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U.S.-Southeast Asia Relations: Thai Political Turmoil Impacts ASEAN

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Political conflict in Thailand between the ruling, rural-based pro-Thaksin People Power Party (PPP) and an urban elite coalition calling itself the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) – though actually opposing democratic elections – turned violent in November and shut down Bangkok and the capital's airports for several days. The PPP government was forced to postpone the ASEAN summit scheduled for early December because of the violence and rescheduled the meeting for February 2009 to the dismay of other ASEAN leaders. Nevertheless, the new ASEAN Charter, which provides the Association with a legal personality for the first time, was activated at a special meeting of ASEAN foreign ministers in Jakarta on Dec. 15. Southeast Asian leaders welcomed Illinois Sen. Barack Obama's election as the next U.S. president although some commentators noted that the Democratic Party has sometimes followed a trade protectionist policy when the U.S. economy is in difficulty. The Democrats have also taken a tougher position on human rights. In general, though, no significant change is foreseen in U.S. policy for Southeast Asia under President-elect Obama.

Political confrontation roils Thai politics

A long-simmering political conflict between former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's ruling PPP and the PAD coalition of his opponents representing Bangkok's traditional elites (academics, professionals, some military officers, royalists, and corporate managers) turned violent in November and virtually shut down the country's capital and economy. Though Thaksin was ousted in a 2006 military coup, later convicted of fraud, and has fled abroad, the pro-Thaksin PPP won a landslide electoral victory in December 2007. Subsequently, the PPP tried to alter the constitution to void Thaksin's conviction and restore him to political life. The PAD staged numerous protests to bog down the political process, highlight Thaksin's persistent influence from afar, and hopefully precipitate yet another military intervention that would drive Thaksin's supporters out of Bangkok.

The violence peaked in November as both sides exchanged gunfire and used grenades. PPP supporters came to the capital from the countryside to defend the ruling party and the PAD raised the stakes by occupying Bangkok's international and domestic airports, stranding over 300,000 visitors at the height of the tourist season and closing down a major Southeast Asian hub for air cargo. On Dec. 2, the U.S. government (and many others) called on the protestors to allow the airports to reopen and insure against any "similar seizure in the future."

The PAD said it is frustrated with years of vote-buying in rural Thailand as well as Thaksin's corruption benefiting his billionaire business interests. Moreover, PAD supporters lamented the country's democratic voting system that insures the reelection of the ex-prime minister's party however it is reconstituted in the wake of the Constitutional Court decisions invalidating the party's most recent PPP incarnation. In effect, Bangkok's traditional elite has come out against one person-one vote democracy and prefers to restore a partially appointed Parliament that would guarantee the dominance of the urban elite.

Despite the fact that the Democratic Party prevailed and Abhisit Vejjajiva was elected prime minister on Dec. 15, political turmoil could well return in the near term. The Thai economy is taking multiple blows: the global economic downturn, a tanking tourism market as a result of the airport shutdowns, and order cancellations for the electronics industry, car industry components, and flower, fruit, and produce companies all of which rely on air transportation. On Dec. 1, the Standard & Poor's rating agency lowered Thailand's economic outlook because of the political unrest. Some U.S. Congress members warned that Thailand may become a failed state whose central government lacks control over much of its territory. While this assessment is probably too dire, political stalemate at the center, economic stagnation, and the persistent Muslim insurgency in the south, do not auger well for Thailand's immediate future. And, the government's stasis also prevents any resolution to the standoff with Cambodia in a disputed border zone near the landmark 11th-century Preah Vihear temple. On Oct. 15, State Department spokesman Sean McCormack stated that the U.S. "would urge restraint on both sides to refrain from any use of violence."

As ASEAN's incoming Chair, Thailand was to host the December summit that would formalize the new ASEAN Charter. Because of the political confusion, the government postponed the meeting until February 2009 much to the dismay of several members. Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia rubbed salt into these wounds by suggesting that Thailand give up the chairmanship this year due to the country's political violence, implicitly putting Thailand on a par with Burma which was forced to relinquish its chairmanship turn in 2005.

ASEAN Charter ratified

In October, the Philippines and Indonesia were the final two ASEAN members to ratify the Association's first formal Charter, making the Association a legal entity for the time since its 1967 inception. The Charter provides for a joint commitment to human rights and the creation of a 2015 free trade area in addition to socio-cultural and security communities. How these might operate in practice is yet to be determined. The Charter became operative at a Dec. 15 meeting at the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta attended by the Association's foreign ministers.

A prominent Indonesian scholar and advisor on the Charter's creation, Rizal Sukma, is skeptical about the Charter's impact and warned: "Don't expect too much from the charter. The government [Indonesia] must fight to create a credible human rights body." Democracy and human rights provisions are also more nominal than real since the Charter has no provisions to sanction members, such as Burma, for violations where protestors are jailed and democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi has been held under house arrest for most of the past 18 years.

A senior Asia advisor to President-elect Obama, Frank Jannuzi, in late October, said that he would advise the Obama administration to sign ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and participate in the East Asia Summit, the region's most recent security dialogue. Jannuzi also predicted: "An Obama administration would give greater focus to ASEAN because ASEAN is 500 million people, it is such a vital part of the world which is often neglected, and we usually view it through a narrow prism of counterterrorism."

Southeast Asia welcomes Obama's election

Southeast Asian leaders welcomed Obama's election as president, expressing confidence in continued warm relations. Insofar as any concerns were expressed about a president from the Democratic Party, they revolved around prospects for trade protectionism and tougher policies in intellectual property rights. Immediately after the Nov. 4 U.S. election, Eric John, the U.S. ambassador to Thailand assured Thai Commerce Minister Chaiya Sasomsab that there would be no discrimination against Thai trade or labor practices.

On another dimension, Thailand has been involved, primarily under Prime Minister Thaksin's government, in U.S. counterterrorism activities as a location for a covert CIA prison site where "aggressive interrogation techniques" were practiced by U.S. agents. Possibly in exchange for this cooperation, Washington has not pressed the Thai government on its human rights record in the south where it has been battling a protracted Muslim insurgency. Nor has the U.S. become involved in the efforts over the past several months by Bangkok's elite and some elements of the military to overthrow a democratically elected government, the election of which in December 2007 had restored full-scale U.S. economic and military assistance to Thailand. Noteworthy, too, is that two democratically elected leaders, Prime Minister Somchai and Bangkok Gov. Apirak Kosayothin, were invited to a post-election U.S. Embassy gala, while ranking members of the Thai military were not in attendance even though some had angled for an invitation.

An Indonesian commentator and international affairs expert, Dewi Fortuna Anwar, warned "that the Democrats tend to be a bit more intrusive in the domestic affairs of other countries ... especially the less than democratic..." But, Indonesian human rights groups welcomed that prospect, hoping that an Obama administration would put more pressure on Indonesia to resolve its major human rights cases.

In the Philippines, Speaker of the House Prospero Nograles praised the U.S. electoral process for "very orderly, swift, and accurate" accounting and the graciousness with which the defeated candidate conceded. He went on to say "I just hope that we can have this kind of statesmanship during our own elections." As for Singapore, Foreign Minister George Yeo foresees good U.S.-Asian ties under the new president and expects a "stable and constructive" U.S.-China relationship, saying "This is the single most important relationship in the world."

Bali bombers executed, Indonesia remains calm

Of all Southeast Asian states, Indonesia has made the greatest progress toward stable democratic governance since President Suharto left office in 1998. A vibrant civil society and outspoken press as well as human rights organizations investigate and publicize cases of government

corruption and abuse of power, though the country remains one of the world's most corrupt, according to Transparency International. Indonesia is also the home of the region's most notorious terrorist organization, Jemmah Islamiya (JI), which is responsible for the 2002 Bali bombings and those of the Jakarta Marriott and Australian Embassy as well as attacks in the Philippines. Nevertheless, the Indonesian National Police, with assistance from Australia and the U.S., has built an antiterrorism component that has arrested and prosecuted several hundred JI terrorists and other militants, while also adopting a rehabilitation approach to those the country has incarcerated.

On Nov. 9, the three Bali bombers were executed, five years after their capture. Though the U.S. and Australian Embassies received bomb threats, the executions were carried out without incident. Indonesia's two mainstream Muslim movements and a clerics' body, the Indonesian Ulemas Council, all condemned the bombers as terrorists and insisted that they should not be glorified as martyrs. Top JI leaders have been caught and jailed and the organization seems to have split, with a branch devoted to nonviolent proselytization and another smaller group that continues to advocate violence. Nevertheless, dozens of JI-linked *peasantren* (Muslim boarding schools attended primarily by children from poor families) continue to preach fiery jihadist rhetoric.

Two prominent JI militants, Dulmatin – an explosives expert – and Umar Patek, remain at large, apparently hiding in Mindanao. The U.S. has offered a \$10 million reward for the capture of Dulmatin and \$1 million for Patek.

At a Nov. 13 meeting of The Atlantic Council in New York, CIA Director Michael Hayden favorably assessed the decline of terrorism in Indonesia, which he portrayed as “one of the most effective counterterrorism partners.” Hayden noted that JI's “once robust relationship with Al-Qaeda is gone. Its plots are increasingly detected and disrupted. Hundreds of its leaders and operatives have been captured or killed by the Indonesia National Police.”

Nevertheless, Jakarta continues to seek access to Hambali, an alleged JI/Al-Qaeda leader held at Guantanamo Bay. Indonesia has requested access to Hambali several times since his 2003 arrest, saying he has valuable information about JI, but Washington has refused, insisting it plans to try Hambali, though he has not yet been charged with a crime. Now, Indonesia has requested consular access since the Obama administration has pledged to close down Guantanamo.

In his mid-November visit to Washington, Indonesian President Yudhoyono at a U.S.-Indonesia Council luncheon favorably reviewed the two countries' relations citing both President-elect Obama's Indonesian childhood and progress made during the Bush administration. He specifically cited the lifting of the U.S. arms embargo, a \$157 million five-year development grant for public education, U.S. tsunami emergency relief and reconstruction aid, as well as law enforcement cooperation as part of the U.S.-Indonesia Strategic Dialogue.

Mindanao unrest concerns U.S. and Philippine officials.

Philippine military operations against “rogue” Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) units as well as Abu Sayyaf (ASG) fighters continue in the southern Philippines displacing some 300,000

civilians because of the earlier collapse of Manila's peace negotiations with the MILF. (See the October 2008 U.S.-Southeast Asia Chapter in *Comparative Connections* for background.) The situation in the south has become so unstable that some U.S. diplomats privately refer to the region as the "new Afghanistan." U.S. military aid to Philippine armed forces in the region is designed to improve their capabilities against the ASG, and most of America's economic assistance is also funneled to the south. Projected U.S. development aid for 2009 is estimated at \$77 million.

At the late November APEC meeting in Lima, Peru, Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo boasted: "We broke the back of terrorism in southern Philippines because of our partnership." Though at best a premature claim, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice replied that relations between the two states constituted a "very good partnership, and we would like to continue to be your strong partner." Rice went on to ask about the stalled peace talks with the MILF, and Arroyo hinted at the complexities involved in dealing not only with the Moros but other "affected communities in Mindanao," meaning the Christian population. Prospects for a new agreement to which all these stakeholders could agree seem slim.

U.S. forces in Mindanao continue to be involved in development projects with their Philippine counterparts. Medical missions, road building, school repair, and construction are all designed to demonstrate the Philippine government's commitment to economic growth as an alternative to Moro rebel movements that hope to drive the central government from the region. A Philippine human rights leader, Herbert Docena of Focus on the Global South, in late November urged President-elect Obama to withdraw U.S. troops from the Philippines, however, U.S. Ambassador Kristie Kenney noted that Obama has reiterated America's commitment to partnership with the Philippines, part of which is military support for the Philippine armed forces.

U.S. continues sanctions against Burmese junta

Continuing to ratchet up economic sanctions against Burma's military leaders and ethnic criminal gangs in mid-November, Washington announced it had frozen the assets of 26 individuals and 17 firms tied to drug trafficking. Targeted were those linked to the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the most powerful drug trafficking organization in Southeast Asia. Its senior commander, Wei Hseuh Kang, was at the top of the U.S. Treasury Department's list of targeted individuals under the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act. The State Department followed the Treasury announcement by offering a reward of up to \$2 million for tips leading to Wei's capture. Other UWSA members were also named by the Treasury Department, although any capture of these individuals or seizure of their firms' assets seems unlikely as long as they remain outside the United States.

On a somewhat different tack, the Bush administration announced on Nov. 10 that it is nominating well-known Asia specialist and former National Security Council Asia Director Michael Green to a new post created by Congress: policy chief for Burma. According to the legislation, the policy chief is to consult with all other governments with a strong interest in moving Burma's leaders toward a more democratic future to see if a common strategy can be devised. However, with more weighty problems on its plate – particularly the economic crisis –

it seems unlikely that Congress will address Green's nomination before Bush leaves office. Therefore, any new coordinator for Burma policy awaits the new president.

The U.S. armed forces in Southeast Asia: a brief assessment

The U.S. profile in Southeast Asia is dominated by the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM), which performs as great a diplomatic role as it maintains a security presence. The flag officers of each of the services regularly call not only on their military counterparts in the region but also on local political leaders who sometimes reciprocate by visiting PACOM headquarters in Honolulu. In November, PACOM Commander Adm. Timothy Keating approved a new strategy "based on partnership, presence, and military readiness" that may seem to be a rhetorical retreat from earlier versions that stated the strategy was "rooted in partnership and military preeminence." Keating emphasized "the fundamental importance of sustained and persistent cooperation and collaboration in times of relative peace to mitigate situations that could lead to conflict and crisis." In effect, this explanation for the most recent PACOM strategy suggests preventive diplomacy, that is, collaboration with friendly states to insure that differences among them do not escalate to violence. An additional interpretation of Keating's statement is Washington's desire to dispel the complaint that the U.S. has failed to consult with friends and allies over the past eight years and has chosen instead to act unilaterally. Regardless of the veracity of this belief, Keating is emphasizing that PACOM's current strategy will focus on collective action. At a meeting of regional military commanders on Bali, he told the Voice of America that "We in the United States Pacific Command want to emphasize partnership in everything we do." The top U.S. security priority, according to Keating, will be "fighting terrorism" and he did not expect that priority to change under the Obama administration.

Indonesia's National Defense Forces (TNI) Commander Gen. Djoko Santoso echoed Adm. Keating and stated that effective counterterrorism required better collaboration across Asia-Pacific armed forces. Gen. Santoso pointed to the fact that currently countries' counterterrorism policies are frequently incompatible. Therefore, conference participants need to work toward a common set of procedures to deal with terrorist actions. However, what these procedures should be has not yet been revealed.

Meanwhile, U.S. joint training and arms sales in Southeast Asia continue. In early October, for the first time, Washington discussed possible arms sales to Hanoi as the Vietnamese military requested that the U.S. supply spare parts for Hanoi's Vietnam War-era U.S.-made helicopters. In November, Singapore ordered 24 of the latest model *F-15SGs* to be delivered in 2009. These combat aircraft, according to Singapore's Air Force Chief Maj. Gen. Ng Chee Khern, will become "the mainstay of our next generation multi-role fighter aircraft...." U.S. Ambassador to Singapore Patricia Herbold praised the acquisition, noting that it underscores the close relationship between the two countries.

On the other hand, some Southeast Asian armed forces are diversifying their suppliers. In October, Malaysia took delivery of six *Sukhoi SU-30MKMs*, which the Malaysia air force will fly alongside its *F-18s*. The Air Force is reportedly planning to buy the latest *F-18E/F* as the mainstay fighter for its third generation, while the *SU-30s* will be tasked with precision attack missions because of their considerable weapon capacity. Meanwhile Thailand announced it

canceled a project to repair 15 U.S.-purchased *Bell-212* helicopters and will purchase three Russian *MI-17* multi-role helicopters instead. This would be the first time the Thai Army will use Russian helicopters. While the Thai Army has more than 200 of the *Bell 212s*, only half of them are functional because they have been in use for more than 20 years.

U.S. war games with the Philippines ran for two weeks in October – *Talon Vision* and *Philbex* – integrating ground and air training in Luzon. The training exercises were supplemented by medical missions in the same region. And, in early November, Brunei and U.S. naval forces engaged in a simulated boarding exercise against a ship suspected of carrying contraband.

Looking ahead

Like the rest of the world, Southeast Asia awaits the new U.S. administration. While Adm. Keating has said U.S. security priorities in the Asia-Pacific will remain the same with counterterrorism at the top of the agenda, there is an expectation that there will be more collaboration with Asian partners and a greater sensitivity to their needs, including assistance for those activities involved in “human security” – to counter drug and human trafficking, smuggling, and to assist development. These pursuits will require a more integrated approach from U.S. agencies, bringing together PACOM and a reinvigorated State Department and Agency for International Development – the latter two having been starved for funds during the Bush administration. Hopefully, it will no longer be necessary for PACOM to bear not only its major military responsibilities but also more than its share of diplomatic and developmental tasks.

Chronology of U.S.-Southeast Asian Relations October - December 2008

Oct. 1, 2008: Indiana University Law School’s Center for Constitutional Democracy initiates an investigation to determine if Burma’s military junta has committed war crimes against minority ethnic groups.

Oct. 6, 2008: Vietnam and the U.S. conduct their first ever strategic dialogue in Hanoi, addressing political, security, defense, and humanitarian cooperation. The Vietnamese delegation was led by Deputy Foreign Minister Phan Binh Minh, the U.S. by Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs Mark Kimmitt.

Oct. 7, 2008: The Philippines signs the ASEAN Charter.

Oct. 8, 2008: Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in a speech at the State Department urges ASEAN to do more in promoting democracy in Burma.

Oct. 15, 2008: State Department spokesman Sean McCormack tells reporters that the U.S. urges restraint on both Cambodia and Thailand after a gunfight broke out in a disputed zone near a landmark 11th century temple.

Oct. 15, 2008: 4000 Filipino and U.S. soldiers inaugurate the two-week annual joint *Talon Vision* and Amphibious Landing Exercise (*Philbex*) involving integrated air, ground, and naval training along with civic action in selected communities.

Oct. 15, 2008: Thai and Cambodian soldiers exchange rocket and rifle fire for about an hour in a confrontation at their border over the disputed Preah Vihear temple. At least two Cambodian soldiers are killed, and several soldiers from both sides are wounded.

Oct. 18-21, 2008: The *USS Mustin* visits Danang's Tian Sa port, headquarters of Vietnam's Navy Zone 3, which is responsible for patrolling the area of disputed Paracel and Spratly Islands.

Oct. 21, 2008: President George W. Bush invites Indonesian President Yudhoyono to attend a mid-November meeting of the G20 on the global financial crisis in Washington, DC.

Oct. 21, 2008: Indonesia ratifies the ASEAN Charter clearing the way for its formal adoption.

Oct. 27, 2008: The U.S. Customs and Border Protection Service begins enforcing The Tom Lantos Block Burmese Jade Act aimed at keeping Burma's jade and jewelry from third-party countries out of U.S. markets.

Oct. 28-29, 2008. U.S. and Philippine navies engage in the *Philbex-2008* bilateral exercises in Subic Bay, part of which is civic action repair and repainting of schools in Olongapo City.

Nov. 4, 2008: U.S. Ambassador to Singapore Patricia Herbold at the rollout of Singapore's latest combat aircraft, the *F-15SG*, states the acquisition underscores the close relationship between the two countries. The SG is the most advanced in the *F-15* series.

Nov. 5, 2008: U.S. and Brunei naval forces engage in a maritime security exercise with commandos from Brunei boarding a U.S. ship carrying "illicit cargo."

Nov. 9, 2008: U.S. Ambassador to Thailand Eric John assures the Thai commerce minister that good U.S.-Thai relations will continue when President-elect Obama takes office and that there will be no discrimination against Thai trade and labor.

Nov. 12, 2008: President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo claims that the U.S. and the Philippines will remain "steadfast friends and allies" under President Obama.

Nov. 13, 2008: The U.S. Treasury Department freezes the assets of 26 individuals and 17 firms tied to drug trafficking in Burma and prohibits U.S. citizens from dealing with them.

Nov. 13, 2008: CIA Director Michael Hayden says that Indonesia-based Al-Qaeda affiliate, Jemmah Islamiya, has been significantly disrupted by the Indonesian National Police.

Nov. 14, 2008: Indonesian President Yudhoyono arrives in Washington to attend the G20 summit on the global economic crisis.

Nov. 18, 2008: California, Illinois, and Wisconsin sign a pact with Indonesia's Aceh Province that allows Aceh forest carbon credits to be sold to U.S. states to reduce global carbon dioxide.

Nov. 21, 2008: The U.S. Embassy in Manila announces \$25 million in assistance for individuals and families displaced by the fighting in Mindanao between government forces and Moro Islamic Liberation Front rebels. The assistance will be primarily rice from the World Food Program and services from NGO partners.

Nov. 24, 2008: Secretary Rice and President Arroyo exchange compliments on the sidelines of the Peru APEC meeting, emphasizing efforts to suppress terrorists in the southern Philippines.

Nov. 24, 2008: The Sultan of Brunei visits the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) in Honolulu.

Nov. 24, 2008: PACOM Commander Adm. Timothy Keating visits Singapore and underscores the excellent bilateral defense relationship.

Nov. 27, 2008: The U.S. Embassy in Bangkok warns U.S. citizens to stay away from the capital's airports, which thousands of anti-government demonstrators have seized in the extended confrontation with the Thai government.

Dec. 1, 2008: The State Department calls anti-government protestors' seizure of the two Bangkok airports "not an appropriate means of protest" and urges them "to walk away from the airports peacefully."

Dec. 2, 2008: A State Department spokesman, citing a Thai court ruling calling for the Thai prime minister to step down, said the U.S. hopes it will lead to a resolution of the political crisis that has brought political life to a standstill.

Dec. 4, 2008: Lt. Gen. Douglas Fraser, deputy commander of PACOM, visits Philippine Armed Forces Chief of Staff General Alexander Yano. Along with U.S. Ambassador Kenney, they discuss the security situation in Mindanao.

Dec. 10, 2008: First Lady Laura Bush announces the U.S. will add \$5 million to the \$75 million in disaster relief provided to Burma in the aftermath of last May's Cyclone *Nargis*.

Dec. 15, 2008: Abhisit Vejjajiva is elected prime minister of Thailand.

Dec. 15, 2008: ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting in Jakarta announce the activation of the Association's new Charter, which formalizes members' democracy and human rights commitments as well as the principle of noninterference in member's domestic affairs.

Dec. 24, 2008: Burma signs a 30-year contract with four firms from South Korea and India to pipe natural gas to China from fields off Burma's northwest coast.

Dec. 29, 2008: Protesters in Bangkok block access to the Parliament building, forcing a one-day delay in the legislature's opening session under Thailand's new government.