

U.S.-Southeast Asia Relations: Building for the Long Term

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The quarter was marked by continued U.S. efforts to consolidate and clarify its counterterrorism strategy in the region. In the Philippines, U.S. military training and assistance seemed to produce more energetic and effective operations by the Philippine Army against Abu Sayyaf guerrillas. Politically and operationally, U.S. counterterrorism cooperation with Malaysia strengthened notably while collaboration with Singapore stayed close. Indonesia remained the primary focus of U.S. concern and even here significant movement toward close working relations became evident. Terrorism-related issues continued to overshadow more traditional U.S. concerns in the region regarding economic issues, human rights, and an incipient strategic rivalry with China. U.S.-China relations were relatively quiescent – facilitating a single-minded focus on terrorism in U.S. relations with Southeast Asia.

Strategic Focus

Since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, U.S. strategy toward Southeast Asia has tended to lack sharp focus and clear priorities. The end of the Cold War and the general disorientation this produced in the U.S. security community tended to reinforce the sense of strategic drift. Finally, the loss of U.S. bases in the Philippines in the same time period removed the southern anchor of U.S. power in East Asia – leaving the U.S. military presence heavily concentrated in Northeast Asia. The Seventh Fleet and its air assets continued to patrol Southeast Asian sealanes, but U.S. officials sometimes had difficulty articulating the purpose of this substantial mobile presence.

The rationale tended to take two forms: (1) U.S. forces acted as a kind of security guarantor for Southeast Asia preventing many historic and not so hidden rivalries and disputes within the region from spiraling out of control; and (2) these forces acted as a counterweight (and barrier) to possibly overweening Chinese strategic ambition toward Southeast Asia. Taken together (so the argument went), the net effect was to provide Southeast Asia with a relatively peaceful and secure environment in which economic development could proceed and political stability could be nurtured.

There was much merit in this formulation. But for all its subtlety and even sophistication, it lacked the immediacy and clarity that can only be provided by a tangible

and credible threat. That was provided on Sept. 11, particularly when Washington determined that al-Qaeda had established at least a “toehold” in Muslim Southeast Asia – sufficient for the U.S. president to declare the region as the “second front” in the U.S. global war on terrorism.

That view, and its corollary call for collaboration against Islamic militants, has been surprisingly well received in Southeast Asian capitals. “Surprising” if one assumed a high level of Southeast Asian skepticism and resistance to demands by the U.S. superpower to crack down on certain domestic groups. The key to such receptivity lies in the perception of existing political establishments that militant/terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda pose a mortal threat to current governments as well as political and social stability.

As a consequence, U.S. security strategy and programs, augmented by diplomacy in multiple forms, have become strikingly single-minded around one theme – the war on terrorism.

The Philippines: Boots on the Ground

The Philippines has provided the U.S. military with both a target and an opportunity to deploy assets against it. Abu Sayyaf, a militant Islamic splinter group in the extreme south, has long bedeviled the Philippines government with a campaign of kidnappings and ransom. When the attacks on Sept. 11 occurred, Abu Sayyaf happened to be holding two American hostages. That, plus a tenuous history of some contact with al-Qaeda was sufficient to generate a U.S. offer, and Manila’s acceptance, of assistance. The result was a contingent of over 600 troops comprising primarily Special Forces and Seabees (for civic infrastructure projects). While the engineers built roads and repaired bridges, the Special Forces trained Philippine troops and provided equipment. In time the U.S. also offered a reward of \$25 million for the capture of the top five leaders of Abu Sayyaf. Judging from press reports and events, the net effect of U.S. assistance was a steady improvement in the tempo and effectiveness of Philippine Army operations.

Sometime in June, the guerrillas holding the hostages (the Burnhams and Ebidorah Yap) were forced to flee their longtime redoubts on Basilan Island and retreat to Mindanao. There a Philippine Scout Ranger unit tracked them down. When the shooting stopped, Mr. Burnham was dead (apparently executed by his captors) as was Ms. Yap, but Mrs. Burnham was rescued. A few days later a senior leader of Abu Sayyaf was apparently killed when a speedboat (detected with U.S. overhead surveillance) he and others were using to leave Mindanao was intercepted and sunk by the Philippine military.

These operations against Abu Sayyaf were taking place simultaneously with separate and larger joint Philippine-U.S. exercises “Balikatan 2002” in central Luzon. President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo gave strong public support to both joint activities and Philippine army officers declared their high satisfaction with the results of U.S. assistance. With the removal of the hostage factor, President Macapagal-Arroyo called for a no-quarter war of extermination against Abu Sayyaf. She also indicated a desire for some U.S. forces to

remain in the Philippines for continued assistance (including joint patrols) against Abu Sayyaf beyond the formal end of “Balikatan” on July 31. Subsequently, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld effectively acceded to that request.

The net effect of these developments was (1) to weaken – perhaps fatally – Abu Sayyaf and (2) to re-establish effective U.S.-Philippine military cooperation for the first time in over a decade. The general change in tone in U.S.-Philippine relations compared to the acrimony prevalent in the early 1990s was striking.

Malaysia: Friends After All

U.S.-Malaysia relations, if judged by commercial/economic, defense, and intelligence standards, have long been close and productive. But on the political/diplomatic dimension the picture has been quite different with rancor – in public or barely below the surface – the order of the day. For years Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has used the sharp edge of his tongue to lacerate U.S. policy for neocolonial bullying (among many other sins). A low point was reached in 1998 when Vice President Al Gore used a platform in Kuala Lumpur to criticize Mahathir for the jailing of his erstwhile deputy, Anwar Ibrahim.

When George W. Bush was elected president (much to Mahathir’s publicly proclaimed delight), Kuala Lumpur began efforts to repair relations. These acquired serious momentum in the wake of Sept. 11. To the surprise of many in Washington, Mahathir quickly staked out a position of common cause with the U.S. in the global struggle against terrorism. The same militant Islamic impulses that fed support for al-Qaeda also posed a threat to the moderate, essentially pragmatic, Malaysian government. Bush and Mahathir met at the October 2001 Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders’ Meeting in Shanghai and established a working relationship. Washington made a point of publicly thanking Mahathir for his expressions of support – culminating in an invitation for the prime minister to visit the White House in June. Despite some predictions that Mahathir would ruffle feathers in Washington, the visit went smoothly and produced a bilateral agreement to collaborate closely in counterterrorism efforts, including intelligence sharing, border security, and money laundering.

Domestically, Mahathir seized upon Sept. 11 (and subsequent statements by the major Malay opposition party calling for a “jihad against America”) to clamp down hard on militants. As a result, Mahathir’s political position, weakened in the wake of Anwar’s arrest, rebounded strongly. In foreign policy, senior Malaysian officials spoke publicly of the value of joint military cooperation with the U.S. Meanwhile Malaysia assumed a high-profile role in a variety of fora as advocate for energetic multilateral cooperation against terror. These included the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) where Malaysia assumed a three-year chairmanship, a special ASEAN ministerial meeting, and a joint summit of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. From Washington’s standpoint, all this established Malaysia as an increasingly valuable and effective voice for the war on terrorism within Islamic and developing councils.

In sum, the startling effect of Sept. 11 and subsequent policy initiatives was to put U.S.-Malaysia relations on the strongest footing at least since the 1960s – and perhaps ever.

Indonesia: Delicate Dance

By any measure, the most important regional player in any counterterrorism effort is Indonesia. It has both the largest Muslim population and is the most vulnerable, with a debilitated economy, a weak government, and a demoralized and discredited military. In recent years money from the Persian Gulf has introduced a more orthodox, less tolerant, strain of Islam than the traditional Javanese *abangan* form. Together these factors have produced something new and ominous on the Indonesian scene – organized sectarian (Muslim/Christian) violence on a large scale.

When a terrorist cell was uncovered in Singapore with connections to Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, senior officials in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and Washington quickly identified an Indonesian cleric as the mastermind and urged Jakarta to take action. The predominant Indonesian response was defensive and resentful – denying that there was any persuasive evidence of an al-Qaeda presence in the country.

Still, for U.S. officials looking for a glass half full, opportunity lies in the makeup of the current Indonesian government. President Megawati Sukarnoputri is a secular nationalist with close ties to the Indonesian Army. These are the elements in the political spectrum that are natural allies in any campaign to reign in Islamic militants. For them, sectarian violence poses a potentially lethal threat to the unity – and hence the survival – of the country. The problem for Washington is, in part, homegrown. Since the bloody campaign of pro-Jakarta militias (closely tied to the army) in East Timor, the U.S. has maintained Congressionally-mandated restrictions of assistance to or cooperation with the Indonesian military.

The Bush administration has made it clear that it sees the Indonesian armed forces (TNI) as an absolutely vital element in an effective counterterror strategy in Indonesia (and Southeast Asia). Senior officials led by Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz have tried to stake out a position in favor of removing barriers to cooperation with the TNI while reaffirming continued support for military reform and accountability. During the quarter, both Wolfowitz and Assistant Secretary of State of East Asian and Pacific Affairs James Kelly visited the region and expressed understanding of the difficulties facing President Megawati and guarded approval for the steps her government was taking.

Indonesian official reaction during this period evolved. In February, TNI leaders rejected a Pentagon offer of humanitarian aid in dealing with serious flooding in Jakarta. Several senior officers made statements to the effect that Indonesia could handle any security problems without outside help (or interference). But in late April, U.S. and Indonesian security officials began sensitive talks to explore a possible resumption of military-to-military cooperation. Both the commander of U.S. forces in the Pacific and the U.S. ambassador to Indonesia publicly advocated a restoration of military ties. In an interview

in Singapore, Wolfowitz made the case for not allowing the perfect to become the enemy of the good. “I believe very strongly in an agenda of military reform. But, I also believe that democracy in Indonesia requires a competent military that can protect the rights of minorities. We’ve got to pursue both agendas. We can’t be dogmatic about insistence on total reform of the Indonesian military before we’ll help them in any way at all.”

Unlike in the Philippines and Malaysia, the quarter ended with U.S.-Indonesia relations still very much a work in progress. The administration’s goal of robust counterterrorist assistance to Indonesia will have to overcome imbedded suspicions (and legal restrictions) in the Congress plus doubts in Indonesia whether the gains will outweigh the risks.

Chronology of U.S.-Southeast Asia Relations April-June 2002

April 1, 2002: Cambodia announces it has agreed to a U.S. offer to grant asylum in America to 905 ethnic Montagnards who fled across the border from Vietnam. Hanoi has labeled the U.S. offer a deliberate attempt to stir up unrest among ethnic hill tribes.

April 1, 2002: An Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers on Terrorism opens in Kuala Lumpur.

April 2, 2002: U.S. Senators Daniel Inouye (D-Hi.) and Ted Stevens (R-Ak.) of the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee arrive in the Philippines to assess the deployment of 660 U.S. troops in the southern Philippines.

April 5, 2002: U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick begins talks in Singapore with ASEAN trade ministers.

April 11, 2002: Philippines Supreme Court rules that ongoing U.S. counterterrorism training for Filipino soldiers is legal because it is covered under the Mutual Defense Treaty and the Visiting Forces Agreement. However, the Court says it has “no doubt that U.S. forces are prohibited from engaging in offensive war on Philippines territory.”

April 11, 2002: A presidential spokesman indicates the Philippines would approve the deployment of a U.S. engineering brigade from Okinawa to help in development projects on Basilan Island.

April 13, 2002: Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James Kelly meets with Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in Kuala Lumpur.

April 15, 2002: U.S. Ambassador Skip Boyce reaffirms that the U.S. does not support separatist movements in Indonesia – whether in Irian Jaya or elsewhere.

April 15, 2002: USCINCPAC Adm. Dennis Blair visits the southern Philippines to assess the ongoing deployment of U.S. forces to assist Philippine troops operating against the Abu Sayyaf; the Philippines declares U.S. troops could return fire if attacked.

April 22, 2002: Malaysian Defense Minister Najib Tun Razak says Indian and U.S. navies are welcome to conduct joint antipiracy patrols in the Malacca Straits.

April 22, 2002: The U.S. and Philippines armed forces launch joint exercises in central Luzon – the second phase of “Balikatan 2002.” About 2,700 U.S. troops are involved in training in jungle warfare, tactical night-flying, amphibious landings, and search and rescue.

April 24-25, 2002: U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Affairs Peter Brookes arrives in Jakarta to initiate a new U.S.-Indonesia security dialogue to explore restoring military cooperation severed in 1999.

April 26-29, 2002: Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, arrives in the Philippines.

April 30-May 3, 2002: DM Najib visits the U.S. to discuss terrorism and Middle East issues with Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and members of Congress.

May 1, 2002: Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew meets with President Bush at the White House in a meeting devoted primarily to international terrorism. The president expresses his “great gratitude” for Singapore’s support in the war on terror.

May 2, 2002: Public opinion poll shows 69 percent of Filipinos support U.S. assistance to Philippine troops on Basilan, 31 percent are opposed.

May 6, 2002: Burmese opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, is freed after 19 months of house arrest.

May 6, 2002: Hundreds of Muslim students protest the presence of Ambassador Boyce in Makassar, accusing him of being behind the arrest two days earlier of the leader of Laskar Jihad.

May 9, 2002: *The New York Times* report indicates widespread popular concern in Indonesia that the U.S.-sponsored war on terrorism will become a war on democracy as the U.S. moves to assist the Indonesian Army and police despite their histories of human rights abuses.

May 13, 2002: A senior Malaysian legal affairs official meets with U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft and reports he was told the U.S. endorses Malaysia’s use of the Internal Security Act to fight terrorism.

May 13-15, 2002: PM Mahathir visits the U.S. and signs antiterrorism treaty.

May 13-15, 2002: Indonesian Minister of Defense Matori Abdul Djilil meets with Secretary Rumsfeld and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice in Washington in an effort to speed up the restoration of full military cooperation.

May 13-23, 2002: A senior officer in Burma's military government holds a series of meetings in Washington with a number of agencies including state, justice, and the CIA exploring how Burma can shed its designation as a narco-state.

May 14-28, 2002: The 21st annual "Cobra Gold" exercise in Thailand with the participation of 13,200 U.S., 7,700 Thai, and 700 Singaporean forces.

May 15, 2002: Philippines Senate Defense Committee Chairman Ramon Magsaysay, Jr., says there is no legal impediment to the extension of U.S.-Philippines military exercises aimed at eradicating Abu Sayyaf.

May 17, 2002: Adm. Thomas Fargo, new USCINCPAC, visits U.S. troops in the southern Philippines.

May 22, 2002: USAID signs a Memorandum of Understanding with the Philippines providing a framework for assistance in Manila's efforts to curb money laundering.

May 23, 2002: PM Mahathir declares that Malaysia will not seek foreign military assistance against internal terrorist threats. He also notes that relations with the U.S. are improved and that the Bush administration is "more appreciative" of Malaysian policies.

May 24, 2002: The U.S. House votes \$8 million in aid for training Indonesian police as part of an antiterrorism bill but does not embrace the administration's call for assistance to the Indonesian military.

May 25, 2002: USCINCPAC Fargo says it would be desirable for Japan and other Asia-Pacific countries to participate in future "Cobra Gold" military exercises to upgrade regional capabilities to deal with transnational threats.

May 29, 2002: Indonesian Vice President Hamzah Haz meets with a controversial Muslim cleric publicly linked by Singapore and Malaysia to a regional terrorist network and announces that, "There are no terrorists here. I guarantee that."

June 3, 2002: The first of the Montagnard refugees from Vietnam departs Cambodia for resettlement in the U.S. The refugees fled to Cambodia in February 2001 after Vietnamese authorities crushed antigovernment demonstrations in the Central Highlands.

June 3, 2002: Speaking in Singapore, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz calls for renewed U.S.-Indonesian military links.

June 4, 2002: U.S. Customs Commissioner Robert Bonner announces an agreement with Singapore by which U.S. inspectors will begin security screening of cargo containers

before they leave Singapore for the U.S. This is the first time U.S. inspectors will be stationed overseas.

June 5, 2002: Thai Gen. Surayud Chulanot on an official visit to the U.S. stresses the importance of Thai-U.S. military cooperation and Bangkok's support for the war on terrorism.

June 7, 2002: The Philippine military announces that Philippine Scout Rangers had found the Abu Sayyaf group holding the two American hostages and a Filipina nurse. In the ensuing firefight one U.S. hostage and the nurse were killed, the other U.S. hostage was rescued.

June 17, 2002: Two official Vietnamese delegations visit Washington to lobby against a Vietnam Human Rights bill that has passed the House and is pending in the Senate.

June 21, 2002: The Philippine Army reports that a leader of Abu Sayyaf has "no doubt" been killed in a speedboat clash between the military and a small guerrilla group.

June 22, 2002: PM Mahathir tearfully announces his resignation, but subsequently is convinced by party officials to remain in power for another 18 months to ensure a smooth transition of power to Deputy PM Abdullah Badawi.

June 23, 2002: Although "Balikatan 2002" will end July 31, President Macapagal-Arroyo announces plans to extend the stay of U.S. forces and seek their wider deployment for joint operations in the fight against Abu Sayyaf.

June 26, 2002: Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld says some U.S. forces will continue small unit training in the Philippines after the bulk of U.S. forces withdraw.

June 26-July 1, 2002: Malaysia and the U.S. conduct the annual Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercise involving 2,400 Malaysian soldiers and sailors and 1,400 U.S. Marines and Coast Guard personnel.