

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

A TRIANNUAL E-JOURNAL
ON EAST ASIAN BILATERAL RELATIONS

US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

ABANDONING LEADERSHIP

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Concerned about what Southeast Asian leaders see as US neo-isolationism under President Donald Trump, the heads of government from Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore all visited Washington in the last four months of 2017. Trump's trip to Asia in November led to additional talks with Vietnam's leaders and Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. These activities could be termed "shopping diplomacy" in that each leader has sought to curry favor with the United States and all announced plans to purchase more US goods and invest in US companies to help Washington reduce its balance of payments deficit. They also emphasized that their economic infusions in the US would generate thousands of new US jobs. Politically, their combined message was that the US should not leave Southeast Asia to China's tender mercies but that Washington should remain a major actor in the region's security, economic activities, and political organizations.

This article is extracted from *Comparative Connections: A Triannual E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations*, Vol. 19, No. 3, January 2018. pp 41-52

“America first”

From the end of World War II to the beginning of Donald Trump's presidency in 2017, regardless of the party in power, the US in large part created and led a “rules-based” international order. Over the past year, that system has been deconstructed by Washington with little idea of what might replace it, which states and international organizations will dominate, and how long any new system will take to emerge. US global leadership is condemned as the main cause of the country's diminished weight in the world. President Trump has rejected past synergies between US vital interests and the responsibilities of global leadership.

Rather than seeing international relations as a cooperative enterprise, particularly in the realm of economics, Trump sees it as a zero-sum game with clear winners and losers. Deficits are bad, surpluses are good. This absolutist perspective flies in the face of production networks involving many countries and industries. Trump's mercantilist view of trade ignores mutual benefits. Indicative of this mindset is the Trump administration's targeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO) by blocking the appointment of judges and his failure to nominate a permanent US representative to that body. Meanwhile, the US president has ordered a comprehensive review of US trade relations, country-by-country and product-by-product.

As Robert Zoellick, President George W. Bush's deputy secretary of state, has argued: “President Trump has created a populist foreign policy that denies mutual interests in a world of expanding capitalism, governed by adaptive rules and practices, and nurtured by America's competitive markets.” The US president also disdains the security institutions and arrangements created by his predecessors because they required US financial expenditures and supposedly yielded few benefits. Instead, in his November trip to Asia, he enunciated a succession of US demands but promised no leadership. In Da Nang, Vietnam, at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Economic Leaders Meeting Trump [denounced](#) its utility and the unfair treatment meted out by all international trade organizations to the US. Nor did Trump in his many Asian stops call for cooperation among alliances and strategic partners.

Ironically, while excoriating APEC and the WTO, the US president introduced a new regional concept – “the Indo-Pacific” – designed to replace his predecessor's rebalance to Asia. Yet, Trump seems to deny the components of open regionalism: that it must be inclusive and incorporate regional organizations such as APEC, the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), all of which require collaboration between the US and other members. If, as Trump insisted on his Asia trip, the US will henceforth seek only bilateral trade deals and will no longer tolerate “chronic trade abuses” and massive trade deficits, then open regionalism is not on the agenda, nor is trade and investment liberalization. Indeed, the president plans to change the terms of existing trade agreements, weaken dispute settlement mechanisms in regional and global arrangements, and heighten reliance on domestic US trade laws, which provide the executive branch with the power to restrict imports.

Abandoning the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)

The US was a prime mover behind the TPP, an agreement among 12 developed and developing countries, the greatest benefit of which would be relatively open access to the US and Japanese markets. The US particularly sought high standards in intellectual property rights, services, the environment, and labor rights. However, one of President Trump's first official acts was to withdraw from the TPP. Nevertheless, the remaining 11 states have agreed to proceed without Washington, rewriting the original agreement and adjusting the terms of trade. Japan and Australia initiated the follow-on Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) to facilitate US entry at some point in the future.

Collectively, the remaining 11 countries account for about 15 percent of global trade. Under the CPTPP trade arrangement currently being negotiated, members would have tariff-free trade with one another, and each country's businesses would have better access to members' markets than would their US counterparts. Even without the US, this arrangement would be the largest regional trade agreement in history, while opening more markets to free trade in agricultural products and digital services among its

members. Although the original TPP also paved the way for trade union autonomy and guaranteed labor rights, working conditions are again being debated in the new draft document. The 11 countries working toward this new agreement are Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, and Vietnam. The Philippines and Indonesia have expressed interest, depending on the CPTTP's final version.

President Trump's call for individual bilateral trade deals during his Asian visits received no takers. On Nov. 14, Steven Okun, chair of the Singapore American Chamber of Commerce said, "Regional trade deals such as the TPP are the most effective way to facilitate exports to multiple markets by establishing uniform rules of the game and therefore to increase jobs back home." Indeed, Trump's emphasis on bilateral trade deals goes against the *raison d'être* of APEC, ASEAN, and its key forums, such as the East Asia Summit. These entities were established because Southeast Asian countries wanted to deal multilaterally with important economic and security issues in the region.

While the CPTTP retains commitments to liberalize trade in textiles, sanitary measures, state-owned enterprises, and dispute settlement mechanisms, there are significant differences from the original TPP, most of them related to US demands on intellectual property protection. Twenty TPP provisions sought by the US have been suspended with the understanding that they could be reinstated at some future date. Malaysia and Vietnam are seeking delays in implementing provisions on competition rules for state-owned enterprises and the creation of autonomous trade unions, respectively.

Finally, under President Trump there appears to be no US strategy toward ASEAN, seen by most Asian actors as the key regional politico-economic association. Nor is there any evidence that Washington will exert leadership toward economic integration. In fact, the term "leadership" was notably absent from Trump's remarks during his trip to Asia. This means that the only other large-scale multilateral trade pacts in play are the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), comprising the 10 ASEAN states plus Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea; the Japan-European Union Economic Partnership;

and the still-pending CPTTP. None of these include the US.

Southeast Asia and US security

The one domain in which the US remains engaged in Southeast Asia is defense cooperation. Yet, even here, US actions are unilateral or bilateral, not multilateral with a couple of exceptions such as the annual *Cobra Gold* military exercise and the biannual *Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC)* naval exercise. Prior to his November visit to the region, President Trump received the prime ministers of Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore in Washington. He met President Duterte in Manila at the ASEAN gathering at the end of his Asia trip. ASEAN defense budgets are growing. In the 2017-2018 fiscal year, Singapore is the highest defense spender with a \$10 billion budget, followed by Indonesia (\$8.3 billion), Thailand (\$6 billion), Vietnam (\$3.6 billion), the Philippines (\$2.76 billion), and Myanmar (\$2.14 billion). In contrast, China's projected defense budget for the same period is \$147 billion.



1United States President Donald Trump meets Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte in Manila. Photo: Vince Ong, update.ph

External allies and partners play a key role in assisting ASEAN states develop their security capabilities. After the US, Japan is the next most important source of military aid. For Indonesia, Japan is providing patrol boats and radar facilities to protect fisheries in the Natuna Sea. In early October, Tokyo established a "Mobile Cooperation Team" to assist various Southeast Asian countries in improving their coast guard capabilities. Implementation occurred in early November when Tokyo announced the donation of five turboprop

trainer aircraft to the Philippines for maritime border patrols. South Korea and India are also providing military equipment to ASEAN members. In late November, Hong Kong's *Asia Times* announced that Seoul was selling three attack submarines to Indonesia, while the Hanoi *Dai Viet*, Vietnam's military publication, on Sept. 21 revealed that New Delhi is building 12 patrol craft for Vietnam funded by an Indian credit line worth \$100 million.

During the past several months, the US conducted several bilateral *Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT)* and *Southeast Asia Cooperation Against Terrorism (SEACAT)* exercises with Southeast Asian partners. These are training maneuvers based on a pre-agreed list of activities and designed to work with smaller littoral Southeast Asian navies. Most recently, these exercises incorporate US littoral combat ships deployed from Singapore.

In September, the Pentagon announced that the US Navy planned to conduct two or three freedom of navigation (FON) patrols per month in the South China Sea. In its November *Foreign Policy White Paper*, Canberra stated that the Australian Navy will conduct its own FON and over-flight rights patrols in the region and may even conduct "cooperative activities with other countries consistent with international law."

ASEAN in US foreign policy

ASEAN commemorated its 50th anniversary in 2017, with the Philippines serving as the chair. Singapore was designated to be chair for 2018 at the November ASEAN Summit in Manila. US Secretary of Defense James Mattis spoke at the October meeting of the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+), [pledging](#) "...increased operational cooperation on maritime security challenges" and "continued cooperation in maritime domain awareness and information-sharing to address common threats to regional security."

Attending the ASEAN-related meetings in November, President Trump [reassured](#) ASEAN members that the United States "remains committed to ASEAN's central role as a regional forum for total cooperation." While Trump's interaction with the ASEAN states during the visit to Manila was relatively uneventful, at least some credibility was sacrificed when Trump, at the last minute, decided to skip the EAS Plenary when he learned the meeting would be delayed

for a few hours. This, after he had initially signaled he would not attend, then, while on the way to Manila said he would.

Singapore's Prime Minister Lee, focusing on the terrorist threat to Southeast Asia now that ISIS was marginalized in the Arab world, said that he hoped the US would continue to support Southeast Asian counterterrorist efforts, particularly in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Earlier, Singapore's Defense Ministry issued a statement saying that there was a "need for ASEAN to respond collectively given that terrorism is a problem no country can manage singlehandedly." The statement went on to highlight the importance of new combined air and maritime patrols of terrorist-plagued waters off the Sulu Archipelago in Mindanao, Philippines, and Sabah, Malaysia initiated by Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. The patrols began in 2017, emulating the Malacca Straits Sea Patrols (MSSP), which were established by Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia in 2004 to counter maritime piracy and terrorism. Thailand joined the initiative in 2008. Like the MSSP, the Sulu/Celebes Sea patrols permit military personnel of the contracting parties to enter each other's waters when chasing intruders with the permission of the countries whose sea spaces are being entered.

The central theme in all US engagements with Southeast Asian states in the final months of 2017 was an aggressive campaign for implementing UN Security Council sanctions against North Korea. The topic was raised in each of the meetings between Trump and Southeast Asian leaders he met in Washington and in his visits to Vietnam and the Philippines. In mid-December, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Patrick Murphy visited Cambodia and Joseph Yun, the US special representative for North Korea policy, visited Thailand in an effort to garner support for sanctions that call for stopping all trade with North Korea, repatriating North Korean workers, and reducing the size of North Korea's diplomatic presence in the countries. Yun made similar visits to Singapore and Myanmar in July.

Country analyses: Philippines



2Soldiers walk in the frontline in Bangulo village in Marawi City on 17 October 2017. Photo Jeffrey Maitem

President Duterte clashed with President Obama over the human rights violations that have been a central feature of the Philippine president's anti-drug campaign. Some 8,000 extrajudicial killings of alleged drug traffickers have occurred since Duterte took office in 2016. Yet, bilateral relations have improved under Trump, who has ignored Duterte's egregious human rights practices, while praising his anti-drug policy. Beyond the shift in the US attitude toward Duterte's drug eradication efforts, better bilateral relations can also be attributed to Manila's willingness to comply with a US request to suspend trade with North Korea and its acceptance of US military assistance in counterterrorism operations in Marawi, Mindanao.

During the Obama years, US Special Forces were training Philippine military personnel in counterinsurgency in Mindanao and providing intelligence through drone surveillance and electronic monitoring of insurgent communications. In 2016, Duterte demanded US forces leave Mindanao following an anti-Obama tirade over accused human rights violations. He reversed himself in October 2017 after radical Islamists occupied Marawi, proclaiming that he was now "friendly" with the United States and reauthorized joint military exercises, including joint counterterrorism training. Duterte said his anti-Obama rages were "water under the bridge" and thanked the US for helping in the fight against Islamic militants in Marawi.

Philippine Armed Forces Chief of Staff Gen. Eduardo Ono visited Adm. Harry Harris, commander of the US Pacific Command, in early October; the two agreed to an increase in joint exercises for 2018. US Ambassador to the

Philippines Sung Kim averred in late October, after the siege of Marawi had been defeated, that US military assistance made a "huge difference" in the Philippine victory, particularly the intelligence support and deployment of US drones and P-3 Orion aircraft. Australia also provided assistance to counter the Marawi siege.



3US and Philippine military participate in joint exercise. Photo: US Army

Human rights organizations in both countries urged Trump to raise concerns over the extrajudicial killings during his meetings with the Philippine president. Instead, Trump hailed his "great relationship" with Duterte. Before the visit, Duterte warned that the US has no standing to preach about human rights given its historical record in sabotaging governments such as Salvador Allende's in Chile, Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and Muammar Qaddafi in Libya. Once it was clear that Trump had no intent to criticize Duterte's drug war, these complaints disappeared and the bilateral relationship was restored.

During his November visit, Trump met Duterte and they reaffirmed their commitment to the Mutual Defense Treaty. During the last year of the Obama presidency, Duterte had threatened to scrap the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which allowed the US to rotate forces through the Philippines and preposition equipment on Philippine bases. Now, the Philippine president has recommitted to implementing the EDCA.

Ethnic cleansing in Burma (Myanmar)

Unlike the Philippines, Washington has less at stake in Myanmar, no US troops or bases, and limited business involvement. As a result, Myanmar's ethnic troubles can register as an US

human rights concern even under President Trump. During Obama's two terms, the US worked with Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) to nurture free elections and the creation of democratic institutions, though it was clear to all that Myanmar's military, the Tatmadaw, would maintain ultimate political power.

Myanmar is a patchwork of 135 officially recognized ethnicities dominated by the Bamar from the nation's heartland who make up almost 70 percent of the population and most of the ruling elite. While Aung San Suu Kyi placed resolving the ethnic struggles at the top of her agenda when the NLD entered a power-sharing arrangement with the military, the Muslim Rohingya from Rakhine State in the northwest of the country were not among the officially recognized ethnic groups. Almost 90 percent of Myanmar is Buddhist, and although the Rohingya have lived in Rakhine State for generations, most Burmese regard them as illegal immigrants from neighboring Bangladesh. Aung San Suu Kyi has done nothing to combat this prejudice. In fact, she has described the Rohingya as "terrorists." Her defenders point out that her power is sharply limited by the military over which she has no authority.

Islamophobia is deep-seated in Myanmar and fanned by extremist monks. In recent years, the government has confined around 100,000 Rohingya to internment camps with little access to food and medicine. In 2013, Buddhist men carried out coordinated attacks on Muslim villages, prompting hundreds of thousands of Rohingya to seek refuge in Bangladesh. In October 2017, responding to an attack led by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) on three government border posts, the Tatmadaw and police conducted systematic attacks on Rohingya villages that included gang rape of women and girls, torture, and murder as well as the expulsion of a large portion of the Rohingya to Bangladesh. By the end of the year, it was estimated that 650,000 Rohingya had fled to Bangladesh, making them one of the largest stateless refugee communities in the world.

US Vice President Mike Pence addressed the Rohingya issue before the UN Security Council on Sept. 20, describing Myanmar's security forces actions as "terrible savagery." Pence said that he and President Trump wanted the UN Security Council "to take strong and swift action

to bring this crisis to an end and give hope and help to the Rohingya people in their hour of need." US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley called for a halt to arms shipments to the Tatmadaw and presaged the imposition of new US sanctions. The Myanmar crisis also elicited dissent within ASEAN as Malaysia took exception to the statement by the Philippines in late September as the ASEAN chair. The ASEAN statement, according to Kuala Lumpur, did not reflect the reality of ethnic cleansing in Myanmar.

On Oct. 23, the State Department ended travel waivers for current and former Burmese military officers to visit the US. A few days earlier, in a speech at Washington's Center for Strategic and International Studies, a State Department official held Myanmar's military leadership responsible for the humanitarian disaster. In an Oct. 24 briefing, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Patrick Murphy declared that, "all units and officers involved in northern Rakhine State are ineligible for US assistance programs," and that they are excluded from participating in US-sponsored programs in the United States. Washington also dropped plans to train the Tatmadaw in maritime security and human trafficking at a time when ISIS is believed to be smuggling arms into Myanmar.

Visiting Myanmar in mid-November, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson met both Aung San Suu Kyi and Senior Gen. Min Aung Hliang, the nation's military commander. Tillerson called the Rohingya situation "horrific" and said the violence had the characteristics of "crimes against humanity." A special representative of the UN secretary general accused the Myanmar military of systematic sexual violence against the Rohingya, describing rape as a weapon of genocide.

Washington has provided over \$150 million in refugee assistance for the Rohingya in fiscal 2017. Secretary Tillerson averred in his Nov. 15 Nay Pyi Taw meetings that "The key test of any democracy is how it treats its most vulnerable and marginalized population." After returning to Washington Tillerson claimed that what is occurring in Burma "constitutes ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya." The US plans to pursue "targeted sanctions" against military leaders but will not levy broader sanctions because that could jeopardize the country's

transition to democracy after decades of repression.

In the Trump administration, according to the Nov. 23 *New York Times*, there is a debate within the State Department and National Security Council between democracy and human rights officials who desire more punitive measures vs. Asia experts who argue that broad sanctions against the Myanmar government would obstruct its transition to democracy. On Dec. 21, however, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin imposed financial sanctions against Maj. Gen. Huang Maung Soe, the leader of the Army's Western Command, responsible for the Rohingya atrocities in Rakhine State. Mnuchin stated that the sanctions contain "a message that there is a steep price to pay for their misdeeds."

Malaysia: scandal and a strategic partner

Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib Razak's Sept. 12-14 [visit to Washington](#), occurring under a cloud of scandal in his country, had more to do with Malaysian domestic politics than foreign policy. The Malaysian leader desired a seal of approval from the Trump administration to burnish a tarnished reputation because of a general election expected in the first half of 2018. Najib hoped that the US visit would be seen by Malaysians as a sign that he was not involved in a probe by the US Department of Justice into a \$4.5 billion theft from the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) state financial firm that involved the purchase of US properties. During Najib's Washington visit, the Trump administration refused to comment on the investigation, but did agree to strengthen the Comprehensive Partnership.

President Trump was gratified by the signing of several agreements involving [Malaysian purchases of US products](#), including 25 Boeing jetliners worth more than \$10 billion over five years, investments in the US worth \$3-4 billion by Malaysia's Employment Provident Fund for infrastructure, and another \$400 million for technology enterprises. The trip elicited strong criticism from Malaysia's alliance of opposition parties, the Pakatan Harapan, which asked why Najib was supporting US infrastructure when his own people were suffering from slashed subsidies, the introduction of a new goods and services tax, and the weakening of the Malaysian ringgit. Moreover, Najib's visit did not seem to result in any tangible economic

commitment by the US to Malaysia. Najib's discussions with Trump on North Korea, the Rohingya crisis in Burma, and counterterrorism brought him little political credit at home. The major takeaway for the Malaysian prime minister seemed to be the further enhancement of US ties begun under the Obama administration and now upgraded to a Comprehensive Partnership." Trump particularly "welcomed" Malaysia's intent to make an additional \$60 million purchase of defense equipment. Washington also promised to assist Malaysia in developing maritime surveillance capabilities.

Malaysia's most important strategic gift to Trump is its decision to cut all ties to North Korea: banning Malaysians from visiting the DPRK, ending the import of North Korean workers for Malaysian enterprises, and stopping any financial operations between the two countries.

Singapore: cementing a solid relationship

Singapore has been one of the most steadfast US allies in Asia for decades. The US Seventh Fleet permanently positions several littoral combat ships in the city-state on a rotational basis; years ago, the Singapore government upgraded Changi port to accommodate US *Nimitz*-class aircraft carriers. The US Navy also maintains a logistics facility in Singapore. More than 4,000 US firms have a presence there and unlike much of the rest of Asia, the US enjoys a trade surplus of \$18 billion. Singapore purchases sophisticated military equipment from the US and Singapore military personnel regularly attend military education courses and train in the US. The Singapore Air Force maintains a squadron of combat aircraft at Luke Air Force Base in Arizona.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong visited Washington from Oct. 23-26 and met President Trump. In economic matters, the US-Singapore Free Trade Agreement was emphasized and the fact that Singapore is the second largest Asian investor in the US. In a [Joint Statement](#), the two leaders singled out Singapore's purchase of 39 Boeing wide-body civilian aircraft valued at \$13.8 billion. Defense contracts were also signed for \$5.8 billion over three years. The US reaffirmed its commitment to ASEAN centrality in regional matters, though how this squares with Trump's "America first" principle was not addressed. The US president enthused that

Singapore's purchase from Boeing will create 70,000 jobs in the United States, though how he reached that figure is a mystery. In sum, Trump concluded that the US-Singapore relationship was "now at its highest point" and that the US was "fortunate to have such a wonderful and loyal partner."

Prime Minister Lee is concerned that the Trump administration might disengage from the region and said that after his talks that he is reassured that many senior US officials know that America's fate depends on its continued engagement with the world. Lee acknowledged that the US market is the "most open ... in the world" and that "the others should be as open as us but that this will take time and patience." In a [speech](#) at the US Council on Foreign Relations, he noted that the US provided peace and security in Asia over the past 75 years. Washington must not turn inward and should remain committed to its role and responsibilities.

Thailand: fewer political strains under Trump

When Thailand experienced a military coup in May 2014 and the National Council for Peace and Order was created to rule the country, the Obama administration expressed its displeasure by stopping all arms shipments and significantly reducing the scope and content of Asia's largest annual multinational military exercise, *Cobra Gold*. Usually, *Cobra Gold* is a live-fire set of maneuvers with land, sea, and air components, lasting a month and involving thousands of forces from a number of Asian militaries. After the Thai coup, however, although *Cobra Gold* continued, its duration was shortened, the number of participants reduced, and the content limited to humanitarian aid and disaster relief (HADR). The Obama administration said the only way to restore normal diplomatic and military relations was for the military to yield to a civilian government via free elections.

Thailand's Prime Minister Gen. Prayut Chan-ocha's Oct. 2-4 visit to Washington yielded only [modest economic benefit](#) for the US. Thai Airways ordered three additional planes from Boeing and Thailand agreed to slightly increase the amount of coal it would import from the US. However, Thai businesses did pledge \$6 billion investment in US companies ostensibly to create more than 8,000 jobs. Thailand and the US restored military relations with the Trump

administration abandoning Obama's pressure to restore democratic processes. An initial arms order covered helicopters, a *Cobra* gunship, five *Harpoon Block II* missiles, and upgrades to Thailand's fleet of *F-16s*. The [joint statement](#) ending Gen. Prayut's visit indicated that both sides desire to restore the military alliance for strategic reasons. For Washington, Thai bases could provide facilities for US surveillance in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean.

From August to September, there were high-level visits from both sides to lay the groundwork for Gen. Prayut's October visit. The US secretaries of State and Commerce visited Bangkok, and the Thai commerce minister and National Security Council chief came to Washington. A net assessment of the visit suggests that other than restoring security ties, little was accomplished. Because it had a \$19 billion trade surplus with the US in 2016, Thailand was included in a list of 16 countries for investigation. Although Thai companies promise to invest more in the US, the joint statement concluding the visit does not commit Thailand to reduce the trade deficit. Despite Washington's request, Bangkok also refused to downgrade diplomatic relations with North Korea (unlike Malaysia). The Trump administration did not complain about the Thai military junta's suppression of free speech, banned political activities, or imprisoned dissidents.

Vietnam: courting Trump

As Carlyle Thayer, an Australian Vietnam specialist, put it in an Oct. 29 *Background Briefing*, "Vietnamese leaders are well aware of the importance of relations with the United States as part of their 'diversification' and 'multilateralization' of foreign relations. Vietnam vitally needs continued US engagement in Southeast Asia to counterbalance China and to maintain stability in the South China Sea." In his May 31, 2017 visit to Washington, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc knew what Trump wanted from Hanoi in order to place Vietnam as a "strategic partner," – business deals worth several billion dollars, the improvement of US investment opportunities in Vietnam, and at least lip service to improved US intellectual property protection by Hanoi authorities. In other words, Vietnamese assistance for President Trump's "America First" agenda. Still, Hanoi continues its policy on no military alliances nor foreign bases in the

country, though it has agreed to a visit by a US aircraft carrier to Cam Ranh Bay some time in 2018, a first since the end of the Vietnam War. Moreover, the US agreed during Trump's November 2017 visit to Vietnam to cooperate on dioxin cleanup from the Vietnam War era.

President Trump is more popular in Vietnam than he is in the United States. A 2017 Pew survey found that 58 percent of Vietnamese were confident in his ability to guide US foreign policy, and 84 percent had general confidence in the United States.

Washington has given Vietnam a refurbished *Hamilton*-class coast guard cutter and six new patrol boats. In his Nov. 10-12 visit to the country, the US president agreed to increase security cooperation through intelligence sharing as well as joint training. While no arms deal came out of the visit, Trump praised the quality of US military equipment and urged his hosts to buy US gear with the claim: "We make the greatest missiles in the world, greatest planes in the world, greatest commercial aircraft in the world. So, we would like Vietnam to buy from us, and we have to get rid of the trade imbalance. We can't have the trade imbalance."

Finally, the human rights issue was notably absent from Vietnam-US discussions during Trump's visit except for one short sentence in the [joint statement](#): "The two leaders recognized the importance of protecting and promoting human rights." The US House of Representatives, however, had urged the president to raise "Vietnam's dismal human rights record" during his talks. There is no evidence that he did so.

Cambodia: America bashing

Prime Minister Hun Sen, the longest serving Southeast Asian leader, has governed a regime initially installed by Vietnamese armed forces to remove the brutal Khmer Rouge from power. A former Khmer Rouge cadre himself, Hun Sen has been suspicious of democracy and opposition parties as deviously employed by Western powers to gain control of Cambodia. During the 1980s, US-backed forces tried to root out his Vietnamese-installed regime. International donors including the US have poured billions of dollars into Cambodia for health care and an international tribunal to try the remnants of the Khmer Rouge. Hun Sen's

government has tried to end the tribunal's activities. After all, Hun Sen was a Khmer Rouge cadre and probably feared the possibility he could be implicated in testimony before the court.

Although nominally a democracy in the 1990s, Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party (CPP) was hectorated by Washington over human rights violations. The Cold War legacy is evident in support for his government by China, Vietnam, and Russia with opposition coming from the US and the European Union. Political parties have seen each other not as legitimate contenders for leadership but as enemies of the nation. The current opposition is The Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) led by Kem Sokha and his exiled predecessor, Sam Rainsy, both resistance participants going back to the 1980s.

Kem Sokha and Sam Rainsey had opposition parties of their own in 2007, but, they joined forces to form CNRP in 2013. By that time, both had cultivated relations with US diplomats and politicians as well as private sector donors and had received funding and training from US democracy-promotion NGOs. Both also touted the importance of democracy and human rights. The CNRP victories in the last national election and more recent local polls probably led Hun Sen to weaken relations with Washington and ultimately destroy the political opposition. These actions began with the January 2017 cancellation of military exercises with the US and progressed to the August expulsion of foreign staff of the National Democratic Institute in Cambodia affiliated with the US Democratic Party. Cambodia's independent newspaper, *Cambodia Daily*, was presented with a \$6 million tax bill, which forced it to close. Hun Sen's government also raised questions about the legal and tax status of *Radio Free Asia* and *Voice of America*, both funded in part by the US. These actions and the arrest of opposition leader Kem Sokha aimed to neuter the opposition prior to the 2018 national election.

In early September, Kem Sokha was arrested and charged with treason for alleged coup plans backed by the US. The "evidence" provided is a 2013 video clip in which Kem Sokha discusses advice provided under the auspices of the American National Democratic Institute on how to organize and conduct free elections. The US State Department condemned Kem Sokha's arrest as politically motivated but initially did

not respond to the charge of collusion. US Ambassador to Cambodia William Heidt labeled the charges against Kem Sokha as “inaccurate, misleading, and baseless,” and called for his release. The Cambodian government responded in mid-September by requiring Washington to withdraw the Peace Corps from the country and then suspended cooperation with the US on finding the remains of US soldiers missing in action in Cambodia during the Vietnam War.

As Carlyle Thayer put it in an Oct. 13 review of the situation: “Cambodia today is an illiberal democracy rapidly descending into autocratic rule.” In February 2017, Hun Sen amended the Law on Political Parties so that the CNRP could be dissolved. Cambodia’s top court did so in mid-November. Condemning the Cambodian court decision to outlaw the CNRP and jail many of its leaders, Washington withdrew aid for the 2018 election. In a late November *Voice of America* interview, Ambassador Heidt remonstrated: “I feel that there’s never been an honest desire by the Khmer government to have a good relationship with the US.”

Interestingly, despite the systematic anti-US campaign linking the United States to the Cambodian opposition, Hun Sen has expressed a personal affinity for Donald Trump. At the Manila ASEAN Summit, he praised the US president’s lack of interest in human and rights interventionism, saying further than the US Embassy in Phnom Penh was not implementing Trump’s “policy line.”

Closing thoughts

Barack Obama willed Trump a three-legged policy stool toward Southeast Asia. One leg was the repositioning of US air and naval forces to the region, another was political support for ASEAN centrality in regional organizations, the third was the TPP, designed to be the most comprehensive trade agreement in modern history. What has the Trump administration done with each in its initial year? First, it acknowledged none of these components by name. In fact, however, the military leg of the policy stool has been continued on every dimension, including the shift of more forces to Southeast Asia as well as military aid to regional partners. Political deference to ASEAN has not continued, no doubt influenced by the US

president’s jaundiced view of international institutions. The TPP collapsed immediately after Trump was sworn in, foundering on his commitment to “America First” and his insistence that all multilateral economic accords have harmed US interests. On balance, Southeast Asian governments view Trump’s Washington with anxiety and suspicion. At best, they see Washington treading water, while political and economic initiatives have been left to China.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2017

Aug. 19–Sept. 2, 2017: Singapore and US navies conduct warfighting exercises off Guam.

Sept. 5, 2017: United States pledges \$14 million to help rehabilitate the southern Philippine city of Marawi ravaged by military operations against ISIS-affiliated militants.

Sept. 6, 2017: Cambodia's opposition party leader Kem Sokha is arrested and accused of plotting a US-backed coup against Prime Minister Hun Sen. The State Department condemns the arrest as politically motivated in anticipation of the 2018 national elections.

Sept. 7–17, 2017: Indonesia and the United States conduct the 23rd annual *Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT)* naval exercise, including ground activities in Surabaya and at-sea scenarios in the Java and Bali Seas.

Sept. 8, 2017: US embassy promise \$2 million for drug reduction activities in the Philippines.

Sept. 12, 2017: US Ambassador to Cambodia William Heidt [denies](#) allegations by Prime Minister Hun Sen that Washington is seeking to oust his government.

Sept. 12, 2017: Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib Razak visits Washington and meets President Donald Trump at the White House. Najib is under investigation by the US Justice Department for his involvement in an investment fund that faces a multibillion dollar corruption allegation.

Sept. 15, 2017: Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen asks the US to withdraw the Peace Corps from Cambodia one day after he ceased cooperation with US efforts to find and repatriate the remains of US soldiers in Cambodia killed in the Vietnam War.

Sept. 18–24, 2017: US and Malaysia conduct a "Maritime Training Activity" (MTA) which appears to be a replacement for the annual *Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT)* exercise series, which has been held for past 22 years.

Sept. 27, 2017: Philippine's Secretary of Foreign Affairs Alan Peter Cayetano visits Washington and meets Secretary of State Rex Tillerson.

Sept. 28, 2017: Philippine's President Rodrigo Duterte calls for friendly relations with the US after months of anti-US rhetoric.

Oct. 2, 2017: US and Philippine forces conduct counterterrorism exercises.

Oct. 2–4, 2017: Thailand's Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha visits Washington and meets President Trump at the White House. They discuss Thai investment in the US and Thailand's strategic role in Asia. Trump refers to Thailand a "key partner and longstanding ally."

Oct. 2–11, 2017: US and Philippine militaries conduct joint exercise *Kaagapay Ng Mga Mandirigma Ng Dagat (KAMANDAG)*. The exercise, which roughly translate to English as "Alongside the Warriors of the Sea," which will take the place of the *US-Philippine Amphibious Exercise (PHIBLEX)* and will focus on enhancing counterterrorism and humanitarian assistance and disaster and relief capabilities, as well as other humanitarian and civic assistance projects.

Oct. 23, 2017: Philippine government declares the end to the five-month [siege](#) of Marawi.

Oct. 23–28, 2017: Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong visits the US and meets Trump at the White House.

Oct. 25, 2017: US Defense Secretary James Mattis visits the Philippines and meets President Duterte in Manila to discuss ways to deepen US-Philippine military ties.

Nov. 9, 2017: Secretary of State Tillerson, during a visit to Beijing, reiterates the US position on freedom of navigation in the South China Sea as well as opposition to “militarization of the outposts” in that body of water.

Nov. 10-11, 2017: Trump attends the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Economic Leaders Meeting in Da Nang, Vietnam. In a formal speech, he states that multilateral trade agreements disadvantage the US. He also visits Hanoi to meet Vietnam’s leaders

Nov. 11, 2017: Trump makes a state visit to Vietnam and meets President Tran Dai Quang. They discuss measures to strengthen and expand the Comprehensive Partnership between their two countries.

Nov. 12, 2017: Philippine’s Foreign Affairs Secretary Cayetano thanks Trump for his offer to mediate the South China Sea dispute but says that all ASEAN countries must agree before any such arrangement could be reached.

Nov. 12-14, 2017: President Trump attends the 50th ASEAN anniversary and the 40th anniversary of US-ASEAN relations in the Philippines. He also meets President Duterte.

Nov. 14, 2017: President Trump [skips](#) the East Asia Summit in the Philippines after being told the meeting would be delayed by about two hours.

Nov. 15, 2017: Secretary Tillerson visits Burma (Myanmar) and meets Sr. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, the nation’s military commander and State Councilor Aung San Suu Kyi. He urges them to halt violence that has driven more than 600,000 Rohingya from Rakhine State to flee to Bangladesh.

Nov. 22, 2017: Secretary Tillerson says Myanmar’s Rohingya population was subjected to “ethnic cleansing,” accusing security forces of perpetrating “horrendous atrocities” against the Muslim minority.

Nov. 30-Dec. 1, 2017: US and Singapore hold the seventh annual Bilateral Strategic Dialogue in Washington.

Dec. 13, 2017: Assistant Deputy Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Patrick Murphy visits Cambodia and asks Phnom Penh to continue supporting UN resolutions countering North Korean missiles and nuclear weapons. Cambodia’s secretary of state of foreign affairs avers that Cambodia supports the idea of Korea being a nuclear-free peninsula.

Dec. 13-15, 2017: US Special Representative for North Korea Policy Joseph Yun visits Thailand to encourage Thai government to enforce UN Security Council sanctions against North Korea.

Dec. 15, 2017: US and Singapore [hold](#) their 10th annual Counter-proliferation Dialogue in Singapore.