

Comparative Connections

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US-Southeast Asia Relations: Dismay at Thai-Cambodia Skirmishes

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Both the US and ASEAN expressed dismay at border skirmishes between Thailand and Cambodia around the Preah Vihear temple and two other ancient temples about 160 km to the west. Artillery exchanges and small arms fire call into question the two countries' commitment to the ASEAN rule of the peaceful settlement of disputes among its members. Washington has promised to aid Philippine maritime capabilities to patrol both its South China and Sulu Seas' territorial waters as part of a larger US goal of keeping Asian sea lanes open. New ships and radar installations as well as navy and coast guard training are being provided by the US. In Indonesia, the US embassy inaugurated a new public diplomacy program, *@america*, an interactive information technology site designed to demonstrate the breadth of American life to Indonesia's tech-savvy young people. *Wikileaks* releases of US embassy cables published in the Australian press critical of President Yudhoyono caused some tension between Jakarta and Washington. As the current ASEAN chair, Indonesia seemed to follow Secretary of State Clinton's call for an ASEAN role in resolving the South China Sea islands dispute. US relations with Vietnam and Cambodia continue to be strained over human rights concerns. While ASEAN has called for the lifting of economic sanctions on Burma since its recent national election and the release of Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest, Washington seems in no hurry to follow suit, labeling the election as fatally flawed and noting that political prisoners remain in jail. Finally, the US promised high-level participation in ASEAN-led regional organizations, including the ARF, the ADMM+, APEC, and the EAS.

Cambodia/Thailand/ASEAN: Preah Vihear border conflict

From its 1967 inception, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members agreed to a sacrosanct basic principle: they would settle disputes with one another peacefully. Although the principle has been breached on occasion – most recently Indonesian-Malaysian naval skirmishes near the Ambalat Islands – generally the peaceful settlement norm has been honored. Currently, however, it is undergoing a significant test in the confrontation between Cambodia and Thailand over the land border on which the ancient Preah Vihear Hindu temple, as well as two other ancient temples about 160 km to the west, are situated. Rarely have ASEAN members' bilateral conflicts enlisted the intervention of the Association. However, the Thai-Cambodia border conflict has proven to be an exception.

Although the Preah Vihear temple itself was awarded to Cambodia by the World Court back in 1962, the land around the temple site remains contested and, after the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) labeled the structure a World Heritage site in 2008, Thai nationalist sentiments led to military outbursts between Cambodian and Thai armed

forces. Shots and artillery fire have been exchanged six times since 2008 – the first time ASEAN members were involved in a shooting war against each other. Most recently, casualties resulted from fire fights in February and late April, and thousands of refugees have fled the border areas on each side. The Preah Vihear “border war” constitutes a serious challenge to plans for an ASEAN Security Community, which has as one of its foundation stones the ASEAN pledge not to use force to settle differences.

Domestic Thai politics complicate any resolution of the Preah Vihear conflict. Although ultra-nationalist “Yellow Shirts” were initially supportive of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva’s military-backed government, they broke ranks in 2010 because of his alleged failure to defend “Thai territory” in the Preah Vihear region. Elements in the army and the business community back the ultra-nationalists because they fear that without a strong nationalist turnout, elections scheduled for this summer will lead to the return of deposed and exiled former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. The “Yellow Shirts” have held demonstrations outside government offices in Bangkok demanding that the government tear up border agreements with Cambodia and press Phnom Penh to leave the area adjacent to the temple claimed by Thailand.

Cross-border shelling in early February led Cambodia to call for an urgent meeting of the UN Security Council. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen asked for UN troops to be sent to the area and said he would also welcome ASEAN’s good offices to resolve the dispute. The US, China, the UN, and ASEAN have all expressed concern over the border conflict and urged the two neighbors to exercise restraint. The UN Security Council – meeting in February – asked ASEAN to mediate. As the Association’s current chair, Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa has shuttled between Bangkok and Phnom Penh. On Feb. 23, US State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley welcomed Indonesia’s mediation efforts as well as an ASEAN foreign ministers’ appeal for both sides to resume negotiations.

However, internal disagreements in Thailand continue to obstruct any settlement. Now, there is a split between the Foreign Ministry and the military with the former promoting dialogue and the latter insisting that a negotiated solution with Cambodia is impossible. In late February, the military claimed that Cambodia was Thailand’s most worrisome external threat. Both governments have escorted groups of military attachés, including Americans, to see the damage around Preah Vihear. However, the Thai Army has refused to allow Indonesian observers to inspect the border area even though the two sides had initially agreed at a special meeting of ASEAN foreign ministers in Jakarta on Feb. 22 to an Indonesian presence on both sides of the border. The Thai Army has also balked at attending General Border Committee meetings with Cambodia if they are held in Indonesia, insisting that no third party needs to be involved in the General Border Committee meetings, which should take place only in Thailand and Cambodia. On March 23, a Cambodian Defense Ministry spokesman, referring to the Thai demand, stated: “This shows they do not respect the decisions of the United Nations and the ASEAN foreign ministers.”

By late April, ASEAN’s efforts to mediate the Preah Vihear border conflict had yielded mixed results. Elements of the two armies still confront each other in close proximity. Large numbers of refugees have been created on both sides, and the stalemate is enmeshed in the intricacies of Thai internal politics and bureaucratic disagreements, rendering external mediation

fruitless. Still, there has been UN recognition that ASEAN is the appropriate forum in which to negotiate a resolution. Moreover, the Association continues to provide its good offices. As ASEAN's current chair, Indonesia sees this effort as a first test for the nascent ASEAN Security Community. Perhaps these efforts demonstrate that ASEAN is now ready to become involved in defusing military disputes among its members and stay the course despite what appears to be a minimal prospect for success. An intense exchange of artillery and small-arms fire that resulted in at least 18 deaths in late April appears to even further marginalize efforts at reconciliation.

US boosts Philippine defense capacity

Long regarded as having among the weakest maritime defense capabilities in Southeast Asia, Philippine nationalists have criticized the US for not contributing more to Manila's long-delayed armed forces modernization. In early January, Philippine Sen. Gregorio "Gringo" Honasan complained: "We're practically getting crumbs, or \$50 million annually, from the US government for their stay in the country compared to the massive military aid it gives to other countries with lesser or equal military importance to them." Continuing, the senator insisted that the Philippines should assert itself when the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) is renewed. Manila should treat the VFA as a "lease contract" under which the US must pay "fair money" for the use of Philippine resources.

Whether Washington listened to Honasan is unknown, but in late January at the inaugural Philippine-US strategic dialogue, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell promised that the Obama administration was committed to boosting Philippine maritime capacities to patrol its waters as part of a larger goal of keeping Asian sea lanes open. Indirectly referencing Chinese insistence that maritime disputes such as the Spratly Islands be settled bilaterally by the claimants alone, Campbell said they should also be addressed in larger settings "in order to develop confidence on these issues and the larger Asia-Pacific region." More specifically at a Feb. 2 Washington press conference, Campbell promised the "provision of equipment through excess defense sales, training of elements of their coast guard and navy, and deeper consultations at a strategic, political, and military level."

On March 7, the Philippine announced the purchase of a large *Hamilton*-class patrol craft from the US, refurbished to boost the country's border patrol capacity and defend its territorial claims in the South China Sea. The patrol craft – a high endurance cutter – will be the most modern ship in the Philippine inventory and could be used to protect the country's oil exploration vessels, one of which was recently harassed by PRC fishery patrol boats. Scheduled for delivery in August, the *Hamilton*-class boat represents 1960s US naval technology. Nevertheless, it adds a more modern touch to the Philippine Navy, most of whose ships were commissioned in World War II. Additionally, the US has finished building 11 of 17 planned *Coast Watch South* radar stations in the southern Philippines. This network will stretch from Palawan in the west to keep watch on the South China Sea to eastern Mindanao to monitor the Sulu Sea. Washington has appropriated \$60 million for the stations drawn from anti-terrorist funds. The money has also bought a first batch of 10 Rigid Hull Inflatable Boats that will replace old patrol watercraft. The *Coast Watch South* area is a haven for smuggling and piracy as well as an escape route for terrorists who operate between Indonesia and the southern Philippines. Philippine Navy Commander Orwen Cortez was quoted in the April 11 issue of *Defense News*, saying that the

Philippines needs to develop a cooperative arrangement with Indonesian and Malaysian maritime agencies to deal more effectively with criminal activity in these waters.

Terrorism, religious persecution, public diplomacy, and *Wikileaks* pepper Indonesia-US relations

In early February, Indonesian authorities charged one of the country's senior radical clerics, Abu Bakar Bashir, with terrorism – a capital offense. Bashir is the spiritual leader of Jemah Islamiyah (JI), the al-Qaeda-linked radical organization that perpetrated the 2002 Bali bombings and subsequent Indonesian attacks using explosives and suicide bombers. This is Bashir's third arrest for terrorism. Now, he is accused of coordinating and financing a militant group that had set up a training camp in the northern Sumatra province of Aceh. Although Bashir was acquitted of the earlier charges, Sidney Jones of the highly regarded International Crisis Group believes the authorities have a strong enough case this time for a conviction. As in past arrests, Bashir proclaims his innocence and argues that his arrest is part of a US-Israel plot.

Attacks against Christians and members of the Ahmadiyah minority sect have increased recently, and Islamist groups are also pressing the government to pass a strong anti-pornography law as well as ban the Ahmadiyah sect from propagating its faith. In a *Voice of America* interview on March 2, Sidney Jones pointed out that while the Indonesian government has cracked down on terrorist groups, it has been slow to respond to violence related to religious intolerance because the government perceives popular support for limiting other religious groups: "That is why we have the minister of religion making repeated statements about the need to ban Ahmadiyah and the fact that it is their own fault for getting attacked because they don't leave Islam." The persecution of Ahmadiyah escalated after several local governments issued decrees banning its practices, and Indonesia's two largest Muslim organizations – generally considered to be moderate – Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) urged the government to take strong action against Ahmadiyah. The US embassy weighed in on March 4 on the side of Indonesian human rights groups saying that restrictions on religious freedom were damaging Indonesia's international reputation as a democracy with a tradition of tolerance and a commitment to protect the freedom of all its citizens.

Meanwhile, also in early March, the Indonesian National Police (Polri) met officials from the FBI, including Director Robert Mueller. The two sides signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on counterterrorism, anti-crime, and counter-corruption cooperation. The FBI also promised to assist Polri in capacity building for all the categories covered in the MOU. The US agency has been working closely with Polri in combination with the Australian Federal Police since the 2002 Bali bombings.

In April, with the help of the CIA, Pakistan captured the notorious Indonesian terrorist, Umar Patek, for whom the US had offered a \$1 million reward in 2005. A master bomb maker and considered a prime suspect in the 2002 Bali bombings, Patek remains in Pakistan although Indonesian authorities have gone there to verify his identity and arrange his transfer back to Indonesia. The Obama administration has not requested custody although US officials believe he has significant information on Southeast Asian militants linked to Al Qaeda. Some Republican lawmakers have criticized the US Justice Department for not seeking Patek's transfer

to Guantanamo, but the Obama administration may not want to add prisoners to that notorious facility. US officials expect the CIA will be given intelligence gleaned from Indonesia's interrogation of Patek and may even be allowed to sit in, but the procedure will be entirely in Jakarta's hands.

US public diplomacy ramped up a notch in Jakarta with the opening of its first full-fledged cultural center since Sept. 11, 2001. Named *@america*, it is a high-tech interactive operation located in a shopping mall and designed to appeal to Indonesian youth. The center is run by a private Indonesian company led by a US citizen. This is the first US cultural center in Indonesia since the mid-1990s. US cultural centers worldwide were shut down in the wake of 9/11 because of security concerns and replaced by "American Corners" in foreign university libraries. US Ambassador Scot Marciel stated that *@america* will help "young Indonesians ... realize that the US is an open culturally diverse country that can be a good partner and friend for Indonesia ..." While *@america* may be the first in a series of new public diplomacy efforts, China has opened 320 Confucian Institutes throughout the world, with dozens of them in Southeast Asia.

In addition to the new cultural center, Washington hopes to double the number of Indonesian students studying in the US, as university recruiters are being assisted by the US embassy in Jakarta. Ambassador Marciel in an April 6 interview with VOA said that 90 percent of Indonesian applicants accepted by US universities received visas and that the US hopes to significantly increase the numbers. However, fewer than 7,000 students were in the US last year.

Wikileaks cables continue to roil US relations with a number of countries, including Indonesia. Australian newspapers on March 11 published reports based on leaked US embassy cables discussing links and favors between President Yudhoyono and a prominent Indonesian businessman. The cables stated that Yudhoyono personally intervened to influence prosecutors and judges to protect corrupt political figures and that he used Indonesian intelligence to spy on political rivals. Indonesian State Secretary Sudi Silalaki denied the reports and insisted that the US apologize for the leaked cables. Ambassador Marciel apologized for the leaked documents, but the embassy added it could neither confirm nor deny their veracity. The question remains as to whether Australian media will publish any more of the 3,059 US cables from Jakarta that *Wikileaks* has provided to the Australian press.

Indonesia and the Philippines weigh in on the South China Sea

As ASEAN's current chairman, President Yudhoyono stated in February that he wanted to make progress in the South China Sea dispute over the ownership of the Spratly Islands. Though not a claimant, Indonesia has an interest in the issue since China's famous "nine dotted line" map could lead it to claim waters around Indonesia's Natuna islands – a prime natural gas location. Yudhoyono's insistence that ASEAN has a role to play can also be seen as a follow-on to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's urging at the July 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting that ASEAN become the venue for Spratly negotiations. In a March 8 joint press conference with President Aquino, Yudhoyono expressed hope that rather than a zone of conflict, the South China Sea can become "a zone of potential economic cooperation ... [where] through ASEAN, we'll continue to work together to ensure security in the supply of energy in the South China Sea."

China's February patrol boat harassment of a Philippine oil exploration vessel in Manila's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) may well have driven Southeast Asian Spratly claimants closer to the US as a security guarantor in these crucial waters. Indeed, China has agreed to meet with ASEAN to discuss a formal code of conduct, even hosting a conclave on Jan. 24-25 in Kunming. Secretary Clinton in a March 14 phone call to Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert del Rosario reiterated Washington's offer to mediate negotiations for a South China Sea code of conduct. The Chinese ambassador to the Philippines stated, however, that US mediation would "magnify" the issue and make it more difficult to settle. On April 9, at a special ASEAN-Japan ministerial meeting in Jakarta, ASEAN announced that it has agreed not to discuss the South China Sea at ASEAN's annual gathering and, as long as the South China Sea is quiet, according to Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty, ASEAN will not raise it at the East Asia Summit either.

Vietnam's heavy-handed human rights actions strain US relations

Washington's concern about human rights in Vietnam has strained relations with Hanoi. On Jan. 6, the US strongly protested to Vietnam after a US diplomat, who monitors human rights, was manhandled and briefly arrested after trying to visit a dissident Catholic priest. US Ambassador Michael Michalak told reporters, "This is a very serious incident," and a violation of the Geneva Convention on diplomatic relations requiring all governments to ensure the safety and security of diplomats. Human Rights Watch stated that the assault on Christian Marchant, a political officer at the embassy since 2007 and a noted human rights advocate, fits a pattern of police brutality in Vietnam. A Foreign Ministry spokeswoman responded by saying Vietnam would investigate the incident that occurred in Hue but that "diplomats have the responsibility to respect the laws of the host country...." The incident occurred one week before the meeting of Vietnam's ruling Communist Party Congress, a once-in-five-years event that determines top leadership posts.

While relations between the US and Vietnam have flourished in recent years with US companies making large investments and military officials meeting regularly with their Vietnamese counterparts – spurred in part by the desire to balance China's growing military profile in the region – human rights remain a topic where Hanoi bristles at Washington's criticism. In December, the US House of Representatives called for including Vietnam in a US blacklist of countries that have engaged in "severe violations of religious freedom." Vietnam had been on that list from 2004 to 2006, but was removed when Washington stated it was satisfied that Hanoi was loosening religious restrictions. At the end of March, Human Rights Watch reported that the Vietnam government was closing small, informal Protestant churches attended by the minority Montagnards in the central highlands of the country. Culturally and ethnically distinct from the majority lowland Vietnamese, the Montagnards worship in house churches that have been declared illegal by the Vietnamese government. Hanoi is concerned about links between Montagnard religious activity and US evangelical groups. Many Montagnards fought alongside US and South Vietnamese troops in the Vietnam War, and some continued their resistance after the Communist victory in 1975.

Cambodia is also on the US human rights radar. In January, the State Department said it had "serious concerns" about a draft law aimed at restricting the activities of charity workers affiliated with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). A number of organizations including

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have protested that the law “should be abandoned because it will undermine rather than promote civil society.” NGOs have played a significant role in rebuilding Cambodia. They are frequently funded by and implement developed countries’ aid programs.

ASEAN calls for lifting sanctions on Burma; Washington withholds approval

Last November’s National Assembly election in Burma – the first in over 20 years – led to the installation of a new legislature at the end of January. Some opposition political parties were permitted to run, though not Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD), which won the country’s last free election. The November election swept the ruling military new Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) into office with over 80 percent of the seats. Moreover, Burma’s new charter reserves 25 percent of the National Assembly for the military. In late December, the state-run newspaper *New Light of Burma* told the opposition to stop calling for reconciliation and instead support the government. Additionally, the country’s president has the right to call a “national emergency” at any time and hand executive and judicial power to the commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

An ASEAN meeting on Jan. 17 described the election as “conducive and transparent” and went on to urge “the immediate or early removal or easing of sanctions that have been applied to Myanmar by some countries.” Reflecting the vested economic interests several ASEAN countries have in Burma and a longstanding belief that working with the military regime is a better strategic option than isolating it and providing China with uncontested access, ASEAN’s welcome for the new government contrasts with Washington’s continued skepticism and President Obama’s 2009 statement that the US will lift sanctions only if the military government makes satisfactory progress on democracy and human rights. The recent election has not met those conditions. Even Indonesia’s Foreign Minister Marty has stated that “There needs to be reconciliation and dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi and various parties in Myanmar so they can be part of the change in Myanmar.”

Prior to the November election, the US was reconsidering its earlier policy of economic isolation. Nevertheless, on Feb. 3, Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell said ending the economic sanctions would be premature, although the Obama administration would keep trying to reach some level of engagement with the regime. Currently, the sanctions include freezing assets of firms linked to the rulers and banning US investment. On Feb. 8, Aung San Suu Kyi’s NLD party endorsed the continuation of Western sanctions, saying they hurt the regime, not ordinary citizens. Despite the sanctions – which many say have prevented neither foreign investment nor trade with Burma – China, India, Thailand, South Korea, and other Asian countries have economically engaged the resource-rich country. The latest sign that Washington will continue to probe prospects for better relations with Burma was the April 15 announcement that Derek Michell, currently assistant secretary of defense for Asia and the Pacific, would be appointed the special envoy to Burma. The announcement followed a decision by the European Union to relax some of its sanctions against members of Burma’s new government.

US collaboration and participation in Asian institutions grows

The Obama administration's commitment to high-level US participation in ASEAN-based international political/security organizations was reiterated by Assistant Secretary Campbell in a Feb. 2 press conference where he noted that the US president would attend the East Asia Summit and host a US-ASEAN heads of state meeting as well as an APEC meeting in Hawaii. In late December, Indonesia's Defense Minister Purnomo Yusgiantoro also noted the importance of participation by external powers such as the US in the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+), from which Indonesia and the US will lead counterterrorism and de-radicalization training programs in Bali in 2011. The US is also participating in the ARF disaster relief exercise in Indonesia where, on March 15, Ambassador Marciel assured ASEAN countries that the US is committed to supporting ARF activities.

The US is also raising its military profile in Southeast Asia. In mid-January the US Navy's newest *Virginia*-class nuclear attack submarine visited Singapore, where its commander told the local press that the visit underscores the US commitment to augment its presence in this part of the world. Sixty percent of the US submarine fleet is now deployed in the Pacific. The commander, Capt. Stephen Mack, also noted that the *USS Hawaii* is designed to operate in shallow waters, including the South China Sea. Also indicative of the substantial US military presence in Southeast Asia is the annual *Cobra Gold* military exercise in Thailand. Conducted in February, this year's exercise included about 17,000 armed forces from the US, Thailand, Japan, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, and South Korea. US forces totaled some 7,300. The drills encompassed peacekeeping, humanitarian aid, and disaster relief. This is the first year that Malaysia and the ROK joined the exercise. *Cobra Gold* constitutes the largest multinational exercise in the world. In addition to the participating armed forces, Brunei, China, India, Laos, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Russia, and South Africa sent observers. As in the recent past, this year's exercise emphasized nontraditional security, although there was also a field exercise involving a multinational amphibious assault conducted by Thai, US, and Korean forces. This was *Cobra Gold*'s 30th year.

Looking ahead

After a number of years in which US embassies and consulates have been underfunded and their activities reduced compared to the Cold War era, it is heartening to see a revival of public diplomacy in Southeast Asia. The inauguration of *@america* in Jakarta designed to appeal to tech-savvy young Indonesians has been an early success, providing a positive image of the US to the upcoming generation. Combined with more opportunities for higher education in the US, one hopes that these new relationships will be duplicated throughout the region. It is true that the US economy is still recovering and that many government agencies' budgets are under pressure. However, the remarkably small appropriation for the State Department and even smaller amount for public diplomacy should not only be spared but increased if the US hopes to present more effectively its qualities to the world.

Chronology of US - Southeast Asian Relations

January - April 2011

Jan. 4, 2011: Indonesian Defense Minister Purnomo Yusgriantoro states that Indonesia and the US will lead an ASEAN Plus 8 counterterrorism training program in Bali later this year.

Jan. 6, 2011: The US lodges a protest with Vietnam for a police assault on a US diplomat who monitors human rights after he tried to visit a dissident priest.

Jan. 15, 2011: The Philippine government applauds a US court decision awarding compensation to victims of abuse during the Ferdinand Marcos regime. Each of 7,500 victims will be awarded \$1,000, a symbolic acknowledgment of their suffering. The money will be distributed from frozen Marcos-era assets in the US.

Jan. 16, 2011: At an ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting in Lombok, Indonesia, the ministers urge the US and Europe to lift sanctions against Burma now that the country has held elections and released Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest.

Jan. 18, 2011: The *USS Hawaii*, a new Virginia-class nuclear attack submarine, visits Singapore.

Jan. 26, 2011: US-based Human Rights Watch releases a report condemning the Burmese military junta's November 2010 election and the new government's human rights violations.

Jan. 27-28, 2011: The US and the Philippines hold their first-ever Strategic Dialogue in Manila bringing together officials from their respective foreign affairs and defense departments. Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell promises US aid to the Philippine Navy to help increase its patrol capabilities in surrounding waters.

Jan. 31, 2011: Burma's Parliament convenes for the first time in two decades after flawed elections permit the military to dominate the legislature through reserved seats and a military-backed political party.

Feb. 7-18, 2011: The annual *Cobra Gold* joint multilateral military exercise involving 17,000 personnel is held in Thailand with seven countries – US, Thailand, Japan, the ROK, Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia – participating.

Feb. 9, 2011: US State Department spokesman Philip Crowley expresses concern over Indonesian mob violence against the minority Ahmadiyah community as well as church bombings in central Java.

Feb. 11, 2011: The *USS Essex* Amphibious Ready Group begins an exercise with the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces, emphasizing humanitarian activities.

Feb. 14, 2011: Thailand's Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya and Cambodia's Foreign Minister Hor Namhong present arguments to the UNSC in New York regarding the disputed border area

near the Preah Vihear temple. They also hold separate talks mediated by Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa.

Feb. 16, 2011: The US calls on Burma to see that no harm comes to opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi after her party issues a statement urging Western countries to maintain their sanctions against the new regime.

Feb. 27-March 2, 2011: US and Cambodian navies hold joint exercises to build humanitarian intervention capabilities.

March 4, 2011: The US embassy in Jakarta issues a statement that government regulations restricting religious freedom of the Admadiyah sect would damage Indonesia's reputation as a tolerant country protecting religious freedom.

March 4, 2011: US Senate confirms David Corden as the first full-time US ambassador to ASEAN, succeeding Scot Marciel who is now US ambassador to Indonesia.

March 7, 2011: Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard visits President Obama at the White House where they discuss climate change, trade, Afghanistan, and Libya. President Obama praised Australia as one of the strongest allies of the US.

March 7-9, 2011: The US 7th Fleet command ship, *USS Blue Ridge*, visits Port Klang, Malaysia. US Ambassador to Malaysia Paul Jones states that about 40 US Pacific Fleet ships will visit Malaysia this year.

March 9, 2011: Prime Minister Gillard addresses a joint session of the US Congress.

March 11-12, 2011: Senior Officers Meeting of APEC is held in Washington at which Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reiterates US support for continuing APEC efforts to open trade and investment opportunities.

March 14, 2011: Secretary Clinton in a phone call to Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert del Rosario expresses concern over a March 2 maritime incident where Chinese naval boats harassed a Philippine oil exploration vessel near the Spratly Island Reed Banks.

March 15, 2011: The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) launches a disaster relief exercise in Manado, Indonesia. US Ambassador to Indonesia Scot Marciel expresses US support for these "major multilateral cooperative activities" by the ARF.

March 24, 2011: Vietnam deports three Vietnamese-Americans who had participated in farmers' protests against government graft and illegal land grabs in Ho Chi Minh City. The US Consulate helped facilitate the protesters' release.

March 29, 2011: Indonesian President Susilio Bambang Yudhoyono offers to send Indonesian troops to help implement a UN-mandated ceasefire in Libya if the UNSC desires. He criticizes the UNSC-sanctioned no-fly zone because it leads to civilian casualties.

March 31, 2011: Singapore takes command of the Combined Task Force operating in the Gulf of Aden and western Indian Ocean in counter-piracy operations. The command teams operate from the US destroyer *USS Mason*.

April 5-15, 2011: The US and the Philippines conduct the 27th annual *Balikatan* (shoulder-to-shoulder) bilateral military exercises in the Philippines. The exercises are held partly off Palawan near the Spratly Islands. Some 500 soldiers from the Korea-based Second US Infantry Division participate, illustrating the Pentagon's "strategic flexibility" doctrine.

April 9, 2011: Indonesia convenes a special ASEAN-Japan Ministerial Meeting co-chaired by Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa and Japanese Foreign Minister Matsumoto Takeaki at the ASEAN Secretariat to discuss ASEAN-Japan cooperation on the management of disasters in the region.

April 11, 2011: Foreign ministers and diplomats from ASEAN member countries hold a special informal ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting on the East Asian Summit (EAS) in Bangkok.

April 14, 2011: Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs confirms that it filed a formal protest in the UN over China's so-called "nine-dash line" territorial claim over the South China Sea.

April 15, 2011: President Obama nominates Defense Department official Derek Mitchell to be special envoy to Burma subject to confirmation by the Senate.