

March 21, 2003: Philippine prosecutors file graft charges against former Vice President Salvador Laurel, who served in 1986-1992 under former President Corazon Aquino.

March 21, 2003: U.S. government suspends official travel to Vietnam and advises U.S. citizens to put off non-emergency travel to Vietnam because of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS).

March 24, 2003: Malaysian PM Mahathir condemns U.S. and Britain for invasion of Iraq, in a speech to the Malaysia Parliament.

March 24, 2003: UN Human Rights Envoy Paulo Sergio Pinheiro announces departure from Burma two days early after finding a hidden microphone while meeting political prisoners at the Insien jail.

March 27, 2003: UN Human Rights Envoy Pinheiro accuses Burmese military junta of making “absurd” excuses to detain more than 1,200 political opponents and called for all prisoners to be released immediately.

March 30, 2003: Peaceful march by 100,000 Indonesians to U.S. Embassy in Jakarta to protest Iraq war.