

# COMPARATIVE

---

## C O N N E C T I O N S

A TRIANNUAL E-JOURNAL  
ON EAST ASIAN BILATERAL RELATIONS

**US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS**

## MIXED MESSAGES

SHELDON SIMON, ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

In its early months, the Trump administration has devoted little attention to Southeast Asia and US relations with the region have generally followed a trajectory set by the Obama administration. The US continued naval operations in the South China Sea and joint exercises with most ASEAN states with US air and naval forces rotating through bases in northern Australia and the Philippines and deploying from Singapore. There have been mixed signals between Manila and Washington. With the ASEAN states and China moving toward completion of a Code of Conduct (COC) on rules of engagement in the South China Sea, it is hoped that the new document would be “legally binding,” but little specific about its provisions has been published. Following Washington’s abrogation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), Hanoi has sought to alleviate its disappointment, saying that it understands the US need to create more jobs and that it will try to accommodate Washington in future trade negotiations.

---

This article is extracted from [Comparative Connections: A Triannual E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations](#), Vol. 19, No. 1, May 2017. Preferred citation: Sheldon Simon, “US-Southeast Asia Relations: Mixed Messages,” *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 41-50.

In its early months, the Trump administration has devoted little attention to Southeast Asia and US relations with the region have generally followed a trajectory set by the Obama administration. The US continued naval operations in the South China Sea and joint exercises with most ASEAN states with US air and naval forces rotating through bases in northern Australia and the Philippines and deploying from Singapore. There have been mixed signals between Manila and Washington. With the ASEAN states and China moving toward completion of a Code of Conduct (COC) on rules of engagement in the South China Sea, it is hoped that the new document would be “legally binding,” but little specific about its provisions has been published. Following Washington’s abrogation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), Hanoi has sought to alleviate its disappointment, saying that it understands the US need to create more jobs and that it will try to accommodate Washington in future trade negotiations.

During the Obama administration’s two terms (2009–2016), the president’s “rebalance” to Asia featured Southeast Asia as its centerpiece. President Obama made 11 separate trips to the Asia-Pacific, visiting a total of 14 countries, nine of which were members of ASEAN. His secretaries of state and defense also made multiple journeys to the region. Among many successes during these years were US accession to ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, participation in the East Asia Summit for the first time in 2011, the establishment of the first diplomatic mission to ASEAN, and realization of the historic transition to democracy in Myanmar. The United States also increased the deployment of ships and aircraft to the region, particularly in Singapore, the Philippines, and Australia. In Obama’s final year, the US began distributing resources under the Maritime Security Initiative to assist Southeast Asian countries with their maritime domain awareness by transferring patrol vessels and surveillance aircraft as well as creating a system whereby these countries could share information on the region’s maritime security picture.

While it’s still early for the Trump administration, there have been virtually no policy statements dealing with Southeast Asia, nor at this time (April) has the State Department chosen a deputy secretary – the number two position – or a permanent assistant secretary

for East Asian and Pacific affairs. Direction from Washington for a region that was so important during the preceding eight years seems to be absent.

## **US position in Southeast Asia**

Southeast Asian policymakers wonder whether a US government that seems to be quite transactional in its diplomacy might make deals at their expense. With the Trump administration abandoning the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), so important to Vietnam and Malaysia, as Washington’s “America first” prism concentrates on terrorism and China, there will be missed opportunities in Southeast Asia for economic policies and political alignments. From ASEAN’s viewpoint, a litmus test about Washington’s commitment to the region will be how it treats the Association’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary and the annual East Asia Summit – both scheduled for November. As regional specialist Carlyle Thayer pointed out in a March 19 *Background Briefing*, the Trump administration seemed to have abandoned its predecessor’s focus on Southeast Asia when Acting Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs Susan Thornton stated that the term rebalance “was a word that was used to describe Asia policy in the last administration,” implying that the current government “will have its own formulation.” Little has been said about Thailand and the Philippines, both treaty allies, though President Trump’s lack of interest in promoting human rights and democracy has probably reassured the military junta in Bangkok and Duterte’s government in Manila. ASEAN core members may well promote closer security relations with other important Asian partners, particularly Japan, India, Australia, and South Korea.

The Trump administration will probably continue freedom of navigation operations (FONOP) patrols around the Spratly and Paracel islands in the South China Sea and conduct joint military exercises with most ASEAN states, involving US Navy littoral combat ships deployed from Singapore. Additionally, the US rotates air, naval, and amphibious forces through Australia and has access to several Philippine bases through the Philippine-US Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA).

Japan, a close US ally, has supported the US security posture in the region by boosting

security capabilities and maritime domain awareness particularly for Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Japan has provided patrol boats and aircraft for the three, engages in periodic ship visits and small-scale exercises, and holds regular defense talks. The most recent example (April) is the lease of five Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) TC-90 turboprop surveillance planes to the Philippines. Though not long-range monitoring aircraft like the P-3C Orion, the TC-90s give the Philippines its first significant ability to monitor its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the South China Sea.

### **Mixed messages from the Philippines**

Soon after President Trump's election, President Duterte congratulated him in a press conference and expressed hope for a new relationship. Duterte appointed Trump's Filipino business partner, Jose EB Antonio, as special envoy to Washington. In early February, Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana stated that the two countries would continue bilateral military exercises, but they would now emphasize humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, counter-terrorism, and counter-narcotics more than military assault scenarios. US assistance for Philippine maritime domain awareness continued as well. In testimony before the US Senate on Jan. 11, Secretary of State-designate Rex Tillerson stated that he would not be concerned about Philippine human rights abuses, such as summary executions, until these actions were corroborated by US intelligence. Human Rights Watch condemned Tillerson's "reluctance to acknowledge human rights abuses by ... the Philippines...." Tillerson went on to say: "America and the people of the Philippines have a longstanding friendship. And I think it is important that we keep that in perspective in engaging,... they have been any ally, and we need to ensure that they stay an ally."

In late January at a roundtable discussion with Philippine media, US Ambassador Sung Kim reassured participants that the United States and the Philippines remain "strong allies" in both economics and security. During the meeting, Kim related that President Duterte told him that he "acknowledged the importance of our alliance and military partnership." The ambassador also said at the roundtable, "We have tremendous respect for the Philippines as a sovereign state. We're not going to ask the

Philippines to be a proxy for us on anything – South China Sea or some other issue." On economic relations, the ambassador assured Philippine businesses that there would be no "dramatic" changes in the operations of US companies in the country, though they should be aware that the long-term factors for commercial change are not Washington policies but rather technology advances to which all successful business must adjust.

At a late February meeting of the Management Association of the Philippines, Ambassador Kim was asked about removing visa requirements for Filipinos heading for the United States. Kim replied that US law has strict requirements for countries seeking visa waiver status, and unfortunately the Philippines does not currently meet those requirements. Nevertheless, the embassy works very hard to make the visa application process "as painless and efficient as possible" and that thousands of nonimmigrant visas were successfully processed in 2016.

By mid-March, President Duterte displayed a more positive view of the US when he stated he had established an amiable relationship with President Trump. The Philippine president declared that he had a "very engaging, animated" phone conversation with the US president in which Trump expressed support for Duterte's anti-drugs campaign, though subsequently Washington clarified its view that extrajudicial killings would not solve the problem.

In April, President Duterte, concerned about the rumor that China was about to build facilities on Scarborough Shoal, ordered the Philippine military to deploy to nine islands and reefs in the Spratly islands already occupied by the Philippines to repair the infrastructure on these features so that they could provide a permanent presence. Anxiety about the prospect of additional Chinese activities in the area led to a statement by Philippine Supreme Court Associate Justice Antonio Carpio, who had been instrumental in the 2014 Supreme Court ruling that validated the Philippine-US EDCA, published in the March 20 *Manila Sun Star*, urging Manila to declare Scarborough Shoal a part of Philippine territory under the 1951 Philippine-US Mutual Defense Treaty. This would make Scarborough comparable to Japan's Senkaku Islands, which the US has reaffirmed are included under the US-Japan Defense Treaty, the assumption being that this

presumably would deter any Chinese military action in the area. To this author's knowledge, neither the US government nor President Duterte has commented on Carpio's statement.

Despite these positive components of recent US-Philippine relations, negative issues persist. At the end of January, President Duterte told the US to stop implementing EDCA because he had received information that the US was building permanent arms depots in violation of the agreement. The Philippine armed forces responded that the president's information was incorrect and on Jan. 30, Ambassador Kim also denied the allegations, noting that US construction on the bases was "not related to weapons," only barracks, runways, and storage facilities were being built. Noteworthy, though, is a statement to *Reuters* on Feb. 8 by Defense Secretary Lorenzana that absent a US guarantee of support, the Philippines would consider scrapping the EDCA to avoid becoming involved if a US war (with China) broke out in the South China Sea.

In late March, the Philippine president registered a new complaint against the US, this time with respect to US Navy FON patrols. Stating that they risked a "miscalculation" and could spark conflict, he went on to charge the Obama administration with pressing the Philippines to take a stand against China without any guarantee of US support. Referring to Washington's inaction when China first began building up its presence on South China Sea features several years ago, he said, "Why in hell, America, the only one who can act there, why did it want my navy to go there? It will be a massacre for my soldiers. You could have cut the problem in the bud had you taken decisive action."

Meanwhile, President Duterte's anti-drugs campaign continues to outrage human-rights organizations and a number of Western governments. In early March, Human Rights Watch issued a condemnation of extrajudicial killings involving the Philippine National Police. A Human Rights Watch director quoted in the March 3 *New York Times* stated, "We think there is a very strong case to be made in front of the ICC [International Criminal Court] that crimes against humanity have been committed." The US State Department also issued its annual human rights report on March 3 which, according to Secretary Tillerson, partly determines "the allocation of foreign aid and

security sector assistance." The Philippines could be at risk of losing millions of dollars in police and military assistance if Manila's human rights record does not improve. In late April, the lawyer of self-confessed hitman Edgar Matobato filed a complaint against Duterte and 11 other government officials before the ICC, accusing Duterte of being a "mass murderer" and asked the international court to prosecute him over his involvement in the so-called Davao Death Squad.

### **Counter-piracy cooperation in the Sulu Sea**

The Sulu-Celebes Seas, encompassing the waters around Indonesia, Malaysia's eastern Sabah state, and the southern Philippines has become the latest area of piracy and kidnap-for-ransom incidents. They are linked mainly to the Abu Sayyaf militant group, reportedly affiliated with ISIS and operating out of the southern Philippines. For several years, the Abu Sayyaf has targeted tug boats, small fishing boats, pleasure craft, and seaside resorts in Sabah. Beginning in 2016, however, they began going after larger prey, including merchant ships in the Sulu Sea, reasoning that bigger ships presumably can pay bigger ransoms. Between March 2016 and January 2017, 48 crew members have been abducted in 16 attacks in the Sulu-Celebes Seas. Abu Sayyaf claimed responsibility for most of these attacks, according to reports by the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combatting Piracy and Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP).

ReCAAP urged the littoral states – Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines – to consider "hot pursuit" arrangements across maritime boundaries to tackle piracy, maritime terrorism, human trafficking, and drug smuggling. In November 2016, the Philippines agreed to allow Malaysia and Indonesia to inaugurate "hot pursuits" in Manila's territorial waters, though no joint patrols were contemplated. Finally, in March 2017, the three agreed to begin patrolling a maritime transit corridor through which ships would be monitored and protected. A longstanding political conflict between the Philippines and Malaysia over which had sovereignty in Sabah was set aside for purposes of these patrols. Additionally, in late February, Manila stated that it planned to ask the US to hold naval exercises in these southern waters, though whether this proposal has actually been made to Washington is unknown.

## ASEAN and the South China Sea

ASEAN is troubled that the Trump administration has said very little about the Association; the 10 Southeast Asian countries constitute more than 600 million people with the potential to be an important player in economic and strategic affairs. ASEAN has created a number of multilateral mechanisms for the Asia-Pacific. From a US security perspective, the most important are the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Plus (ADMM+). Also concerned with regional collaboration are the East Asia Summit (EAS) and Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). In conjunction with ASEAN, the US can influence the agendas of these gatherings and reinforce the already established US role as a guardian of rules-based institutions and regional order.

Taken together, the ASEAN 10 constitute one of the world's most promising economic areas with a single market and combined gross domestic product of \$2.5 trillion – the third largest in Asia behind China and Japan. Therefore, President Trump's scrapping of the TPP, one of his first foreign policy actions, was particularly discouraging to the four ASEAN countries – Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam – that viewed the TPP as both an economic and strategic hedge against China. The TPP would have accelerated trade and investment liberalization in the region. Now only the PRC is able to dominate the Asian economic agenda with its Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank and its “One Belt, One Road” economic initiative.

Although the South China Sea has been relatively tranquil in recent months, China has been ramping up its naval drills and the *USS Carl Vinson* carrier battle group has been conducting patrols and exercises in the region. In a visit to Japan in early February, Secretary of Defense James Mattis enunciated a continuation of the FON policy followed by the Obama administration, stating that, “Freedom of navigation is absolute, and whether it be commercial shipping or our US navy, we will practice in international waters and transit international waters as appropriate.” Subsequently, as reported March 3 in Singapore's *Channel News Asia*, Rear Adm. James Kilby, the *Carl Vinson* strike group commander, explained that the patrol was not a show of power but rather an example of the US

commitment to the Asia-Pacific. Noteworthy also is that the *Carl Vinson* strike group is from the San Diego-based US Third Fleet, thus extending the purview of the Third Fleet to the western Pacific in cooperation with the US Seventh Fleet from Japan.

During Secretary Mattis' Tokyo visit, Japan's defense minister said that though Japan would enhance Southeast Asian security through training and the provision of security assistance, the Maritime Self Defense Force (MSDF) would not deploy to the South China Sea on joint patrols with the US Navy, though the MSDF could engage in “bilateral and multilateral exercises with regional navies...” Japan also plans to send one of its two biggest post-World War II warships, the helicopter destroyer *Izumo*, on a three-month South China Sea tour beginning in May.

## Creation of a South China Sea Code of Conduct

As early as 1996, ASEAN members called for a legally binding Code of Conduct (COC) for the South China Sea that would foster stability and understanding among the claimants – China, Taiwan, Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei. By 2002, China and ASEAN signed a non-binding Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) under which the signatories pledged to refrain from aggressive actions and from building new structures in the contested region. The DOC was intended as a prelude to a legally binding final agreement. There was also a general understanding that the DOC should be implemented before a COC was negotiated. From 2011 to 2016, meetings on the implementation of the DOC occurred with few results. Over the past three years, China rapidly expanded its strategic footprint across disputed land features in the Paracel and Spratly islands, deploying its military, coast guard, and paramilitary patrols across contested waters.

Nevertheless, over the past year meetings between ASEAN and China have been regularly convened to create a draft COC document. These efforts have been endorsed by the US as recently as late February when Deputy Chief of Mission for the US Embassy in Manila Michael Kiescheski stated that the COC is an “important” issue and that the US “shares” ASEAN's support for the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. The proposed COC is aimed at

preventing territorial conflicts from degenerating into armed confrontations by enacting rules that would discourage aggression.

Despite these positive signs, few specifics have been released about the proposed components of the COC. It is important to understand that the Code does not address territorial disputes. The ASEAN states are asking, however, that these disputes be settled on the basis of international law. Currently leading the ASEAN discussions with China, acting Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Enrique Manalo in mid-March asked that the code segregate disputed from non-disputed areas in the South China Sea and establish a dispute settlement mechanism. According to a March 28 [paper](#) by Hong Thao Nguyen of the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam and published by the National Bureau of Asia Research Maritime Awareness project, negotiations should include measures to manage escalation of disputes and to promote restraint on the new occupation of claimed features as well as land reclamation. Other issues that should be addressed include practices at sea: how to avoid maritime collisions, regulations over high-powered water cannons, sinking of fishing boats, treatment of detained fishermen, cable cutting, unilateral movement of oil rigs into another state's EEZ, and unilateral fishing bans. (All these activities have occurred over the past several years, mostly attributed to China). To address these concerns, the COC should provide for dispute settlement protocols, hotlines, and consultations. This is a very ambitious agenda; the prospect that ASEAN and China will produce a draft anywhere near this elaborate seems unlikely.

### **Vietnam: hoping for continuity**

Vietnam suffered a double setback as the Trump administration took office. First, the country had counted on the realization of the TPP as major boost for Hanoi's economic ties and enhanced strategic links to the US. Second, Vietnam finds itself ranked sixth of 16 countries targeted by the White House National Trade Council for persistent trade surpluses with the US. As CSIS's Murray Hiebert pointed out in his essay in the April 6 issue of *Southeast Asia from Scott Circle*, Hanoi is working to meet the Trump administration's criteria for a good international partner. In discussions with the US Commerce Department, Vietnamese officials

said they recognized the importance to the White House of creating more US jobs; these officials also announced that Hanoi would be willing to discuss the merits of a bilateral trade agreement.

Other ways of dealing with the bilateral trade surplus would be Hanoi's purchase of US military equipment such as coastal radar, surveillance aircraft, and patrol boats. Both Hanoi and Washington have discussed the need for enhanced maritime domain awareness among the Southeast Asian littorals. According to Hiebert, Vietnamese officials are also asking the US to resume FON patrols, including areas within 12 nm of the artificial islands China has recently built. One silver lining from Hanoi's viewpoint is that unlike the Obama administration, the Trump White House has not made human rights in Vietnam a priority.

### **Cambodia: human rights and decades-old debt roil relations**

Cambodia-US relations have been troubled ever since the Hun Sen regime came to power in Phnom Penh as an adjunct to the Vietnamese communist victory in 1975. Originally a Khmer Rouge cadre and now the longest serving political leader in Southeast Asia, Hun Sen has been suspicious of the US for several reasons: the use of the poisonous Agent Orange in eastern Cambodia during the Second Indochina War (1965-1975), the massive bombing of the eastern Cambodian portion of the Ho Chi Minh trail, and political pressure on Hun Sen's regime to improve the country's human rights profile. Although the relationship between Washington and Phnom Penh has "normalized" over the past 20 years and diplomatic relations have been established, comity has been strained.

Recently, the troubled relationship has taken a downward turn with the sudden mid-January cancellation of the annual *Angkor Sentinel* joint military exercise scheduled for an eighth iteration this Spring. Although modest in scale, the exercise has now been cancelled for the next two years. Speculation attributes the cancellation to Hun Sen's displeasure with US complaints about Cambodia's democracy and human rights policies following the regime's crackdown on the political opposition led by Sam Rainsy as a prelude to national elections scheduled for 2018. *The Diplomat* pointed out in a Jan. 18 article by Prashant Parmasaran that China may have also pressured the Cambodian

regime to reduce cooperation as a way to stymie US military plans for Southeast Asia that include repositioning equipment and integrating *Angkor Sentinel* into other US military exercises. In recent years, China has become Cambodia's most important military partner, providing both training and joint exercises. By contrast, military ties with the US have been relatively small and susceptible to US human rights concerns.

On Feb. 20, the US Embassy in Phnom Penh issued a statement expressing concern over a newly amended law on political parties that prepares the way for dissolving three parties whose leaders have criminal convictions (read: Sam Rainsy). Hun Sen responded two days later suggesting the US concerns were hypocritical: "When you dropped bombs on our country, did you ever think about human rights? The law passed by National Assembly is not killing Cambodian people as you did to Cambodian people." At the end of the month, The Cambodian Cabinet spokesperson cited President Trump's criticism of US media to justify censorship of Cambodian news outlets: "Freedom of expression is subject to the law and must respect the state's power." Hun Sen specifically cited Trump barring certain journalists from White House press briefings when the Cambodian leader declared that, "President Trump sees them as causing anarchy." The public affairs officer at the US Embassy responded by saying: "The United States has long supported freedom of the press and considers it to be fundamental to any democracy."

Finally, an Indochina War era debt continues to haunt Cambodian-US relations. During that war even as Cambodia was being bombed, Washington loaned the Lon Nol government hundreds of millions of dollars for refugee relief. Now, the US wants to be repaid with interest. The debt has grown to more than a \$500 million; Phnom Penh has refused to repay it, saying that the US owes Cambodia a moral debt for the devastation it caused and should forgive the debt. Washington insists it is legally prohibited from cancelling the debt, though it has offered to reschedule it on favorable terms for Cambodia. The US further avers that Cambodia can afford to gradually repay the sum since the country graduated to lower-middle income status last year with a GDP of about \$19 billion. By comparison China wrote off \$89 million in Cambodian debt last year.

## Thailand and Myanmar

Under the Obama administration Thai-US relations experienced a negative spiral. Once a significant US partner with "major non-NATO status," relations became a victim of the 2014 military coup and the military junta's democracy and human rights violations, followed by a reorientation of Thai foreign policy toward Beijing. Thai analysts expressed disappointment at the Obama administration's lack of understanding of the country's deteriorating security and noted that Washington had reached out to Cuba, Iran, and other autocracies at the same time it was publicly berating Thailand. The one bright spot in Thai-US relations has been the annual multinational *Cobra Gold* exercise. In 2017, the February maneuvers involved some 30 countries either participating or observing. *Cobra Gold* consisted of three primary components: a command post table top exercise, a field training exercise to enhance interoperability, and civic assistance projects in Thai villages. Approximately 3,600 US military personnel participated (hundreds more than last year), and the head of the US Pacific Command, Adm. Harry Harris attended, the highest level US official since the military coup. In remarks on Feb. 14 at the opening ceremony, Harris urged Thailand to restore democracy because the US needs "a strong and stable ally in Southeast Asia." The admiral's presence also signaled that the Trump administration views "our alliance as a big deal" and that "we're in it for the long haul." Nevertheless, Thai military and economic ties with China are burgeoning with growing Chinese trade and investment as well as military purchases and joint exercises, while US law prohibits many activities as long as the Thai military remains in power. At the present time, it may be 2018 before an election is scheduled.

Myanmar views on the Trump administration are mixed. Buddhist nationalists admire the US president's emphasis on nationalism and religion as well as what they interpret as his anti-Muslim bias. The Myanmar military also appreciates Trump's nationalist emphasis. In contrast, the business community and democracy activists are skeptical of Trump's populism and his isolationist pronouncements, fueling fears that US aid and development assistance will be drastically curtailed. Nonetheless, the Aung San Suu Kyi government's recent reforms and tilt toward the

West have helped the United States maintain a power balance with China.

### **An Assessment**

President Trump's foreign policy rhetoric has emphasized US unilateralism, populist-inflected nationalism, and a transactional approach to international relations, meaning that negotiations must always yield benefits for the US. Examples of this are seen in the March 31 Commerce Department declaration that the US will investigate the bilateral trade imbalances between the United States and 16 countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam. The report, due within 90 days, is to focus on alleged trade abuses and nonreciprocal practices. The investigation presumably will not take into account the importance of political relations between these states and Washington or how they fit into longstanding US efforts to strengthen relations with ASEAN and ASEAN-led organizations such as the ARF, ADMM+, and the EAS.

The purpose of a visit to the region by Vice President Mike Pence in late April seemed to be to present a more positive picture of US intentions. In Jakarta, the vice president praised Indonesia's commitment to democracy and religious tolerance while promising increased defense support for both maritime and counterterrorism activities. Conspicuously, Pence did not visit the Philippines or Thailand – US treaty allies -- nor Vietnam or Malaysia – parties disputing China in the South China Sea. At bottom, Pence's Asian tour reaffirms Washington's fundamental continuity of military power in the region. However, the Trump administration's economic accusations seem to undercut its security pledges.



# CHRONOLOGY OF US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

## JANUARY – APRIL 2017

**Jan. 11, 2017:** In his confirmation hearing as secretary of State before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Rex Tillerson states he would not act on human rights abuses in the Philippines before receiving corroboration.

**Jan. 12-13, 2017:** Secretary of State John Kerry makes a final visit to Vietnam, celebrating the progress in bilateral relations under the Obama administration. He expresses confidence that the Trump administration would continue the same peaceful principles on Asian security.

**Jan. 16, 2017:** Cambodia cancels all military exercises with the US for the next two years. The announcement comes five days after Secretary of State-designate Tillerson stated at a Senate confirmation hearing that Washington was prepared to prevent China's access to disputed South China Sea islands.

**Jan. 24, 2017:** Responding to a question, President Trump's press secretary states that the US will prevent China from taking over additional territories in the South China Sea. A Chinese spokesperson responds that such a move would be considered "an act of war."

**Jan. 26, 2017:** Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana announces that the Pentagon will start constructing facilities on the five Philippine bases identified under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA).

**Jan. 29, 2017:** *Rappler* reports that President Rodrigo Duterte has ordered the US to stop implementation of the US EDCA because Washington is building arms depots in the Philippines. Philippine armed forces spokesperson denies the US was doing so.

**Feb. 3, 2017:** Demonstrations protesting the US travel ban against selected Muslim majority countries occur outside US embassies in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi says she has "deep regrets about the policy."

**Feb. 3, 2017:** United Nations report condemns Myanmar armed forces for atrocities against Rohingya Muslims, involving gang rape, the slaughter of hundreds of men, women, and children, and the forced removal of over 90,000 from their homes in Rakhine State.

**Feb. 7, 2017:** Philippine Defense Secretary Lorenzana says President Duterte will allow the continuation of the EDCA so long as the US does not stockpile ammunition in the country.

**Feb. 14, 2017:** Commander of US Pacific Command Adm. Harry Harris opens annual *Cobra Gold* exercise in Thailand saying that the country should restore democracy as a "strong and stable ally" in Southeast Asia.

**Feb. 14-24, 2017:** The 36<sup>th</sup> iteration of the annual Thai-US *Cobra Gold* exercise is held in Thailand involving 30 countries and 3,000 US forces from all branches of the US armed forces.

**Feb. 18, 2017:** US Navy aircraft carrier strike group begins patrols in the South China Sea, led by the *USS Carl Vinson*.

**Feb. 23, 2017:** In a letter to Vietnam's President Tran Dai Quang, President Trump praises growing ties between Washington and Hanoi, emphasizing maritime security.

**March 2, 2017:** In a [report](#) on extrajudicial killings of alleged drug traffickers in the Philippines, Human Rights Watch states the government appears to be responsible and that a case could be made for crimes against humanity before the International Criminal Court.

**March 3, 2017:** In its annual human rights [report](#), the US State Department criticizes extra-judicial killings in the Philippines as Washington's chief human rights concern.

**March 4, 2017:** Philippine Defense Secretary Lorenzana, Finance Secretary Carlos Dominguez, and Justice Secretary Vitaliano Aguirre accompany US Ambassador to the Philippines Sung Kim on a visit to the *USS Carl Vinson* in the South China Sea.

**March 8, 2017:** In a regional press briefing, outgoing Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel assures Southeast Asian reporters that the Trump administration would continue to "engage the region."

**March 8, 2017:** Philippine Commission on Appointments rejects the appointment of Perfecto Yasay as secretary of foreign affairs based on the fact that he holds dual citizenship in the US. President Duterte appoints Undersecretary Enrique Manalo acting secretary.

**March 20-21, 2017:** Thailand, Singapore, and US air forces hold the annual *Cope Tiger* air exercise, involving 1,000 personnel from Thailand and Singapore and 200 from the US, along with 76 aircraft.

**March 21, 2017:** Malaysian Foreign Minister Seni Anifah Aman meets Secretary of State Tillerson in Washington during international meeting on the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Malaysia is this year's coordinator of the ASEAN-US dialogue.

**March 23, 2017:** Philippine government says *New York Times* article depicting President Duterte's political career as a cycle of violence is a "hack job" that ignores positive contributions.

**March 23, 2017:** President Duterte blames the US under President Obama for China's building on features in the South China Sea while Washington did nothing to stop the actions.

**March 27, 2017:** President Duterte criticizes the US while meeting Ambassador Sung Kim for Washington's reticence in confronting China when the PRC began to militarize South China Sea islands some years ago. Still, the two reaffirmed the bilateral relationship under President Trump.

**March 31, 2017:** President Trump signs executive order directing Commerce Department to investigate trade imbalances with 16 countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam.

**April 2, 2017:** Vietnamese media report that President Trump sent a letter to President Tran Dai Quang promoting more cooperation on trade as well as on other regional and international issues.

**April 6, 2017:** With the help of the FBI, Philippine law enforcement arrest a foreign couple allegedly linked to ISIS and involved in terrorist activities in Kuwait.

**April 9, 2017:** *USS Carl Vinson* strike group cut short its Singapore stay to conduct exercises with Australia in the India Ocean; it subsequently proceeds to the Korean Peninsula.

**April 21, 2017:** Vice President Mike Pence visits Indonesia as part of an Asia tour and praises the country's democratic practices and tolerance of multiple traditions.

**April 26-29, 2017:** The 30<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit and related meetings are held in Manila.

**April 29-30, 2017:** President Trump places a phone call to Philippine President Duterte, Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha and Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, inviting all of them to visit the White House.