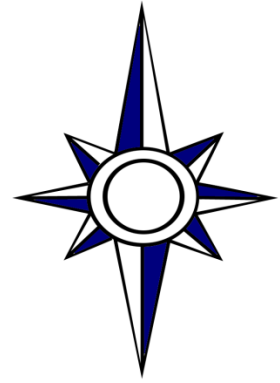


# Comparative Connections

A Triannual E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations



## US-Southeast Asia Relations: South China Sea Wariness

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In the first four months of 2015, senior State and Defense Department officials as well as flag-rank military officers visited Southeast Asia, all emphasizing ASEAN's importance for the Obama administration's rebalance policy. The US is building a rotational force deployment capacity in the region along with military assistance to allies and partners, especially for increasing their maritime security capabilities. Washington and Manila await a Supreme Court decision regarding the constitutionality of the April 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which will permit better access for US forces. Washington has also emphasized Vietnam's importance to the rebalance, currently concentrating on improving coast guard relations. However, the US was dismayed that Hanoi permitted Russian tanker aircraft to fly out of Cam Ranh Bay to refuel bombers that flew near US bases in Guam. The Indonesian Navy has shown interest in more naval exercises with the US around the Natuna Islands. Problems persist in US-Thai relations as the military consolidates its rule. Although the annual *Cobra Gold* exercise took place in February, Washington scaled back US participation and significantly reduced the kinetic component. Planning for next year's exercise is in limbo. Finally, Japan and India have shown support for maritime security buildups and an enhanced naval presence in the South China Sea.

### Rebalance emphasized

Over the past four months, high-level visitors from the Obama administration to Southeast Asia emphasized the importance of the rebalance to the region despite continued US attention to the turmoil in the Middle East and problems with Russia over its actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Summing up Washington's ongoing commitment to Asian security in an address at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University on Jan. 26, Assistant Secretary of State for Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel averred: The US "system of alliances and security partnerships is not a legacy of the 20th century. It is an investment in the 21st century.... [O]ur alliance system is the backbone of cooperation in the region [and] that applies, for example, to problematic actions to unilaterally change the status quo in the South China Sea. We work regularly with our allies to make sure that our forces can operate together in a crisis at a moment's notice." Russel was implicitly responding to China's insistence that the US alliances in Asia are a relic of the Cold War and should be replaced by the PRC's vision of Asian security as the exclusive responsibility of Asian states. In a Feb. 4 talk on "US Policy Priorities for the East Asian and Pacific Region in 2015," Russel also cited the 8 percent increase in foreign aid to the region that expands funding for democracy promotion and maritime capacity building.

The United States is building its rotational deployment of navy and air force assets in Southeast Asia that include four littoral combat vessels to Singapore and new agreements to rotate forces to Australia and the Philippines. As Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter put it in an April 6 address at Arizona State University, these deployments will lead to “an increased tempo of training and exercises” that will “reinforce the partnerships and alliances that are the bedrock of everything we do in the Asia-Pacific.” Specifying Southeast Asia, Carter referred to US military assistance for maritime security in the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia “to provide them with additional assets for maritime security and disaster relief operations.” He went on to note that the most modern equipment in the US defense inventory is being deployed to the Asia-Pacific, including the *P-8 Poseidon* maritime patrol aircraft, the *F-22* and *F-35* combat jets, the *Zumwalt* destroyer, and additional *Aegis*-equipped warships – all for the purpose of keeping the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) open for maritime commerce. US officials were insisting that the rebalance is alive and well despite commitments to other parts of the globe.

### **Attention to South China Sea challenges**

China’s reclamation activities on a number of reefs and shoals among the Spratly and Paracel islands have elicited particular concern from the Philippines and Vietnam as well as suggestions that the United States should become more directly involved in assisting the littoral states to protect their territorial waters. Recall that last year Washington proposed that the South China Sea claimants “freeze” their building activities on the features they controlled to which China responded that this constituted outside interference unfairly targeting Beijing and undermining the code of conduct negotiations. One Philippine legislator in mid-March urged his government to ask for help from the US to take control of the islands in the “West Philippine Sea” [the Philippine name for its exclusive economic zone to the west of its main islands] where the PRC has built large facilities on Mischief Reef, only 41 km away from Second Thomas Shoal, where Philippine soldiers are stationed on board a beached rusting hulk of a WWII vessel.

Over the past several months in regional and global venues, Philippine diplomats have urged broad international support against China’s reclamation activities. The efforts probably reflect Manila’s conclusion that divisions within ASEAN preclude the Association from explicitly criticizing the PRC for violating the 2002 Declaration of Conduct, which requires that no unilateral actions be taken to alter the status quo in the South China Sea, and placing the blame on Beijing for blocking any progress toward a code of conduct that would legally bind its signatories not to interdict other claimants. At the 26th ASEAN Summit in Malaysia on April 27, the assembled leaders released a statement prompted by Vietnam, the Philippines and Indonesia that implicitly called out the PRC: “We share the serious concerns expressed by some leaders on the land reclamation being undertaken in the South China Sea, which has eroded trust and confidence and may undermine peace, security, and stability.”

On March 17 at the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition in Malaysia, the commander of the US 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet, Vice Adm. Robert Thomas called on Southeast Asian nations to form a combined maritime force to patrol areas of the South China Sea. For the past several years, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand have been engaged in a Malacca Strait Patrol (MSP) arrangement designed to detect and deter piracy. The MSP is a coordinated rather than a combined patrol. Each country’s maritime force operates within its own territorial waters,

notifying partners of suspicious activities heading in their direction. Thomas's proposal seems to call for a closer linking of the ships involved. At the end of April, the Southeast Asian states have not formally commented on the proposal, though prospects seem dim largely because Indonesia appears uninterested in expanding MSP deployments and particularly opposes any "jointness" that would allow the navies of other countries to enter Indonesian waters.

In a late March, a bipartisan letter from US Senate leaders to President Obama and Secretary of State Kerry described China's reclamation activities as a "direct challenge" to US interests. Philippine Foreign Minister Albert del Rosario praised the senators' letter as being "very helpful," noting the difference between "what is being said [by China] and what is happening on the ground." Moreover, on a visit to Japan in early April, Secretary of Defense Carter stated that China's actions "seriously increase tension and reduce prospects for diplomatic solutions."

A long-time interlocutor for ASEAN, most recently after the 2012 Cambodian ASEAN Summit when no final communique was issued, then Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natelegawa subsequently visited all ASEAN states to craft a substitute statement on the South China Sea. Indonesia's President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) entered the debate in late March when he stated that China's nine-dash line had no legal basis, though insisting he was not challenging the PRC's overall claims in the South China Sea. Jokowi went on to reiterate his country's offer to continue serving as an "honest broker" in the dispute, since Jakarta was not a claimant. In fact, China's nine-dash line does cut across Indonesia's EEZ north of the Natuna Islands, so Jakarta clearly has a stake in any outcome.

### **Upgrading the US-Philippine relationship**

In April 2014, President Obama and President Aquino initialed an Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). The agreement provides for the rotation of US forces to Philippine military bases – yet to be jointly determined, though in late April some eight possible locations were mentioned in the media. EDCA is being challenged by opposition parties in the Philippine Congress as unconstitutional and awaits a decision by the country's Supreme Court. Meanwhile, the Obama administration continues to assist in the modernization of the Philippine armed forces. In January, the US sold two refurbished *C-130* cargo aircraft to help build the country's territorial defense and maritime capabilities, according to a US embassy statement on Jan. 10. The *C-130* was instrumental in moving people and material in the wake of Super typhoon *Yolanda* last year in the Visayas. In accepting the aircraft, the Philippine Armed Forces announced that Manila will spend more than 90 billion pesos (\$2 billion) for the second phase of its modernization program from 2015-2017. In February, the US began flying its most advanced surveillance aircraft, the *P-8A Poseidon* from the Philippines out over the South China Sea, promising to share "real time" information. One of these inaugural *Poseidon* flights had Philippine military personnel on board for familiarization. While the *P-8A* will not be stationed in the Philippines, it will rotate regularly to the country for patrols.

In a January visit, Assistant Secretary of State Russel and Assistant Secretary of Defense David Shear promised to hold joint military exercises focusing on maritime security and domain awareness. While reiterating that the South China Sea is an "ongoing concern," Russel said the US and the Philippines would exercise "maximum restraint" in favor of diplomacy.

In a significant change, the US Special Operations training mission in the southern Philippines came to an end in late February. For 13 years, US Special Operations had trained the Philippine military in counterinsurgency to fight Islamic separatists, notably the Abu Sayyaf. The deactivation of the command means that US advice and assistance on counterterrorism shifts from the tactical level to higher echelons of command. The Philippine Constitution prohibits foreign forces from engaging in direct combat, though training missions have been declared within the approved range of foreign actions. US Special Forces appeared to have been indirectly involved in an operation in Mamasapano, Mindanao, in February that led to the death of 44 police commandos. A March 17 Philippine Senate report on the botched operation concluded that no US forces were involved in combat, though they did provide training, intelligence, and medical assistance. Some Philippine commentators expressed dismay that US forces were involved in the operation because neither the Philippine interior secretary nor the acting national chief of police knew anything about a US role.

This year's *Balikatan (Shoulder-to-Shoulder)* joint exercise, held from April 20-30, is the largest in history with more than 11,500 troops; it also included 61 Australians for the first time. The total number of personnel is more than double that of the 2014 exercise. Deployed equipment included nearly 80 aircraft and three warships. *Balikatan* covers both territorial defense and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief. Much of this year's event took place in Zambales province opposite the disputed Scarborough Shoal. There was also some activity in Palawan, which is opposite the Spratly Islands.

### **Vietnam in the rebalance**

US officials visiting Vietnam in early 2015 have emphasized the country's importance in the rebalance. At the Seventh Vietnam-United States Political, Security, and Defense Dialogue on Jan. 22-23 in Hanoi, Assistant Secretary of State Puneet Talwar said that building maritime ties constitutes the crux of the defense relationship. Washington advocates increasing the tempo of port visits and joint exercises. However, US Navy ships are currently limited to one port call of up to three ships per year and still may not enter the deep water port of Cam Ranh Bay, a centerpiece of the US Vietnam War naval deployment in the 1960s and 1970s. Washington's Ambassador Ted Osius has stated that this year defense relations will focus on cooperation between the coast guards to enhance maritime domain awareness and search and rescue operations. Toward this end, the *Voice of Vietnam News* on March 6 announced that Washington "for the first time granted an aid package of \$18 million to help Vietnam improve its naval capacity." On April 6, in remarks at Arizona State University prior to his East Asian visit, Secretary of Defense Carter praised the new defense relationship with Vietnam: "In the waters off Danang, a US guided missile destroyer and a littoral combat ship are scheduled to engage with Vietnamese Navy vessels..." While this is a low-level exercise, it includes a Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) event, an arrangement that Washington would like to see all Asian navies adopt to reduce the prospect of accidental ship encounters.

These positive security activities encountered a glitch, however, in March when Gen. Vincent Brooks, commander of the US Army in the Pacific, told the media that Russian bombers engaged in a show of strength over the Asia-Pacific were being refueled out of Cam Ranh Bay and were

conducting “provocative flights” around the US territory of Guam, home of a major US air base and naval port. A State Department official took a somewhat less alarmed position, though, saying that Washington respected Hanoi’s right to enter agreements with other countries. Nevertheless, “We have urged Vietnamese officials to ensure that Russia is not able to use its access to Cam Ranh Bay to conduct activities that could raise tensions in the region.” Australian Vietnam specialist [Carl Thayer in \*The Diplomat\* cited](#) US officials who interpreted the Russian flights as part of a global pattern of assertiveness toward the United States and Europe in response to the economic sanctions against Russia resulting from Moscow’s annexation of Crimea and destabilization of eastern Ukraine. Thayer noted that Vietnam’s permission for the Russians to use Cam Ranh Bay to fly over a US airbase in the mid-Pacific could be seen to contradict Hanoi’s 2009 Defense White Paper which states that no third country could use Vietnamese territory “to carry out military activities against other countries.”

There is no doubt that the Russians hold a special position at Cam Ranh Bay. Moscow is building a submarine fleet for Vietnam’s expanding navy, and Russian experts are reportedly stationed at Cam Ranh Bay to train Vietnamese submariners. Indeed, Russia remains Vietnam’s largest arms supplier going back to the Vietnam War era. Discussing the US complaint on March 13, a Russian Defense Ministry spokesperson mused: “It is strange to hear [complaints] from representatives of the state whose armed forces are permanently stationed in a number of Asia-Pacific countries and which continues to increase its level of military activities in the region.” On the other hand, Vietnam regularly declares that all countries are welcome to help develop Cam Ranh Bay’s infrastructure for an international ship service and repair hub open to all civilian and military users.

### **Indonesia: new leadership, new policies?**

Indonesia has been an ASEAN leader since the Association’s inception. In fact, ASEAN was created in 1967 in part to insure that Indonesia could be “tamed” within a larger Southeast Asian entity. The previous president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, established a foreign policy of “a thousand friends, no enemies.” His successor, Joko Widodo – neither a career military officer nor a member of the country’s elite – has a different foreign policy orientation: “making friends with countries that can provide Indonesia with benefits.... What’s the point of making friends if we are always on the losing end?” According to the US Center for Strategic and International Studies analyst Phuong Nguyen in a Jan. 13 [Cogit Asia piece](#), Jakarta needs to strengthen its economic profile if it is to continue in a leadership role. To do this, it must eradicate illegal fishing in its territorial waters and attract foreign investment to build its deep sea ports and power plants.

Indonesia’s military commander Gen. Moeldoko in a 2014 *Wall Street Journal* interview stated that Jakarta was “dismayed” that the PRC’s nine-dash line seemed to include “parts of the Natuna islands” and that his country would “strengthen its forces” in response. President Widodo added to these muscular statements by insisting that Indonesia could no longer tolerate a situation where over 5,000 ships operate illegally every day in Indonesian waters, leading to an annual loss in fishing resources of over \$20 billion. To reverse this violation of sovereignty, the Indonesian president has ordered the navy to sink captured foreign fishing vessels rather than the previous practice of fining the owners. Fishing boats from Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam

have been sunk; even Chinese boats could be included in the future, although none has been sunk so far. Despite the acquisition of new patrol craft, Indonesia acknowledges that it has neither enough boats nor the requisite fuel to effectively police its vast archipelagic waters.

The US supports Indonesian plans to increase its naval capabilities. Amy Searight, the US deputy assistant secretary of defense for South and Southeast Asia, [sees Indonesia's "global maritime axis policy" as a window](#) through which the US can assist Indonesia's maritime capacity building. The two countries' marines are now regularly exercising together, and on April 13 an Indonesian Navy spokesman declared that his country wanted to hold regular naval exercises with the US near the sparsely populated Natuna Islands, adding that Indonesia plans to add more air and naval forces there. In fact, the two countries have conducted sea surveillance exercises since 2012 in the Malacca Strait and around the Natunas.

### **Thailand: political tension, though *Cobra Gold* continues**

The consolidation of military rule in Thailand following the May 2014 coup has created considerable neuralgia in US-Thai relations. In a late January visit to Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University, Assistant Secretary of State Russel averred that although the US "does not take sides in Thai politics," nevertheless, "we are concerned about the significant restraints on freedoms..., including restriction on speech and assembly, and I've been very straightforward about these concerns." Russel went on to criticize the impeachment of deposed Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and the leveling of criminal charges against her. Russel told Thai media that only "the restoration of a credible democratically elected civilian government" will restore the US-Thai relationship. The junta Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha responded by saying he was "saddened" by these remarks which showed that "the US does not understand how we work."

Despite political tensions between Washington and Bangkok, the largest annual Asia-Pacific multinational military exercise organized by the US and hosted by Thailand – *Cobra Gold* – was held from Feb. 9-20, though scaled back in size and focused primarily on humanitarian assistance/disaster relief. The number of countries participating has increased over the past several years to 24 and now includes both China and India, though the US cut the number of its forces involved by 25 percent to 3,600. Thai media have noted that while Washington is criticizing the retreat from democracy in Thailand, Beijing has offered to expand fledgling military exercises with the junta as well as offering a sympathetic understanding of its political situation. Nonetheless, at *Cobra Gold's* conclusion, Thai Defense Forces Chief Gen. Worapong Sanganetra said he was pleased with the exercise and that its goals were achieved. He noted that the participants indicated they would participate again next year and that all agreed that next year's exercise should once again be a "Heavy Year" type event, emphasizing fire power. He concluded by saying that this year's *Cobra Gold* success shows that Thai-US relations remain warm. Although Thai military officials tried to put the best face on this year's exercise, subsequent events seemed less promising. The US Pacific Command indefinitely postponed the first planning meeting for *Cobra Gold* 2016, and officials in Washington said no definite plans had yet been made for next year's exercise.

## **Myanmar and Malaysia**

Despite high hopes over the past three years by the Obama administration for the political liberalization of Myanmar and its armed forces' gradual relinquishing power through democratic elections, those hopes have not been realized. The Tatmadaw's (the military's official name) continued to dominate the political and economic spheres while violence in the border regions with ethnic minorities as well as human rights abuses have disappointed Washington. However, because of the US rebalance policy and strategic need to counter China's significant influence in Myanmar, relations with the government are strengthening despite these concerns.

The US National Defense Authorization Act of 2015 has gradually opened military-to-military relations with the Tatmadaw, involving some training in humanitarian assistance/disaster relief. Senior Pacific Command officers are visiting, though combat training and arms sales are still off limits. Myanmar's military remains the country's most important political actor. Its constitutionally mandated representation in the Parliament as well as the Cabinet guarantees a veto over any future changes in the political system.

Particularly grievous has been the mistreatment of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar's Rakhine State. On March 31, the Rohingya's temporary identity cards, which gave them the right to vote in the upcoming May election, were revoked. Myanmar's Muslims have been the victim of an ongoing pogrom by the majority Buddhists and have been not protected by the police or the military. In fact, the government has denied the Rohingya Muslims basic government services, including health care and education as well as freedom of movement. On Feb. 12, US Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Tom Malinkowski criticized the Myanmar government's arbitrary disenfranchisement of the Rohingya Muslims as an unconscionable retreat from the government's stated goal of reconciling the Buddhist and Muslim communities. However, Washington's opening to the Tatmadaw leadership seems to privilege the rebalance strategy over US political concerns for democracy and human rights.

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While the United States has no military alliance with Malaysia, President Obama viewed the relationship as sufficiently important to warrant the inauguration of a comprehensive partnership during his April 2014 visit – the first by a US president in almost 50 years. Security cooperation constitutes an important component of this partnership through joint exercises, antiterrorism efforts, and even the use of an airbase from time to time in Sabah for US surveillance of the southern part of the South China Sea. Additionally, Prime Minister Najib Razak has supported Malaysia's joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), though Malaysian critics are opposed to the power given to multinational corporations and the loss of special privileges for state-owned enterprises in the proposed TPP.

Human rights issues continue to mar the US-Malaysian relationship – most recently the second conviction of opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim on sodomy charges, generally viewed both within Malaysia and globally as specious and designed to eliminate the popular politician from the country's political life. International human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch deemed the verdict “disgraceful,” “a black day,” and

“totally unjust.” In Washington, the White House issued a statement in February saying the United States is “deeply disappointed” and that the trial “raised a number of serious concerns about rule of law and the fairness of the justice system in Malaysia.”

Moreover, the late April legislation working its way through Congress to provide President Obama fast-track authority on the forthcoming TPP contains an amendment on human rights that could derail Malaysia’s participation. The amendment prohibits the US from an expedited trade agreement with any country in the top tier of the State Department’s human trafficking list. Malaysia is in that category.

### **Enhancing the rebalance: Japan and India**

One area of emphasis in the rebalance is Washington’s plan for allies and partners to collaborate with the US in strengthening the security capabilities of the Southeast Asian states. Japan and India have recently undertaken a number of initiatives toward that end. Tokyo’s and Delhi’s strategic interests complement Washington’s. Particularly, under Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, Japan is developing a regional naval power projection capability that contributes to the US Navy’s protection of sea lanes of the South China Sea. In India’s case, recent prime ministers have emphasized a “look east” policy that views South China Sea security as contributing to India’s own defense. Both countries aid the Southeast Asian littorals’ development of maritime domain protection. While there is little evidence that Tokyo and Delhi are directly coordinating their Southeast Asian ship visits and military aid programs, both countries regularly consult with the US military, including Pacific Command, and their activities in the region are compatible with those of the US. Japan and India also exercise trilaterally with the US and Australia; Southeast Asia constitutes Canberra’s frontier.

Tokyo’s support for Southeast Asian defense can be traced back to its 2012 announcement that Japan would provide the Philippines with 10 new patrol boats at which time the *Yomiuri Shimbun* editorialized that it was in “Japan’s national interest to ensure that its sea-lanes remain safe.” In July of that year, the Philippine and Japanese defense ministers inked a bilateral agreement on maritime security followed by a Japanese pledge to provide the Philippine Coast Guard with the boats mentioned above as part of Japan’s Official Development Assistance (ODA). Fast forward to January 2015, and Japan’s Defense Minister Nakatani Gen and Philippine counterpart Voltaire Guzman agreed to conduct joint exercises. In late January, the commander of the US Seventh Fleet, Vice Adm. Thomas, stated in an interview: “I think partners and allies in the region will look to the Japanese more and more as a stabilizing function: and averred “I think that JSDF operations in the South China Sea makes sense in the future.” Thomas’s statement coincides with Japan’s development of a new maritime patrol plane, the *P-1*, with a range of 5,000 miles, double the range of its older patrol aircraft and able to push surveillance deep into the South China Sea. During Nakatani’s visit to Manila in January, the two ministers also agreed to advance the countries’ “strategic partnership” by holding regular consultations between their defense ministries.

Japan extended its ODA purview in February when Prime Minister Abe adopted a foreign aid charter that stated ODA can be used to support foreign armed forces when they are involved in noncombat operations such as disaster relief, infrastructure building, and coast guard activities.



On March 10, Tokyo released a white paper stating that cooperation with ASEAN was important for Japan's national security. Indicative of the ASEAN orientation of this initiative is a new Japan-Indonesia "maritime forum" announced during President Jokowi's visit to Tokyo during which Abe pledged assistance in building Indonesia's port infrastructure and in helping in the capacity building of Indonesia's armed forces for peacekeeping missions and defense equipment development. President Jokowi's own "maritime axis" doctrine calls for eliminating the sources of conflict at sea such as piracy and violation of sovereignty. The latter could be interpreted as a reference to China's ownership claim to most of the South China Sea. Japan has also indicated that it might fund Philippine infrastructure improvements around Palawan Island, the closest major land mass to the Spratly Islands.

In an April visit to Tokyo, US Defense Secretary Carter expressed hope that Japan would assist in US surveillance activities in the South China Sea. A Japanese Defense Ministry official declared that such assistance could lift some of the US burden in light of its defense budget cuts. Nevertheless, Japanese defense specialists acknowledged logistical difficulties for any South China Sea patrols. With the exception of its new *P-1*, Japan's *P-3s* could not cover the South China Sea without in-flight refueling.

Finally in late April, Tokyo released an outline of the proposed new Japan-Defense guidelines. For the first time, they contained protection of the sea lanes, including those in the South China Sea as appropriate for Japanese rear guard support, potentially authorizing Japan to provide logistical support for a US defense of the Philippines. Nonetheless, the guidelines still require parliamentary approval for any new operations.

Southeast Asian countries also look favorably on an enhanced Indian role in the region's security. Leaders of Vietnam, the Philippines, and Singapore in recent years have all expressed approval for Delhi's naval presence and military aid. In 2012, former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stated that "ASEAN centrality is essential in the evolving regional architecture," endorsing the Association's leading role in regional diplomacy. President Obama has also urged India to "act east." In early 2015, he and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in their joint vision statement noted their "bilateral dialogue on ASEAN affairs." Moreover, India is upgrading its air and naval presence on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands near the western entrance to the Malacca Strait. Delhi also has docking rights at Vietnam's Nha Trong port.

India has provided Vietnam with a \$100 million credit line to purchase patrol boats that will probably be used to augment Hanoi's Coast Guard operations in the South China Sea. Hanoi is also seeking India's help in training Vietnam's *Sukhoi* fighter pilots. India is already training Vietnam Navy personnel operating Russian *Kilo-class* submarines. In mid-January, Hanoi's Deputy Minister of Defense General Chi Vinh told Indian media that Delhi should not be concerned about joint exploration for oil because those projects are within Vietnam's EEZ, and Hanoi is ready to protect its legitimate waters.

In his speech at Arizona State University on April 6, Defense Secretary Carter spoke of the updated US-India relationship that included the first expansion of the India-US Defense Framework in a decade. Carter said that the US was now in discussions with Indian defense officials on "high end technologies, for example, jet engines and aircraft carrier design."

## Looking ahead

An important component of the Obama administration's rebalance is working with allies and partners; within Southeast Asia the US is focusing on ASEAN institutions. As the current ASEAN chair, Malaysia has broached the subject of a joint maritime peacekeeping force led by ASEAN. The basis for such a force already exists in the Malacca Straits Patrol that brings together the maritime and air components of Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand (in the air component only) for anti-piracy patrols.

In a recent meeting of ASEAN naval chiefs, Vice Adm. Thomas, commander of the US Seventh Fleet, urged Southeast Asian states to form a multilateral force to monitor the South China Sea beyond the Malacca Strait. Along similar lines, reflecting Washington's emphasis on cooperative security, Adm. Harry Harris of the US Pacific Fleet proposed the establishment of a South China Sea Operations Center in Indonesia. This suggestion would seem to be consistent with President Jokowi's emphasis on Indonesia as an Asian maritime nexus. Moreover, ASEAN as a whole shares similar concerns about the threat to freedom of navigation inherent in the militarization of South China Sea disputes. On the other hand, Richard Bitzinger – a well-known military expert at the Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore – expressed skepticism about these prospects when he stated: The maritime force is “a nice idea, but will never be anything meaningful.” ASEAN military collaboration remains a distant horizon.

## Chronology of US - Southeast Asian Relations January – April 2015

**Jan. 2, 2015:** US Navy vessel using acoustic technology recovers several bodies from the ill-fated Air Asia Flight 8501 that crashed into the Java Sea on Dec. 28.

**Jan. 3, 2015:** US Embassy in Jakarta issues a security alert urging visitors to be vigilant. Without specifying the cause, Indonesian and US authorities have expressed concern about radicalized Indonesians returning from Iraq and Syria.

**Jan. 7, 2015:** Indonesian and US defense officials sign an agreement for Washington to assist the Indonesian Ministry of Defense in developing strategies to enhance the latter's performance through institutional reforms.

**Jan. 9, 2015:** US Embassy in Manila announces the sale of two *C-130s* to the Philippine Air Force to enhance its maritime domain awareness, especially for humanitarian purposes and disaster relief.

**Jan. 9, 2015:** US Embassy in Laos donates \$6.5 million for people with disabilities through the US Agency for International Development.

**Jan. 14-15, 2015:** Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Tom Malinowski leads a delegation to Nay Pyi Taw for a dialogue on democratic reform, media freedom, and labor rights; he requests access to conflict areas for humanitarian assistance.

**Jan. 18-28, 2015:** Assistant Secretary of State for Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel visits Manila, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, and Phnom Penh.

**Jan. 20-21, 2015:** US and Philippines hold their fifth annual bilateral strategic dialogue in Manila, focusing on the South China Sea disputes.

**Jan. 24, 2015:** In a press briefing in Kuala Lumpur, Assistant Secretary Russel emphasizes Malaysia's important role as this year's ASEAN chair in addressing South China Sea issues.

**Jan. 26, 2015:** Secretary Russel in Bangkok at Chulalongkorn University calls on the military government to end martial law, restore civil rights, and hasten Thailand's return to democracy.

**Jan. 26, 2015:** US Ambassador to Vietnam Ted Osius states that defense cooperation between the two countries will focus on coast guards.

**Jan. 27, 2015:** Secretary Russel delivers an address on the Obama administration's rebalance policy to the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace. He criticizes Phnom Penh's failure to push through reforms necessary to promote foreign investment.

**Jan. 29, 2015:** *Reuters* reports that US Seventh Fleet Commander Vice Adm. Robert Thomas stated the US would welcome the extension of Japanese air patrols into the South China Sea.

**Feb. 2-3, 2015:** US and Laos co-host a meeting of the Lower Mekong Initiative, including the five lower Mekong countries and major donors from both the public and private sectors.

**Feb. 9-20, 2015:** *Cobra Gold 2015* is held in Thailand. The US sends a contingent of 3,000, smaller than last year because of political tensions over the May 2014 Thai military coup.

**Feb. 13, 2015:** In Washington, Singapore and the US agree to increase anti-terror cooperation at the third US-Singapore Strategic Partner Dialogue.

**Feb. 17, 2015:** US flies its most advanced surveillance plane, the *P-8A Poseidon*, over the South China Sea with Philippine soldiers on board for familiarization.

**Feb. 18, 2015:** Philippine government announces the US Navy paid \$52 million in reparations for the damage a minesweeper caused to a protected reef two years ago. Additionally, the US government will assist in the upgrade of a Philippine Coast Guard station on the reef.

**Feb. 24, 2015:** US Joint Special Operations Command in Mindanao ends its 13-year operations, though some US Special Forces remain to provide advice at a higher echelon of command.

**March 4, 2015:** US Pacific Command Commander-designate Adm. Harry Harris states that the India-US partnership is a "key component" of the US rebalance to Asia and that the US supports India's increased presence in the South China Sea.

**March 9-20, 2015:** US, Thailand, and Singapore hold the annual *Cope Thunder* joint air exercise in Thailand with 400 American personnel, 1,000 from Singapore and Thailand, and 84 aircraft.

**March 11, 2015:** Responding to a petition asking the US to make the release of Anwar Ibrahim a top priority for US-Malaysian relations, the White House expresses disappointment in Anwar's jailing but states the US is committed to developing a comprehensive partnership with Malaysia.

**March 11, 2015:** Gen. Vincent Books, commander, US Army Pacific, states that Russia conducted provocative flights adjacent to Guam. The Russian planes were refueled by tanker aircraft flying from Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam.

**March 12, 2015:** US voices concerns to Vietnam about Hanoi's permission for Russia to use Cam Ranh Bay to refuel nuclear-capable bomber flights.

**March 16, 2015:** US State Department states it is deeply concerned about the arrest of Anwar Ibrahim's daughter, Nural Azzah Anwar for sedition. She made remarks in Parliament protesting the conviction of her father.

**March 17, 2015:** Commander of the US Seventh Fleet at a military exposition in Malaysia calls on Southeast Asian navies to form a combined naval patrol force for the South China Sea.

**March 21, 2015.** First Lady Michelle Obama, visiting Cambodia, urges high school girls to finish their education. Prime Minister Hen Sen objects to the cost of such a request, insisting that the US should foot the bill for such continued education.

**March 29, 2015:** Former President Bill Clinton and former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger attend the funeral of Singapore's founding Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew, who died at age 91.

**April 6, 2015:** In a speech at Arizona State University, Defense Secretary Ash Carter asks the Philippines for eight locations as possible sites for US troops to rotate for joint exercises under the Comprehensive Enhanced Defense Agreement.

**April 6-11, 2015:** Vietnamese and US navies engage in their annual exercise off Danang, central Vietnam. Maritime security and search and rescue activities are emphasized.

**April 8, 2015:** US Navy Secretary Ray Mabus meets top Vietnamese Army officials. Deputy Defense Minister Lt. Gen. Do Ba Ty lauds growing defense ties between the two countries, particularly in maritime safety and security.

**April 16-18, 2015:** Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Scot Marciel visits the Philippines, discussing South China Sea tensions and the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement.

**April 20-30, 2015:** Annual US-Philippine *Balikatan* Exercise is held adjacent to the South China Sea. One of the largest in the series, it deploys 6,500 Americans and 5,000 Filipinos.