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STRATEGIC CONCERN DEEPENS

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The choice of two Southeast Asian countries to host US-North Korea summits in the past year has lent some credence to claims that the region serves as the foundation for regional dialogue and cooperation. In early 2019, the region was also the recipient of extra attention when foreign investment in China began to move south, driven by US tariffs on China imposed in late 2018. However, there was little sign that new bilateral trade agreements with the US will materialize in the near term. Meanwhile, greater security cooperation with the US is more likely with the bombing of a cathedral in the southern Philippines in January serving as another harbinger of increased ISIS activity in the region and continued militarization of the South China Sea strengthening the rationale for the US-Philippines alliance but also putting more pressure on it. In political developments, Thai elections in March left questions about whether the military will remain dominant while Indonesian elections in April were less controversial, with incumbent President Joko Widodo retaining power.

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Introduction

Southeast Asians never tire of casting the region as the crossroads for great powers and the foundation for regional dialogue and cooperation. The choice of two Southeast Asian countries to host US-North Korea summits—Singapore in June 2018 and Vietnam in February 2019—lends some credence to these claims. In early 2019 the region was also the recipient of extra attention when foreign investment in China began to move south, driven by US tariffs on China imposed in late 2018. More may come from Europe as the European Union ratchets up efforts to forge “bilateral” free trade agreements with ASEAN states and the United Kingdom looks for new economic opportunities to offset losses it faces with Brexit looming. However, there was little sign that new bilateral trade agreements with the United States promised by the Trump administration will materialize in the near term.

Greater cooperation with the United States on security is more likely. The bombing of a cathedral in the southern Philippines by the Islamic State in January was another harbinger of increased ISIS activity in Southeast Asia as their operatives are pushed out of the Middle East. This threat and China’s continued militarization of South China Sea land features strengthens the rationale for the US-Philippines alliance but also puts more pressure on it. In March, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was compelled to offer public assurances that the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty extended to the South China Sea. More broadly, Washington warned that Chinese plans to transform the region’s infrastructure—both physical and digital—carried risks for Southeast Asian countries. Thai elections in March were intended to lead the country out of direct military rule, but it remains to be seen whether the military will remain dominant in the new political process. Indonesian elections in April are likely headed for a less controversial result, with incumbent President Joko Widodo tipped to retain power.

The spoils of tariff war

Although the data is still preliminary, it strongly suggests that the US-China trade dispute has fueled an investment and trade surge into Southeast Asia. The trend has brought more high-value, high-technology investment (such as electronics), as well as textiles and other low-

tech goods. In addition to Japanese and Western companies, China has been relocating some of its lighter manufacturing base to Southeast Asia. Foreign direct investment (FDI) to ASEAN accelerated in the second half of 2018, when the US-China trade dispute was in full swing. In the first half of 2018, the greater momentum was on the China side. In general, the Southeast Asia region remains a robust investment site: both trends go against global drift in FDI in 2018, which showed a 19% decline.

This investment windfall has not been evenly spread across the region. Singapore, Vietnam, and Thailand have been the main beneficiaries; by contrast, Indonesia’s FDI flows continue to drop, in part because of the slow pace of economic reform. FDI in Myanmar, where international investor optimism over promised reforms in the earlier years of the decade has waned, also fell in 2018, from \$6.6 billion to \$5.7 billion.

Although welcome, Southeast Asia’s new investment boom is not without qualifications, most obviously that it could be a short-term phenomenon if Washington and Beijing resolve their trade differences. The new influx in investment puts further strain on shaky Southeast Asian infrastructure. As well, it is a disincentive for Southeast Asian leaders to follow through on the more difficult aspects of implementing the ASEAN Economic Community. Stimulating intra-ASEAN trade and investment will be an important strategy when investment in Southeast Asia begins to slow, as it inevitably will when the region’s labor costs rise.

Hanoi plays host



Figure 1 Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc and US President Donald Trump meet on the sidelines of the US-DPRK Summit in Hanoi. Photo: The New York Times

If there was a winner in the US-DPRK summit in February, it was Vietnam. Although its value was purely symbolic, the choice of Hanoi as a venue was a mix of principle and *realpolitik*. Vietnam has longstanding ties with North Korea but a deepening relationship with the US as well. Washington also held Vietnam up as a model—and a pathway—to Pyongyang, for transition from an isolated country with a doctrinaire regime to a nation integrated into the international community with a government open to economic reform. There is little evidence that Pyongyang (or Hanoi) would draw such parallels, but the comparison was taken as a US vote of confidence in Vietnam.

Hosting the summit also helped Hanoi in its determination to rebrand Vietnam as the “Geneva of Southeast Asia,” a mid-sized country that can move adroitly among greater powers. This follows on the good marks that Hanoi earned for its chairmanship of ASEAN in 2012, when the government functioned as an interlocutor between the West and the Myanmar military during by-elections that marked the beginning of a political reform period. Hanoi will take up the ASEAN chair again next year.

A critical clarification?

A number of annual military exercises—*Cobra Gold*, the *Pacific Partnership*, and the US-Philippine *Balikatan* exercises—kept the US security profile high in Southeast Asia in the early months of 2019. In the absence of a confirmed secretary of defense, a greater role in alliance management fell to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. On his return to Washington from the Hanoi summit, Pompeo stopped in Manila Feb. 28–March 1 to address chronic concerns about the reliability of the United States, specifically a call by Philippine Secretary of Defense Delfin Lorenzana to review the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) and subsequent agreements that support the alliance.

Lorenzana’s demand was hardly the first for a high-profile and controversial alliance, but in this case, it reflected increasing nervousness in Manila over whether the US would come to the aid of the Philippines in a conflict with China in the South China Sea. For decades Washington has been reticent on this issue and, since President Rodrigo Duterte’s election in 2016, has been focused simply on keeping the alliance on an even keel.

Past US administrations have approached Philippine inquiries on the applicability of the MDT to the South China Sea with predictable wordsmithing. Two essential communiqués—one from Secretary of State Cyrus Vance in 1979 and a follow-up from Ambassador Thomas Hubbard in 1999—maintained that Washington would apply the MDT to official Philippine ships and aircraft “in the Pacific,” beyond the metropolitan range specified in the treaty. The inclusion of the South China Sea in this mandate may have been implied by Washington, but it was not always inferred by Manila.



Figure 2 USS Blue Ridge makes a port call in Manila on March 13. Photo: AP

During his visit, Pompeo first met President Duterte and, in a joint press conference with Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin on March 1, addressed the South China Sea issue head-on with an explicit statement that the area was covered under the MDT. Not surprisingly, reaction to Pompeo’s statement was mixed. Public opinion polls consistently show that over 80% of the Philippine public supports the alliance with the US and an equivalent percentage are nervous about Duterte’s handling of the South China Sea. However, some in the Philippine defense sector expressed skepticism that Washington would risk direct conflict with China over the Philippines. They pointed out that much of Chinese aggressiveness against the Philippines in the South China Sea is targeted at Filipino fishing fleets rather than official vessels. Others expressed nervousness that Pompeo’s statement would needlessly irritate Beijing.

Nevertheless, the statement may have put US-Philippine security relations on more solid footing. In any case, Manila values the alliance as much or more for US assistance in counterterrorism; the 2017 siege of Marawi City and the bombing of a cathedral on the island of

Jolo in the southern Philippines in January only underscored that need.

Bracing for Brexit

As the United Kingdom looks ahead to a (presumed) exit from the European Union, London is planning a more activist foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific region, and specifically Southeast Asia. As a current EU member, the UK participates in the Singapore-European Union Free Trade Agreement (now in operation) and the Vietnam-EU free trade agreement (FTA) that appears close to completion. Withdrawal from the EU will likely require that London renegotiate these agreements to convert them to bilateral FTAs, but the British are confident this can be easily done with Singapore and that Hanoi will likely be amenable to the switch. More broadly, the UK has signaled that it will apply to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

Without membership in the CPTPP (and possibly with it), after Brexit the UK stands to lose out on benefits from the EU's quiet but steady move toward a regional FTA with ASEAN through the negotiation of bilateral treaties. In 2007, the EU embarked upon negotiations for a full region-to-region agreement but abandoned that in 2009 in favor of a more incremental approach. Apart from the Singapore-EU FTA now in place, the European Union is in FTA negotiations with Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia.

London is also seeking to extend its reach in Southeast Asian security for two reasons: growing concern over Chinese assertiveness in the region and the hope of solidifying the UK-US alliance through partnership in new regions. Apart from several joint exercises in the South China Sea, the UK is attempting to join the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus process and to increase its involvement in the Five Power Defense Arrangement (comprised of the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, and Singapore). However, with the revelation that the UK intends to purchase some of its 5G hardware from the Chinese telecommunications firm Huawei, there is some nervousness that London may be putting the security of the "Five Eyes" intelligence arrangement at risk. The UK government insists that any procurement of Huawei equipment will not endanger security; in any event, neither Malaysia nor Singapore has

yet decided upon a hardware provider for its own transition to 5G.

Silk roads and security fears

The flap over British acquisition of Huawei equipment is a small part of a growing regional dialogue—and overt concern on the part of the United States—over the economic and security impact of China's plans to transform the Asia-Pacific region (and indeed parts of the globe) to facilitate its trade, investment, and strategic interests. A push from Washington, particularly on US allies, to eschew Chinese telecommunications companies—particularly Huawei—for fear of compromising cybersecurity has not resulted in firm pledges to do so thus far. Beijing hopes to build a "Digital Silk Road" that will elevate China to a top position in next generation (5G) internet technology. Since the cost of Chinese fiber optic cables and other hardware is typically 30% less than that of the two main Western vendors, Nokia and Ericksson, the Chinese have some chance of realizing this ambition.

Of equal concern to the United States are Chinese plans to partner with other countries to build physical infrastructure, particularly roads, railways, and ports. These are encapsulated in the "debt trap" example of Sri Lanka, which gave China access to a strategic port when Colombo was unable to fulfill the terms of the Chinese loan for its construction. The second Belt and Road Forum (BRF), held in Beijing April 25-27, exacerbated controversy on BRI issues.

Southeast Asian participation in the BRF was robust: eight countries sent heads of state (Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar in the person of State Counselor Aung Sang Suu Kyi, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand). Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc attended for Vietnam because President Nguyen Phu Trong was seriously ill and Vice President Jusuf Kallah represented Indonesia as President Joko Widodo remained in Jakarta, since results of the April 17 election had not officially been announced.

At the Forum, China signed agreements with Myanmar, Indonesia, and Laos to develop joint bilateral economic corridors, and also advanced a triangular project with Thailand and Laos to construct a rail line between Vientiane and Nongkai. But the greatest "deliverable" for Beijing from Southeast Asia came just before the BRF, when Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir

Mohamad reversed his earlier decision to cancel the Malaysia–China agreement to build an East Coast Rail Link in Malaysia. Mahathir maintains that he was able to renegotiate a new agreement more favorable to his country.

The poorer countries of Southeast Asia, particularly Cambodia and Laos, have far less leverage on Beijing in their negotiations with China, but the larger economies (Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and even Myanmar) are more confident that they can negotiate favorable agreements. Vietnam, whose relationship with China is infinitely more complicated than any other Southeast Asian country, is dissatisfied with the results of a Vietnam–China project to build a subway in Hanoi, but will most likely entertain negotiations with Beijing on construction of a new North–South Highway.

The ultimate appeal of the BRI for Southeast Asia lies not only in improving regional infrastructure but also in facilitating Southeast Asian trade with Europe, through the China–Europe Rail Link and accelerating the effects of Southeast Asian FTA’s with the European Union. Goods that travel between Southeast Asia and Europe by ship take an average of 27 days to reach their destination; by rail they will take only 14.

In its advocacy that Southeast Asia and other regions avoid the pitfalls of buying too completely into either the BRI or the “digital Silk Road,” the US is hampered by the fact that it is not a major provider in the region of either physical infrastructure or telecommunications hardware. Moreover, the tendency for each country to go its own way with China on these issues undercuts the US position. Italy’s decision earlier this year to join the BRI, despite pressure from Washington on Rome, and growing European interest in buying into the Chinese network will hardly persuade Southeast Asian leaders to take Washington’s admonitions seriously.

Maintaining the political status quo? Elections in Thailand and Indonesia

Early 2019 saw two key elections in Southeast Asia. On March 24, Thailand conducted its first general polls since the 2014 coup that overturned the government of Yingluck Shinawatra and paved the way for five years of military rule. These were also the first elections under the 2017 constitution, which altered the

political system to give advantage to smaller parties over larger, more established ones and restored the option for the prime minister to be appointed rather than elected. Both changes were designed in part to enable the Thai military—and particularly the junta led by Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha that has held power since the coup—to retain power albeit through constitutional means.

By the end of April, however, Thailand’s Election Commission (EC) was unable to announce formal results of the elections. The EC was uncertain about vote-counting for MPs in the House of Representatives elected by party list and appealed to the Constitutional Court for a ruling. The Court turned the request back without a decision. Equally if not more important, two rival parties—the pro-Thaksin Pheu Thai Party and the new Palang Pracharat Party that intends to name Prayut as prime minister—have both claimed the right to form a government. All informal indications are that Pheu Thai has won the largest number of seats in the House, while Paling Pracharat has captured the highest percentage of the popular vote.

The government has indicated that it will announce formal results of the election on May 9, but those are not likely to settle the dispute between the two parties. In the end, the military-backed party is likely to form a government, probably led by Prayuth, since it will have support from the appointed Senate. Even so, if Pheu Thai is confirmed as having the larger number of House seats, the party will likely mount a no-confidence vote against a Prayuth government later this year. At this point, there are few scenarios that point to political stability for Thailand in the near term.

By all accounts, Indonesia’s general election on April 17 was more tranquil, although a spike in religious tensions in the country in recent years raised expectations of heightened political violence. This turned out not to be the case, in part because President Joko Widodo (widely known as Jokowi) was able to strengthen his position with Islamic groups in advance of the campaign, not least by choosing Muslim cleric Ma’ruf Amin as his running mate. This was notable since Jokowi’s primary opponent, Prabowo Subianto, was reckoned to have stronger support from Muslim voters.

Official results are expected on May 22, although Prabowo may try to delay that with a protest to the Supreme Court on the basis of election irregularities. That strategy, which he attempted in the 2014 election, will likely not succeed. Informal “quick count” polls give Jokowi an 8-10% lead over Prabowo. Political continuity will strengthen the Indonesian government’s plans to improve the economy, particularly through infrastructure development, and will benefit US-Indonesia relations. Indonesian politics will heat up in the later years of Jokowi’s term, however. Essentially a rogue politician, Jokowi will likely leave office in 2024 without a political heir; having lost the presidential contest three times, Prabowo may not attempt a fourth try. This would leave the 2024 elections open for new candidates and new voices, the tone of which will be influenced by Indonesia’s economic situation at the time and the degree of religious tolerance in Indonesian society.



Figure 3 Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha dances with voters at a campaign stop in early March. Photo: efe.com

Looking ahead

Political developments and regional dialogue will swing into higher gear in Southeast Asia in the next four months. The Thai and Indonesian election outcomes will be clarified, although there may be no definitive resolution for the political situation in Thailand. The midterm Philippine elections in mid-May will shed light on President Duterte’s domestic support and may point to potential successors when he leaves office in 2022. The Trump administration has issued an invitation to Duterte to visit Washington this year, and a response from Manila will likely come after the May elections.

Regional meetings on security and diplomatic affairs will be thick as well, with the ASEAN

Summit this year with Thailand as chair in June and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) later in the year. This year’s Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, May 31-June 2, will function as a barometer of Southeast Asian relations with China and, of course, US-China relations. At any time during this period, a resolution (or downturn) in US-China trade negotiations will see an immediate impact on trade and investment flows in Southeast Asia.

The US participation in and response to these developments and activities will depend in part on the political climate at home. The Trump administration has yet to nominate a new secretary of defense, although an internal DOD exercise has cleared Acting Secretary Patrick Shanahan from conflict of interest related to his prior association with Boeing, which could clear the way for a nomination. The State Department’s East Asian and Pacific Affairs (EAP) Bureau has lacked a permanent assistant secretary for two years. In October, the administration nominated David Stilwell, a former Air Force general, to the position, and Stilwell’s confirmation hearing was held on March 27. However, a distracted Congress and a general focus on the 2020 elections could mean that progress on filling critical positions in Asian affairs remains sluggish and under the radar.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2019

Jan. 11, 2019: US State Department issues a statement expressing deep disappointment that the convictions of *Reuters* reporters and Pulitzer Prize winners Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo are upheld by the Yangon High Court.

Jan. 4, 2019: Arakan Army [attacks](#) four police posts in the Buthidaung area in northern Rakhine, killing 13 policemen and injuring nine on the 71st anniversary of Myanmar's independence from British rule. An Arakan Army spokesperson says the attack was a response to a Myanmar military offensive against the Arakan Army that had also targeted civilians.

Jan. 15-16, 2019: US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Southeast and South Asia Joseph Felter visits Cambodia to meet Cambodian defense officials to discuss strengthening US-Cambodian military-to-military relations. Felter emphasizes to Ministry of Defense Secretary Gen. Neang Phat that advances in military cooperation will depend in part on institutional reform in Cambodia, dropping charges against opposition leader Kim Sokha, and allowing civil society and media to operate freely.

Jan. 18, 2019: Spokespersons for Myanmar's military [announce](#) that State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi ordered security forces to launch an offensive against the Arakan Army. Suu Kyi claims that if she did not order the military to attack the Arakan Army, "the international community would accuse her of religious prejudice for attacking the Muslim guerrillas of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army but not Buddhist rebels who committed similar actions with similar goals."

Jan. 21-Feb. 1, 2019: US Pacific Air Forces and Philippine Air Force [conduct](#) the seventh iteration of the Bilateral Air Contingent Exchange-Philippines (BACE-P) at Cesar Basa Air Base in Pampanga.

Jan. 23, 2019: Thailand's Election Commission [announces](#) that the first official general election since the military coup in 2014 will take place on March 24.

Jan. 27, 2019: On the southern Philippine island of Jolo 20 are killed and 111 wounded when two bombs explode in a cathedral during Sunday Mass. The Islamic State claims responsibility for the bombing through online bulletins.

Jan. 29, 2019: US Ambassador to the Philippines Sung Kim and Philippine Secretary of Defense Delfin Lorenzana open a newly constructed warehouse for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in at Cesar Basa Air Base, the first major project under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). The two countries have identified future EDCA projects in four other locations.

Feb. 6, 2019: Myanmar's Parliament [agrees](#) to form a committee that will consider amending the "undemocratic" portions of the country's military-drafted Constitution.

Feb. 11, 2019: Spokesperson for the Philippine government [announces](#) that the US pledged \$5.75 million in intelligence support to assist counterterrorism efforts in the Philippines.

Feb. 12-22, 2019: Thailand and the US host the 38th iteration of the *Cobra Gold* exercises, involving 29 full participants, with China and India participating in civic action elements of the program.

Feb. 18, 2019: US Navy fleet replenishment oiler *USNS Guadalupe* and UK Royal Navy frigate *HMS Montrose* conduct maritime security and logistics training in the South China Sea.

Feb. 27-28, 2019: President Donald Trump and North Korean Chairman Kim Jong Un meet in Hanoi. The summit draws favorable attention to Vietnam.

Feb. 28 – March 1, 2019: Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visits Manila on his return from Hanoi. He meets President Rodrigo Duterte and Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin.

March 4 – April 25, 2019: Fourteenth round of the *Pacific Partnership* exercises are held in Malaysia, the Federated State of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, Thailand, Timor L'este, and Vietnam. The exercises focus on cooperation in tsunami response.

March 5–7, 2019: United States, Japan, and Indonesia host a conference on Indonesia's need for liquefied natural gas (LNG). Government and private sector participants from the three countries discuss proposals for future projects to help meet Indonesia's energy needs.

March 7, 2019: Rep. Ann Wagner (R-Missouri) introduces the Southeast Asia Strategy Act into Congress. The bill, co-sponsored by Rep. Joaquin Castro (D-Texas) and Rep. Ted Yoho (R-Florida) would require the secretaries of state, defense, and commerce to submit a multi-year strategy for engagement with Southeast Asia to Congress. The bill is referred to committee for action.

March 11–25, 2019: The 25th round of *Cope Tiger* exercises, a set of multilateral field training exercises among the air forces of the US, Singapore, and Thailand, are held in Thailand. The three services fly a combined total of 776 sorties and focused on air superiority, command and control, close air support, interdiction, electronic warfare, and tactical airlift.

March 13 – April 11, 2019: *USS Blue Ridge*, the flagship of the US Seventh Fleet makes a series of routine port calls in Southeast Asia, beginning with a stop in Manila in the Philippines and continuing on to Laem Chabang in Thailand and Kota Kinabalu in Malaysia.

March 20, 2019: US Ambassador to Indonesia Joseph Donovan unveils the new US Embassy in Jakarta, which will house the US Mission to Indonesia and the US Mission to ASEAN. He is joined by Chargé Jane Bocklage, who heads the US Mission to ASEAN in the absence of a confirmed US ambassador to ASEAN.

March 24, 2019: Thailand holds general elections. By the end of April, no official results are announced, in part due to uncertainty in the Election Commission on the methodology for counting votes.

March 27, 2019: Ninth US–Laos Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue is held in Washington, D.C. Topics include fostering a free and open Indo-Pacific, upholding the rule of law in the South China Sea, and countering transnational crime. Laos currently serves as the US country coordinator within ASEAN.

March 27, 2019: Senate Foreign Relations Committee holds a confirmation hearing for David Stilwell, nominated to be assistant secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. In his testimony, Stilwell reaffirms ASEAN centrality in Asian regional affairs and promises to strengthen US security relations with the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, and Vietnam.

March 27, 2019: Seven pro-democracy parties [form](#) a coalition to secure a majority in Thailand's House of Representatives to oppose the military-backed National Council for Peace and Order.

March 28, 2019: United States and Laos host the 32nd US–ASEAN Dialogue in Washington, co-hosted by State Department Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs W. Patrick Murphy and Lao Deputy Foreign Minister Thongphone Savenphet. They discuss the importance of maritime security to regional stability, combatting maritime plastic pollution, and illegal fishing.

April 1–12, 2019: Representatives from all branches of the US armed forces and the Armed Forces of the Philippines conduct the 35th iteration of the *Balikatan* (“*Shoulder to Shoulder*”) exercises. The two militaries are joined in some phases by the Australian Defense Forces. The exercises include 28 major combined or joint interoperability events, focusing on counterterrorism, amphibious operations, live-fire, urban operations, and aviation operations.

April 2, 2019: State Department issues a statement critical of Brunei's decision to implement Phases Two and Three of the Sharia Penal Code, which contain penalties of death by stoning for gay sex and adultery.

April 3, 2019: Two military helicopters [attack](#) a village in Rakhine state on a mission to “(crack) down on the Arakan Army’s terrorist activities.” The number of fatalities is unclear due to conflicting reports, but victims are identified as Rohingya refugees.

April 7-12, 2019: US and Thai naval forces conduct *Guardian Sea* exercises in the Andaman Sea, emphasizing anti-submarine warfare.

April 16-18, 2019: US INDOPACOM Commander Adm. Davidson [makes](#) his first official visit to Vietnam with stops in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City to meet officials including Vietnamese Defense Minister Ngo Xuan Lich, signs an agreement on disabilities assistance, and oversees the launch of a “US-funded project on dioxin contamination remediation at Bien Hoa airport.

April 17, 2019: Indonesia holds general elections. For the first time, a single election allows the country’s 180 million voters to choose a president, legislators, and provincial officials on the same day, making it the largest election in human history. Official results will be announced May 22, but “quick count” polls indicate that incumbent President Joko Widodo defeated Prabowo Subianto.

April 17-19, 2019: Washington (State) National Guard and the Washington Emergency Management Division participate in the first Malaysian Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response Civil-Military Course, organized by the Malaysian Armed Forces.

April 22, 2019: US signs a Memorandum of Understanding with Vietnam to contain dioxin remaining from Agent Orange spraying during the Vietnam War. Washington commits \$183 million to the project, which will take 10 years. USAID also signs a “memorandum of intent” to assist Vietnamese living with disabilities believed to be tied to dioxin exposure.

April 24, 2019: State Department protests the decision by Myanmar’s Supreme Court to uphold the sentences of *Reuters* journalists Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo.

April 27, 2019: Indonesia [arrests](#) 12 of 14 Vietnamese fishermen who were on a boat fishing in the Natuna Sea. The Indonesian Navy reports that one of the two Vietnamese Coast Guard boats that arrived rammed the Indonesian patrol vessel. The Vietnamese fishing boat sinks on site.

April 25-27, 2019: Chinese President Xi Jinping hosts the second Belt and Road Forum in Beijing. Southeast Asia sends the second-largest contingent of top leaders.

April 29-May 5, 2019: State Department Undersecretary for Political Affairs David Hale travels to Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar and Japan. In Jakarta he marks the 70th anniversary of US-Indonesian relations. In Thailand Hale confers with Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials on Thailand’s role as the 2019 ASEAN Chair.

