

U.S.- Southeast Asia Relations: Solid in Support of the U.S. ... So Far

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For this quarter and far into the future, the benchmark for U.S. relations with countries in Southeast Asia – as elsewhere – will be how they respond to the new level of global terrorism initiated in New York and Washington on Sept. 11, and to Washington's call for a worldwide coalition to combat terrorism. Nearly all Southeast Asian governments quickly expressed horror and sympathy. Practical responses were mixed, ranging from unconditional promises of support for military action to some reluctance to become involved, at least for public consumption. U.S. relations with Indonesia warmed substantially with the inauguration of President Megawati Sukarnoputri and her highly successful visit to Washington barely a week after the attacks. Megawati's condemnation of Islamic violence, as spokesperson for the world's largest Islamic country, was particularly welcome. A worrisome backlash surfaced in Indonesia, however, from mainstream Islamic groups as well as extremists.

On other fronts, ASEAN's round of ministerial-level meetings in July produced many words but few concrete results. They did offer an opportunity for U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell to make clear that the Bush administration was committed to the region. The sharpest criticism of ASEAN's current state came from within, with some leaders calling for efforts to move toward faster integration. In July, Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo announced a shift toward expanded relations, including security relations, with the United States.

Response to Sept. 11 Terrorism

Nearly all Southeast Asian governments promptly condemned the Sept. 11 hijackings and terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon, and expressed deep sympathy for the American people and government. As it became clear that the attacks represented an intricate conspiracy, carefully planned over several years by a network of radical Islamic terrorists working in many countries, Southeast Asians realized the events of Sept. 11 signaled serious new risks for their own security.

Offers of support ranged from the concrete – use of military facilities and dispatch of personnel, in the case of the Philippines – to more conditional expressions, depending on what would be asked and what form the U.S. military response would take. Several regional governments already face armed Islamic opposition within their own borders,

feeding on perceived grievances going back decades or longer, challenging social values, the political order, and in some cases national identity and state integrity. Siding overtly with Washington carried the risk of aggravating these groups. Evidence surfaced that Sept. 11 plotters were physically present in the Philippines and Malaysia as they developed their plans.

Beyond domestic security concerns, Southeast Asian governments also quickly recognized that the economic effects of the attacks would reduce their own chances of recovering from the slow or negative growth rates they were already experiencing.

Much attention was on Indonesia, the world's largest Islamic country, and its new president, Megawati Sukarnoputri. She announced almost immediately that she would carry through on plans to visit the United States the week following the attacks (see below), a visit with great symbolic importance under the circumstances. In New York, she condemned the attacks as "the worst atrocity ever inflicted in the history of civilization." In her joint press statement with U.S. President George W. Bush on Sept. 19, Megawati expressed solidarity and pledged to strengthen cooperation in combating international terrorism.

In Jakarta, however, Megawati's own vice president, Hamzah Haz, blurred her message, by expressing hope that the attacks would "cleanse America of its sins." Islamic groups voiced opposition to Megawati's stand, threatening to bring her down if she supported U.S. attacks against Afghanistan. The Council of Ulemas, representing the mainstream leadership of Indonesian Islam, on Sept. 25 stated that any attack on Afghanistan would be an attack on Islam and urged Muslims everywhere to mobilize against it. Extremists in Jakarta and other cities "swept" hotels for Americans and threatened to attack American citizens, the U.S. embassy, and "wipe out all U.S. facilities" in Indonesia. Indonesian police stepped up security, but were not acting against the groups threatening violence. On Sept. 26, Washington authorized non-essential U.S. mission personnel and family members to leave Indonesia and warned against private travel. This step, while unavoidable, will heighten concern on the part of all expatriate workers living in Indonesia and further weaken foreign investor confidence, already near rock bottom.

Of all Southeast Asian leaders, Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo offered by far the strongest backing for the United States. Immediately after the Sept. 11 attacks she promised "all-out support" and was the first to respond positively after President Bush's Sept. 20 address to Congress. On Sept. 26, Arroyo said her government would allow the United States to use Philippine airfields and facilities for the transit and staging of military forces in responding to the attacks and would be prepared to deploy Philippine support and medical personnel, and even combat forces. The following day she announced that her representatives had begun talks with Indonesia and Malaysia on forming a common front against terrorism and hoped for agreement on proposals in time for the ASEAN summit meeting later this year.

Arroyo's stance was courageous, not least because of the 1.3 million Philippine overseas workers in the Middle East. The presence of armed Islamic groups in the southern Philippines raised the possibility of retaliation at home and further complicated Macapagal-Arroyo's choices. Moderates in Mindanao condemned the Sept. 11 attacks, but the small, extraordinarily violent Abu Sayyaf group is widely believed to have had extensive contacts with Osama bin Laden operatives for years. After Sept. 11, reports surfaced in Manila that bin Laden had been directly involved in Abu Sayyaf's creation. Comments by Macapagal-Arroyo's national security advisor following her speech suggested that the Philippines might want U.S. help in fighting the Abu Sayyaf at home.

Singapore leaders also pledged support. Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong told a memorial service in Singapore Sept. 23 that Singapore "stands with America and the rest of the civilized world in the fight against terrorism" despite regional and domestic sensitivities.

Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad of Malaysia, a sharp critic of the United States who has taken a hard line against Islamic fundamentalists at home, took the unusual step of visiting the U.S. Embassy in Kuala Lumpur to sign the condolence book. He called for an international response to the crime of terrorism, but warned that innocents must not be struck and the Palestinian problem should be resolved at the same time. Fundamentalist reactions in Malaysia reflected a dislike of Western freedoms as well as anger over U.S. Middle East policies, and some Malaysians urged the government not to endorse any U.S. military action. Opposition Pan Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) leader Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat reportedly called the attacks "punishment by God for sinful activities."

Thailand's King Phumiphon Adunyadet sent an immediate message of condolence. Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra promised support, but publicly avoided siding with Washington on a military strike and evaded questions about U.S. use of Thai military facilities to facilitate a response. A number of Thai, including leaders of the Islamic community, urged that Thailand remain neutral, although the head of the Central Islam Committee endorsed international action against the terrorists.

U.S.-Indonesia Relations

Strained relations with Indonesia, the key country in Southeast Asia for recovery of regional unity and resumption of economic growth, have hampered Washington's efforts to influence developments since the East Timor crisis of 1999. The long-running crisis of the presidency of Abdurrahman Wahid ("Gus Dur") came to a head in July as Parliament, reacting to desperate presidential moves to stay in office, met earlier than scheduled and voted to replace him with Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri. Megawati's prompt moves to re-establish confidence at home and abroad won quick support in Washington. In particular, her appointments to key economic posts, including highly respected figures drawn from the "Berkeley Mafia" that led the country to rapid growth in the 1980s and '90s, including former ambassador in Washington Dorodjatun Kuntjoro-Jakti, won much respect. Washington and other capitals were also impressed with her early moves to reinstate Indonesia's financial standing and win investor confidence.

Leahy Amendment prohibitions on most forms of U.S. military engagement with Indonesia until the Indonesian military (TNI) brings human rights abusers to account have limited U.S. ability to influence that institution, arguably the most powerful in the country. Calls increased during the quarter for greater flexibility in working with the TNI. A Council on Foreign Relations report concluded that “the U.S. must cease hectoring Jakarta” and re-engage with the military. A key member of Sen. Leahy’s staff told the Singapore *Straits Times* in early July that Leahy would not view all forms of contact as a bad thing, and several officials, including Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, suggested that some military engagement could resume soon.

It was thus not surprising that President Megawati’s highly successful Sept. 19-21 visit to Washington resulted in U.S. agreement to somewhat increased military contact, as well as extensive economic support. President Bush promised to work with Congress to obtain at least \$130 million in bilateral assistance in FY2002, as well as additional aid to deal with internal disruption and conflict in the Moluccas and Aceh, and increased training for Indonesia’s police forces. A U.S. pledge to seek up to \$400 million in loans and guarantees from trade and development agencies, and \$100 million in additional import benefits, brought the total aid package announced during the visit to more than \$650 million. On the military side, Megawati acknowledged that Indonesia must resolve past human rights violations, and the United States agreed to a significant expansion of military interaction, including a new security dialogue, an end to the embargo on the sale of non-lethal military items, and – Congress willing – U.S. funding to educate civilians on defense matters.

The United States, ASEAN, and the ARF

ASEAN’s annual July high season of ministerial-level meetings, hosted for the first time by Vietnam, took place against a backdrop of dismal economic figures and the political crisis in Indonesia. The 10 foreign ministers or representatives met July 23-24 to consider an agenda under the hopeful rubric “ASEAN: Stable, United, Integrated, and Outward Looking.” Discussions were largely dominated by trade and economic issues, including slow progress toward an ASEAN Free Trade Area, the development gap between the original six and the newer members, and competition for foreign investment. China now receives 80 percent of new foreign direct investment in Asia, against 20 percent for ASEAN – an exact reversal from the ratio before the crisis that began in 1997.

The meeting resulted in a 60-article, 4,800-word joint communiqué commending the work of many committees and noting that ASEAN had adopted documents on preventive diplomacy, experts and eminent persons, and an enhanced role for the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Chair. Thailand sought to convince its partners to move toward regional integration, but had to backtrack. Regional press comment described the meetings of the 10 foreign ministers as “a torrent of words” devoid of new initiatives. The harshest criticism came from ASEAN’s own secretary general, Rodolfo Severino, who said the region is “in disarray and rudderless.” In August the prime ministers of Singapore and Thailand agreed on the need to reinvigorate ASEAN to avoid its marginalization.

The 23 members of the ARF, including among others the United States, China, Japan, Canada, the Republic of Korea, Australia, and India, met July 25. Secretary of State Colin Powell said the meetings had been “very, very useful,” and restated the Bush administration’s commitment to ASEAN and the region, which critics had said had been unclear since January. Concrete ARF achievements were hard to identify, however. An ASEAN “Code of Conduct” with China on reducing the chance of conflict over conflicting claims in the South China Sea remained stymied. The hoped-for participation of North Korea’s foreign minister in the ARF failed to materialize.

Some American critics of ASEAN and the ARF renewed calls after the July meetings for Washington to find alternative structures for Asia-Pacific engagement, in light of ASEAN’s ineffective track record. A U.S.-led effort to organize the region would be resisted as forcing states to align with either Washington or Beijing, however, and would almost certainly not succeed. The glacial pace of ASEAN integration stems from the region’s own complex dynamics rather than from weak architecture. It still serves to dampen conflict among members and provide a vehicle for communicating on region-wide problems. And it can’t be ruled out that a serious external security challenge – perhaps global terrorism – might jolt it into greater cohesiveness.

U.S.-Philippine Relations

Well before her positive statements after Sept. 11, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo had pushed for closer relations with the United States, including security relations. In a major foreign policy speech July 12 she identified the military alliance with the U.S. as a “strategic asset for the Philippines,” and said she would like to see a “blossoming” of the overall relationship responsive to the realities of globalization. Arroyo specifically endorsed the U.S. initiative to expand its major bilateral military exercises in the region into a multilateral regional exercise. Defense Secretary Angelo Reyes said at the same time that Manila was considering turning Subic Bay into a “naval base for hire,” making it available to the U.S. Navy as well as forces from other countries. He made clear it would not be a formal military base, which he said would violate the Philippine constitution.

U.S. Commander in Chief, Pacific Adm. Dennis Blair, in Manila for a meeting of the U.S.-Philippine Mutual Defense Board, said the U.S. was looking for flexible arrangements that would enable its forces in the Pacific to operate together quickly. He noted that the U.S. was not looking to re-establish its former bases. The public dialogue nonetheless roused opponents of U.S. bases to criticize the proposed steps and exhume old grievances. Sen. Blas Ople, a key figure two years ago in ratifying the bilateral Visiting Forces Agreement under which U.S. military personnel enter the country, quickly specified that while combined exercises were acceptable, unilateral training for U.S. forces in the Philippines would not be. At the same time, critics (and their allies in the U.S.) maintained pressure on the Philippine government to insist that the U.S. pay for cleanup of toxic wastes and unexploded ordnance allegedly left at the former bases at Subic Bay and Clark Airfield.

Looking Ahead

Regional governments and Washington will need to find ways to cooperate in fighting global terrorism that have broad domestic support within states that have Islamic majorities, as well as those with minority communities. Most Southeast Asian Muslims have traditionally pursued a moderate form of Islam, largely compatible with the ethnic complexity of the region's countries and with the goal of modernization. They have been seen as largely immune to the extremism and violence seen in the Middle East and South Asia. Could Southeast Asia's tolerant brand of Islam give way to militant fundamentalism following Sept. 11? It is being tested by travel by numbers of young Southeast Asians for study in militant Islamic institutions, growing contacts with *mujahedin* from Afghanistan's wars, and recruitment for violent *jihad*. Southeast Asia's worsening recession will aggravate the problem.

For the region's governments, the task will be to lead in ways that reinforce moderate Islamic majorities and forestall threats or attacks on foreigners, including Americans. For the United States, it will be essential to communicate strategy and goals effectively, to publics as well as to governments. Flexibility will be needed, to make it possible for governments to cooperate with and support the U.S.-led campaign against terrorism without jeopardizing their own stability and economic recovery.

Chronology of U.S.-Southeast Asia Relations

July - September 2001

July 2, 2001: Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo announces at the 54th anniversary celebration of the Philippine Air Force that the United States would provide the PAF one C-130 aircraft and five HU1H helicopters.

July 5, 2001: The U.S. and Vietnam agree to hold a joint conference on the effect on humans of the defoliant Agent Orange and to conduct a pilot study on screening soil and sediments for dioxin, the carcinogenic substance in Agent Orange.

July 10, 2001: A spokesman for the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in Mindanao, in the southern Philippines, states that American hostage Guillermo Sobero was reported to have been sighted alive.

July 10, 2001: U.S. Defense Department notifies Congress that Singapore has requested the sale of 12 Apache attack helicopters and associated equipment, spare parts, and training, a deal valued at \$617 million.

July 12, 2001: Defense Secretary Angelo Reyes tells an interviewer that he and USCINCPAC Adm. Dennis Blair had agreed on “intelligence sharing” against the Abu Sayyaf.

July 12, 2001: Philippine presidential spokesman says that reports indicate a Lebanese terrorist named Ahmad Yasser Ismail is en route to Manila to carry out attacks, including against the U.S. and Israeli embassies.

July 12, 2001: Hanoi VNA reports that the Communist Party of Vietnam, in a gesture more quaint than significant, will send a delegation to the 27th National Congress of the Communist Party of the United States in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

July 12, 2001: President Macapagal-Arroyo states the U.S. military alliance is a “strategic asset for the Philippines.”

July 13, 2001: Thailand and the U.S. agree on the sale of advanced medium-range air-to-air missiles (Amraam) to Thailand for use on its F-16 jet fighters; Thailand will be the first country in Southeast Asia to acquire this system.

July 16, 2001: Secretary of State Colin Powell and Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar meet in Washington.

July 19, 2001: ExxonMobil announces it has resumed gas production in Aceh, but only on a small scale and on a day-to-day basis in light of continuing security concerns.

July 23-24, 2001: ASEAN Annual Ministers’ Meeting is held in Hanoi.

July 25, 2001: ARF is convened.

July 27, 2001: Thai Foreign Minister Surakiart Sathirathai tells the press following the Hanoi ASEAN ministerial meetings that the U.S. had agreed to assist efforts that result from an anti-narcotics summit meeting in Kunming, China, among four “Golden Triangle” countries – Myanmar, China, Laos, and Thailand – at a date not yet specified. Officials’ and ministers’ meetings will precede the summit.

Aug. 2, 2001: Malaysian PM Mahathir, responding to reports that FM Syed Hamid Albar had been told during his Washington visit that a Bush-Mahathir meeting would depend on human rights reforms, says that he is not aware of any conditions and that the meeting should not have preconditions.

Aug. 3, 2001: President Macapagal-Arroyo expresses irritation at reports that the U.S. government has expressed “impatience” over the government’s handling of the Abu Sayyaf bandits.

Aug. 10, 2001: State Department Spokesman Richard Boucher welcomes Cambodian King Norodom Sihanouk's signature of a law establishing special courts to try members of the Khmer Rouge for atrocities committed between 1975 and 1979 as a step to "come to terms with the past."

Aug. 10, 2001: U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick visits Jakarta.

Aug. 17, 2001: Two U.S. Navy carrier battle groups, led by the USS Carl Vinson and the USS Constellation, conduct an exercise in the South China Sea, reportedly to reinforce the right to free navigation through sea lanes in that contested area, and also to signal concern at large-scale Chinese military exercises simulating assault on outlying Taiwanese islands.

Aug. 23, 2001: The United States authorizes three U.S. airlines – Delta, Northwestern, and United – to provide service to Vietnam through code-sharing arrangements.

Aug. 27, 2001: Indonesia and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) sign an agreement restoring relations, making it possible to resume disbursement of portions of a \$5 billion loan package and putting debt rescheduling back on track.

Aug. 31, 2001: Jose Ramos Horta, East Timor political leader responsible for foreign affairs in the interim administration, states in a press interview that after independence his country will likely have defense arrangements with the United States and other countries providing for training, equipment, and other forms of engagement, but will not have a defense treaty or military bases.

Sept. 3, 2001: A spokesman for the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) announces that commercial shippers using the Straits of Malacca should seek GAM permission to transit the straits if they wish to avoid incidents of piracy, such as one Aug. 25 in which six crewmen were held for 300 million rupiah (\$34,000) in ransom.

Sept. 3, 2001: Indonesian police and military forces are sent to Riau to protect Caltex Pacific Indonesia oil field facilities on the island, in response to increasing theft and damage to equipment and pipelines. Material losses over the past two months amounted to \$1 million per month, according to company sources.

Sept. 19-21, 2001: Indonesian President Megawati visits Washington; condemns the attacks on the U.S.

Sept. 23, 2001: PM Goh Chok Tong states that Singapore "stands with America and the rest of the civilized world in the fight against terrorism."

Sept. 25, 2001: Council of Ulemas, representing the mainstream leadership of Indonesian Islam, state any attack on Afghanistan would be an attack on Islam.

Sept. 26, 2001: President Macapagal-Arroyo states the Philippines will allow U.S. use of airfields and facilities as a staging area and would deploy Philippine support, even combat forces.

Sept. 26, 2001: Washington authorized non-essential U.S. mission personnel and family members to leave Indonesia.

Sept. 28, 2001: Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Dy Nien states that his government is strongly opposed to a bill passed in the U.S. House of Representatives condemning Vietnam's human rights record, but indicates it would not affect Vietnam's ratification of the Bilateral Trade Agreement with the United States.

