



**U.S.-Southeast Asia relations:
Misses and Hits**

Sheldon W. Simon
Arizona State University

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's decision to bypass the annual ASEAN and ARF meetings in her first year as secretary is seen as a snub by Southeast Asian leaders and interpreted to be a sign of the low level of the region's importance to Washington. Nevertheless, U.S. security cooperation seems to be increasing with the littoral states in the Strait of Malacca, through bilateral exercises with ASEAN states' armed forces, military sales to Thailand, a new security agreement with Singapore, and continued anti-insurgency training for Philippine forces in Mindanao. Moreover, the U.S.-led multinational Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) held its first South China Sea exercise on the interdiction of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Finally, Vietnam was added to the list of Southeast Asian states participating in the U.S. International Military and Educational Training (IMET) program.

Secretary Rice disappoints ASEAN

ASEAN states expressed disappointment and dismay when Secretary of State Rice announced that in her first year in the office she would not attend the annual July meetings of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Vientiane and the follow-on ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Although she sent her deputy, Robert Zoellick – the former U.S. trade representative and a highly respected Asia specialist – Rice's decision not to attend was seen by many in the region as a snub to Southeast Asia and a downgrading of the importance of Asian regional organizations for U.S. foreign policy. In lieu of the Vientiane ARF meeting, Secretary Rice reportedly suggested regional foreign ministers join her during a Thailand stopover in Bangkok. The suggestion did not go over very well. Rice finally got the opportunity to meet ASEAN foreign ministers during the 60th UN General Assembly on Sept. 12.

Southeast Asian speculation attendant upon Rice's absence focused on Washington's disapproval of the ASEAN initiative for an East Asian Summit that will hold its first meeting in December. The summit will include China, Japan, and Australia but not the U.S. because Washington has refused to sign ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation – a regional nonaggression pact. The most positive spin put on the secretary's nonattendance came from Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien-loong, who accepted

Rice's explanation of other pressing matters and emphasized that ASEAN needed to strengthen its ties to the U.S. because regional stability depends on its continued presence as China and India rise in importance.

One of the reasons discussed for the secretary's absence from the ASEAN meetings was that it was a signal that Washington (as well as the EU) would not accept Myanmar as the 2006 rotating chair of ASEAN. Myanmar's forthcoming chairmanship as well as its dismal internal politics and human rights violations have divided ASEAN for some time. The original ASEAN five (Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines, and Singapore) have been pressing Myanmar for reforms, while Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam expressed reluctance to intervene in any member's internal affairs. At the 11th hour, Yangon agreed to relinquish the 2006 chairmanship to Malaysia. Myanmar's decision protected ASEAN from a probable Western boycott but was also an indicator that the ruling junta had no intention of reforming or freeing Nobel prize winner and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest. Hundreds of her followers also remain in detention.

At the 24-member ARF meeting that followed the ASEAN gathering at the end of July, the forum promised closer counterterrorism and maritime security cooperation. U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Zoellick welcomed these pledges and added the need for greater efforts to deal with avian influenza and natural disasters. The ARF also launched a U.S.-sponsored website, ARFNET, which contains news updates, information for public use, and a link for real-time communications among ARF members.

Enhanced monitoring of the Malacca Strait

Concern over both piracy and possible maritime terrorism has been expressed by both littoral and user states in the Strait of Malacca. In March 2004, then Commander of the U.S. Pacific Command Adm. Thomas Fargo proposed a Regional Maritime Security Initiative that would provide a U.S. role in cooperating with the strait's states to provide security. Malaysia and Indonesia objected, however, to U.S. ships and personnel providing security in their territorial waters. Only Singapore endorsed the U.S. proposal and in December 2004 suggested that Japan participate in joint patrols as well. In 2004, the three littoral states – Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia – inaugurated coordinated naval patrols in each of their territorial waters, communicating with one another about suspicious activities but still not permitting ships from one navy to enter the territorial waters of an adjacent state.

At the July 29 ARF meeting in Vientiane, the Malaysian foreign minister said Kuala Lumpur was ready to cooperate with the U.S., Japan, and Australia to combat piracy in the Malacca Strait as long as the littoral states' sovereignty was respected and maritime responsibilities resided with the strait states. Malaysia and Indonesia abandoned their earlier reluctance about seeking outside aid and joined Singapore in asking for help from the user states, though not through their navies but rather via equipment, training, and intelligence. The U.S. Defense Department responded positively to these requests, and Indonesia particularly cited the need for spare parts to restore its aircraft to flight status.

Joint air patrols over the strait had been agreed upon in July by the littoral states. In September, Thailand joined the anti-piracy aerial monitoring arrangement, now called “eyes in the sky.”

The four-nation joint aerial patrols supplement the coordinated sea patrols that have been ongoing over the past year. The difference is that the air patrols will include one military officer from each participating country on board and up to two maritime patrol aircraft from each country operating seven days a week. The patrol aircraft fly along the strait no less than three nautical miles from land. If incidents are detected from the air, the surveillance plane will report to the air force command in the air space of the country where observed, which then communicates to its navy command for seaborne interception.

Further multilateralization of Malacca Strait security may occur in the future. On Sept. 13, the four Southeast Asian states now responsible for monitoring announced that other countries, including the U.S. and Australia, were welcome to participate in a projected Phase Two, which “will entail the involvement of the international community ... after a period of review with the agreement of the littoral states.” Foreign planes could help plug gaps in the current surveillance patrols since each of the littoral countries provides only two patrols each week.

Explanations for these enhanced security arrangements may be the result of a June 2005 publication by Lloyd’s Insurance Joint War Committee that listed the Malacca Strait at risk from “war, strikes, terrorism, and related perils.” As a result, insurance rates for ships transiting the strait have been raised – on top of a sharp increase in the price of bunkering fuel. The strait states may well hope that the combined air and naval patrols will cause Lloyd’s to rethink its published warning and lead maritime insurers to reduce rates to their pre-June level. An additional reason for the new anti-piracy arrangements may be to counter decisions by some ship owners to hire private security companies to guarantee their safety. These arrangements are seen by the strait states as a challenge to their sovereignty and security capabilities. The joint patrols could also be a message to shippers that they do not need private protection.

Jakarta presses U.S. to restore military ties, respect Papua as Indonesian

Continuing its long campaign to have Washington lift military aid restrictions imposed in 1991 in response to Indonesian military violence in its then province of East Timor, Jakarta was heartened by an early July decision by the U.S. House of Representatives to restore some military assistance. (The Senate has yet to follow suit.) Indonesian human rights groups deplored the U.S. House decision, insisting that Jakarta has not met the U.S. criteria for the restoration of military ties because of the Indonesian government’s failure to jail any of the senior military officials responsible for the East Timor violence. Meanwhile, Indonesia rejected a UN Commission of Experts report that recommended the UN Security Council set up an international tribunal to try top military officers involved in 1999 East Timor human rights violations. The UN Experts report condemned Indonesia’s own efforts to secure justice as “manifestly inadequate.”

In late July, the Indonesian and U.S. navies carried out their ninth Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercise involving 1,000 U.S. personnel plus 500 from the Indonesian navy. The exercises included surveillance and search and rescue operations. The U.S. also conducts CARAT drills with Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Brunei. After the exercise, U.S. Navy specialists provided medical and dental services to the public, civic affairs activities that U.S. armed forces carried out in the southern Philippines and after the December 2004 tsunami in Southeast Asia.

Secession concerns are endemic in Indonesia. East Timor achieved independence through a plebiscite marked by violence in 1999; Aceh has been in rebellion for decades, though an agreement with the central government for limited autonomy was reached this quarter in the wake of the devastating December tsunami. Papua in eastern Indonesia – like Aceh, a resource-rich region – is unlike the rest of Indonesia's population in that Papuans are Melanesian not Malayan. In July, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a resolution urging the Indonesian government to permit Papuans to vote on whether they want to remain in Indonesia in response to which Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono warned the U.S. not to interfere in his country's internal affairs lest relations between Washington and Jakarta be jeopardized. In September, Indonesia's House of Representatives dispatched a delegation to Washington to discuss conditions in Papua with members of Congress. The Indonesians explained that Papuans had already participated in a self-determination procedure in 1969 through 1,025 elected elders who voted unanimously to join Indonesia – though outside observers at the time agreed that the arrangements were manipulated by Jakarta to insure adherence to Indonesia.

While the Indonesian legislature passed a special autonomy law for Papua in October 2001, the law has not been implemented. The U.S. House resolution is really an appeal to Jakarta to honor its autonomy commitment to Papua. When President Yudhoyono visited Washington last May, President Bush assured him of Washington's support for Indonesia's territorial integrity.

Secretary Rice supports Thai antiterrorist agenda

Secretary Rice in her first visit to Thailand in July made it a point to support the Thai government's line that the insurgency in the south that had claimed 800 lives by that time was a domestic issue and that there was no evidence linking local insurgents to international terrorist organizations. Rice also endorsed the establishment of a National Reconciliation Commission chaired by the highly respected former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun. At the same time, she said she was not concerned about alleged human rights violations in the region and believed that Thailand respected human rights. To help Thailand deal with its southern troubles, the secretary promised to intensify intelligence and law enforcement cooperation as well as increase technical assistance. There was no indication that Washington planned to assist the Thai military in the south in the way that the U.S. has been assisting the Philippine military in Mindanao.

Nevertheless, Thailand will buy seven U.S.-made attack helicopters and more than 24,000 arms to fight southern insurgents in the provinces of Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat. The weapons include *M16* rifles and both heavy and light machine guns. The Defense Ministry will also purchase maintenance equipment for the helicopters and radio signal tracking devices since the insurgents frequently communicate by cell phones. Thailand anticipates its arms requests will be given priority in Washington because of Bangkok's status as a "major non-NATO ally." However, Thailand has declined to sign on to Washington's PSI to intercept contraband WMD components at sea, leaving Singapore as the only ASEAN signatory.

Singapore-U.S. security links tighten

Although there is no formal security treaty between Singapore and the U.S. as Washington has with Thailand and the Philippines, in fact, the island city-state is probably the U.S.'s closest security partner in Southeast Asia. In July, the ties were further strengthened as Washington designated Singapore a Major Security Cooperation Partner. Bilateral cooperation will expand in counterterrorism, joint military exercises, policy dialogues, and defense technology. Indicative of this closer cooperation is Singapore's active participation in the multi-nation PSI that held a five-day exercise in mid-August in the South China Sea. Inaugurated by President Bush in 2003, PSI is a collaborative arrangement for states to interdict WMD-related cargo in transit by sea, air, or land. The South China Sea drill is the first in Southeast Asia and involved 10 ships, six patrol crafts, and 2000 personnel from 13 countries. During the exercise, Singapore navy personnel worked alongside the Japanese Coast Guard and Australian Customs Service.

In late August, the U.S. Defense Department notified Congress that Singapore will formally announce that Boeing has won the long and hard-fought competition to supply a new fighter jet to the island's air force. The forthcoming *F-15T* sale – not yet officially announced – will include weapons, logistics, and training support for a contract total of \$741 million. Scheduled to replace Singapore's aging *A-4 Superhawks*, the *F-15T* beat out both the Eurofighter *Typhoon* and the French *Rafale* in the competition. Reasons for the *F-15* selection, generally believed not to be as capable as the multi-role *Rafale*, is the U.S. fighter's performance in actual combat, the euro-U.S. dollar exchange rate which made the *F-15* 25 percent cheaper for Singapore, and the fact that Singapore sees the United States as the region's security guarantor. The potentially small size of the initial order – eight aircraft – also suggests that Singapore may be looking down the road at the *F-35* as a long-term acquisition.

U.S. deplores Philippine political turmoil, continues antiterror cooperation

In mid-July, Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was beleaguered by charges of election fraud and corruption. The U.S. embassy, fearing a coup, martial law, or chaos issued a series of statements insisting that the Philippines adhere to its constitutional regulations to ensure political stability. Instead of condemning the U.S. for interfering in Philippine politics, both the government and opposition seemed to appeal for U.S. endorsement. As the elites squabbled, the country's economic and social problems

continue to grow, while the middle class flees to jobs in the U.S., Canada, and Australia. When 10 senior Cabinet members resigned in protest over the fraud and corruption allegations, Joseph Mussomeli – the acting U.S. ambassador – gave a television interview stating that he admired the Cabinet members who resigned as “patriots” and that the U.S. “categorically ... supports the rule of law.” While the U.S. did not want to see martial law or a coup, it was equally opposed to “people power in the street,” a clear message to the opposition.

Subsequently, President Arroyo proposed that the Philippines consider adopting a parliamentary form of government to replace the contentious current presidential system with its fractious division of powers. A U.S. official in Manila stated that a parliamentary system could be the kind of compromise that would allow Arroyo to step aside with grace. A parliamentary system permits the removal of an unpopular leader without street demonstrations. To change forms of government, however, requires a constitutional amendment.

U.S. Embassy assessments of Philippine political turmoil became public following the arrest of a Filipino-American FBI analyst in early September, who is charged with passing classified information to a Philippine opposition leader in the U.S. Apparently, the classified material consisted of reports by the embassy on prospects for a military coup against Arroyo. The reports were passed on to a former Philippine National Police Senior Superintendent who fled to the U.S. to escape murder charges in the Philippines. He, in turn, sent them to unidentified current and former officials in Manila. Both the FBI analyst and the former Philippine police superintendent face espionage charges in the U.S. The three Philippine officials may also be accused of receiving the stolen information. The documents appear to be U.S. Embassy political assessments of the Philippines – the kinds of routine reports that all diplomatic missions file back to their capitals. Some Philippine analysts speculated that the reports could have been leaked by the U.S. government to pressure President Arroyo to institute reforms before the military intervened. The leaked reports included a statement saying that her elevation to president after Estrada’s forced departure from that office was a “questionable precedent” for achieving the presidency.

The Philippines’ antiterror actions are still seen as anemic by many observers. A lack of resources and manpower continue to undermine the ability of both the police and the armed forces to monitor various armed groups operating in Mindanao as well as Luzon, who pass unhindered through the country’s porous maritime borders. Intelligence is frequently based on rumor, hearsay, and unauthenticated sources often with an axe to grind. Local initiative is stifled by an unresponsive central bureaucracy that has effectuated few arrests of significance in recent years. When terrorists are apprehended, they are charged with the illegal possession of firearms or explosives – bothailable offensives. Although the Congress has 17 antiterrorism bills pending in both houses, none is close to passage despite U.S. efforts to convince the Philippine government to provide a legal base for its antiterrorist activities.

In Mindanao U.S. forces provide intelligence, communications support, and training for Philippine soldiers attempting to capture the leader of an Islamist terror-murder gang, the Abu Sayyaf. However, the region continues to attract militants from Indonesia who train in its thick jungles. U.S. P-3 surveillance aircraft from Okinawa and pilotless drones monitor areas where terrorists are believed to train. Although the Pentagon denies any U.S. personnel are involved in combat, villagers and Philippine human rights groups have reported seeing U.S. troops so engaged. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front formally filed a complaint about alleged U.S. military and Philippine forces combat coordination, which would be in violation of the Visiting Forces Agreement as well as the Philippine Constitution.

U.S. military links to Vietnam, condemnation of Cambodian court

The U.S. continues its gradual, low-profile expansion of bilateral military relations with Vietnam as Hanoi signed on to the U.S. International Military Education and Training (IMET) program. However, the new arrangement does not lift the U.S. embargo on defense articles and services. Bilateral military ties between Vietnam and the U.S. began with the exchange of defense attaches and moved to broader military exchanges and U.S. Navy port calls. Hanoi has also sent observers to the *Cobra Gold* exercise in Thailand. The projected IMET program will focus on English language training for Vietnamese officers.

In Cambodia, two recent high-profile court convictions of opposition lawmakers on sedition charges was condemned by the U.S., which stated that the ruling “raises again questions about the competence and independence of Cambodia’s judiciary.” Also condemned by human rights groups, the convictions continue to undermine international confidence in the political independence and legal ability of Cambodian judges and whether the judiciary can fairly and effectively provide a long awaited tribunal for the remaining Khmer Rouge leaders. If and when that tribunal is convened, it will include both Cambodian and international judges.

Implications

Secretary Rice’s decision to bypass the annual ASEAN foreign ministers meeting was a significant diplomatic mistake because the ASEAN states view the gathering as a sign of global powers’ respect for the organization as well as the region’s importance to them. The U.S. snub was particularly ill-timed considering China’s relatively new high profile in Southeast Asia, ranging from its free trade area agreement, through ASEAN Plus Three, and the forthcoming December East Asian Summit in which the PRC will play a prominent role and the U.S. may not attend.

On a more positive note, in the security realm, the U.S. may be more closely involved in multilateral efforts to patrol the Strait of Malacca against pirates and possible terrorist activity; the first PSI South China Sea exercise has taken place; and military relations with Indonesia are gradually improving. Washington also continues military aid and training for Philippine forces in Mindanao working to disrupt regional Islamist groups

and the Abu Sayyaf. Thus, U.S. security assistance for Southeast Asia remains robust. U.S. regional diplomatic configuration needs to be improved, however, through more high level attention to ASEAN and the ARF. Diplomacy counts in Southeast Asia, and the U.S. should be more fully engaged.

Chronology of U.S.-Southeast Asia Relations July-September 2005

June 30, 2005: The nuclear-powered U.S. aircraft carrier *USS Nimitz* arrives in Port Klang, Malaysia, for a visit.

July 7, 2005: Mike Arroyo, husband of the Philippine president, leaves for voluntary exile in the U.S. after allegations of illegal gambling kickbacks.

July 11, 2005: Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in Thailand endorses Thai National Reconciliation Commission to defuse southern tensions and accepts Thai government's assessment that international terrorists are not operating there. She says the brutal Islamic insurgency in southern Thailand that has led to 800 deaths since January 2004 is a domestic matter for Thailand to resolve.

July 11, 2005: Secretary Rice meets with Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and Foreign Minister Kantathi Suphamongkhon before flying to regions of southern Thailand struck by last December's tsunami.

July 12, 2005: Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsieh-loong meets President George Bush at the White House and signs a Strategic Framework Agreement to enhance defense cooperation through policy dialogues, counterterrorism, counter-proliferation, and joint military exercises and training.

July 19, 2005: One of Indonesia's largest Muslim organizations, Muhammadiyah, raises the prospect of cultural cooperation with the U.S., including the reconstruction of Aceh.

July 21, 2005: Malaysia's Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, in a speech to UMNO, the ruling party, reiterates that he will never permit foreign militaries to escort ships through the Malacca Strait.

July 25, 2005: U.S. Embassy officials say they hope political turmoil accompanying the prospect of Philippine President Arroyo's impeachment will not lead to a coup, martial law, or major street demonstrations.

July 25, 2005: U.S. Navy ships arrive in Surabaya to join Indonesia in the ninth Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercise – which last took place in 2002. So far, the 2005 CARAT exercises have included Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia. Following the Indonesian phase, the U.S. task group will continue to the Philippines and Brunei. 200 U.S. service members are in CARAT 2005 Indonesia.

July 25-29, 2005: Deputy Secretary Robert Zoellick attends the ASEAN post-ministerial conference and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Vientiane.

July 28, 2005: At the ASEAN meeting with the U.S. in Vientiane, ASEAN urges Washington to proceed toward negotiating a Southeast Asia-wide free trade agreement.

July 29, 2005: U.S. State Department issues a statement reiterating support for Indonesia's territorial integrity, an implicit response to a U.S. House of Representatives bill that calls for a new referendum on Papua's independence from Indonesia.

July 29, 2005: Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar at the ARF meeting states his country's willingness to cooperate with big powers against piracy in the Malacca Strait as long as Malaysia's sovereignty is respected.

July 29, 2005: Deputy Secretary Zoellick lays out broad array of issues at ARF meeting ranging from counterterrorism and maritime security through avian flu and natural disasters.

Aug. 2, 2005: U.S. and Indonesian military officers hold bilateral defense dialogue in Jakarta.

Aug. 3, 2005: The White House advocates lifting of the military embargo on Indonesia so that full cooperation of the two countries' armed forces can be restored.

Aug. 3, 2005: U.S. Ambassador to Malaysia Christopher Le Fleur states that the U.S. is eager to assist the littoral states in protecting the Strait of Malacca and awaits their requests concerning the type of help they need.

Aug. 9, 2005: The U.S. condemns a Cambodian military court ruling that finds an opposition lawmaker guilty of sedition.

Aug. 15, 2005: Singapore Defense Minister Teo Chee Han praises U.S.-led Proliferation Security Initiative at the beginning of a five-day exercise, *Exercise Deep Sabre 2005* designed to interdict seaborne WMD. The drill involves 10 surface ships, six patrol craft, and 2,000 personnel from 13 countries – the majority from the U.S., Singapore, Australia, Japan, France, and Britain. It is the first PSI exercise to be held in Southeast Asia.

Aug. 23, 2005: Cambodian Premier Hun Sen asks the U.S. for non-lethal military aid following the lifting of a U.S. ban on military assistance. Cambodia has agreed that Americans in Cambodia are exempt from prosecution by the International Criminal Court. The U.S. had halted military aid to Cambodia following a 1997 coup when Hun Sen seized power from Prince Norodom Rannaridh.

Aug. 24, 2005: ASEAN Secretary General On Keng Yang says that President Bush should not be invited to the East Asian Summit (EAS) as an observer. The ASEAN secretary general also states that U.S. interests would not be ignored in EAS discussions.

Sept. 1, 2005: Indonesian House of Representatives voices concern about a resolution approved by the U.S. House of Representatives that questions the status of Papua province and mentions alleged human rights violations there. The Indonesian legislature plans to send a delegation to lobby the U.S. Congress on the issue.

Sept. 1, 2005: The Indonesian defense minister talks of new arrangements for the co-production of short-range missiles with China, while simultaneously urging the U.S. to further ease restrictions on military-to-military ties.

Sept. 5, 2005: Malaysia offers food and medicine to the victims of Hurricane Katrina.

Sept. 6, 2005: Thai government sends condolences to the U.S. on Hurricane Katrina's devastation and offers to send rice and medical teams to assist the victims. According to the Thai foreign minister, the U.S. "gratefully accepted this gracious offer."

Sept. 6, 2005: Singapore announces it is negotiating with Boeing over the purchase of U.S.-made *F-15s* to replace its aging *Skyhawks*. Boeing beat out the French-built *Rafale*.

Sept. 9, 2005: Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad excoriates the U.S. and Britain at a Kuala Lumpur human rights conference, calling the U.S. and UK "terrorists and murderers for killing innocent Iraqis."

Sept. 10, 2005: Four Singapore Air Force *Chinook* helicopters in Texas for training assist the Texas National Guard in a mission to aid victims of Katrina.

Sept. 11, 2005: Former top Philippine law enforcement official and an FBI analyst are arrested in Newark and charged with passing classified FBI information to government officials in Manila.

Sept. 11, 2005: Thailand sends five forensic pathologists to the U.S. to help identify Katrina bodies. The team did similar work after the December 2004 Asian tsunami.

Sept. 12, 2005: Secretary Rice meets with ASEAN foreign ministers during the 60th UN General Assembly in New York.

Sept. 13, 2005: Through the International Red Cross, Malaysia donates \$1 million to Hurricane Katrina victims, according to Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid.

Sept. 19, 2005: In a White House meeting with Thai PM Thaksin, President Bush emphasizes the need for cooperation to track the avian flu virus. They also discuss a pending bilateral free trade agreement. President Bush extended America's appreciation for Thailand's donation of relief supplies for Hurricane Katrina victims.

Sept. 21, 2005: President Bush removes Vietnam from the U.S. list of major drug producing and transit countries. Vietnam's foreign minister welcomes the decision as recognition of Hanoi's special attention to the fight against drug trafficking.