



U.S.-Southeast Asia Relations:

## President's Cairo Speech Resonates in Southeast Asia

Sheldon Simon  
Arizona State University

Southeast Asia media and elites praised President Barack Obama's Cairo address for opening a new dialogue with Muslims and acknowledging U.S. transgressions after 9/11. Washington excoriated Burma's ruling junta for transferring opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi to prison for violating the regime's detention law, characterizing the charges as "baseless" and an excuse to extend her incarceration beyond scheduled elections in 2010. Thai political turmoil disrupted ASEAN-related meetings in April. In the Philippines, this year's *Balikatan* exercise involved 6,000 U.S. troops and focused on responses to natural disasters. Meanwhile, the Philippine Congress is scheduling new hearings on the Visiting Forces Agreement for its alleged unduly favorable treatment of U.S. military personnel. Human rights concerns in Southeast Asia were raised again in the annual U.S. watch list on human trafficking with most of the region cited for an unwillingness or inability to stop the notorious trade. Finally, the U.S. praised Southeast Asian maritime defense cooperation in suppressing regional piracy as well as contributing to counter-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden.

### **Southeast Asians welcome Obama's discussion of Islam**

Southeast Asian media and elites praised President Obama's remarkable June 4 Cairo address for opening a new dialogue with the Muslim world and acknowledging U.S. transgressions after 9/11, particularly the use of torture. Obama emphasized Islam's contribution to world civilization and presented a constructive, if well known, assessment of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. The head of Indonesia's Council of Ulemas, Admidhan, stated his respect for Obama's "sincerity" in seeking a solution to conflict in the Middle East. Muhammadiyah's leader, Din Syamsuddin, expressed appreciation for the commitment made by Obama to build bridges between the West and Islam. (Muhammadiyah is Indonesia's second largest Muslim organization.) Other Indonesian commentary noted his favorable reference to Indonesia as the nation with the world's largest Muslim population promoting religious tolerance and gender equality. Jakarta's *Kompas* newspaper, Indonesia's largest, editorialized on June 5 that Obama was constructing a U.S. image that will erase his predecessor's unilateral and bellicose orientation to the world and replace it with "a multilateral and cooperative approach." Some Muslim clerics in Indonesia, while welcoming Obama's opening to Islam, said that the rhetoric needed to be followed by implementing policies.

Prior to the Cairo speech, Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib Razak praised Obama's decision to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay but stated that he should speed the process of relocating the

remaining inmates. Malaysia has asked for the return of two of its citizens, though they are considered “high value” detainees by the U.S. and central to Jemmah Islamiyah’s operations in Southeast Asia.

### **Aung San Suu Kyi trial may derail U.S. plans for a new Burma policy**

In early April, at a National Bureau of Asian Research meeting in Washington, Deputy Secretary of State Jim Steinberg outlined hopes for a “collaborative and constructive” approach to Burma that would involve U.S. discussions with ASEAN, China, India, and Japan “to find a policy that will improve the lives of the people of Burma and promote stability in this key region.” Steinberg specifically proposed something akin to the Six-Party Talks on North Korea’s nuclear program. On April 13, a group of U.S. women senators urged in a letter to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon to pressure Burma’s ruling junta to scrap its 2010 election plans and free Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest. The senators denounced Burma’s new constitution for entrenching gender discrimination by excluding women from high office – undoubtedly with Suu Kyi in mind – and also for denying access to justice for victims of the junta’s violence.

However, the junta’s plans for Aung San Suu Kyi’s future took a bizarre turn in the second week of May when a U.S. citizen, William Yettaw, reportedly swam across the adjacent lake and into the democracy leader’s home where she has been under house arrest for 13 of the past 19 years. Burma’s law prohibits anyone from visiting Suu Kyi without the regime’s permission. Therefore, just as the junta was going to have to decide whether to release her from house arrest on the anniversary of her detention, along came a new opportunity to arrest her.

Suu Kyi has been jailed since mid-May in the notorious Insein Prison where a special court is in session to determine her future. By claiming that she had violated the terms of her house arrest, the regime can rebut a UN finding that Suu Kyi is being held illegally in breach of both Burmese and international law. Her lawyer has insisted that Yettaw’s stay in her home was uninvited and that she permitted it for humanitarian reasons when he complained of exhaustion and cramping. Her continued imprisonment appears to send a signal to the international community that the Burmese military is not ready to be engaged – a situation that may disrupt the Obama administration’s hopes for a new beginning in its Burma policy.

The U.S. has led Western calls for Suu Kyi’s release with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton saying she was “deeply troubled” by the “baseless” case just days before her six-year detention was to expire. Clinton has also raised the imprisonment of Suu Kyi with the UN, ASEAN members, and China. Malaysian Foreign Minister Y.B. Datuk Anifah bin Haji Aman, after meeting with Clinton, promised to raise the matter with the ASEAN Secretariat and ASEAN Plus 3, which includes China. On May 15, President Obama renewed U.S. sanctions against the Burmese regime, claiming its actions and policies “are hostile to U.S. interests and pose a continuing unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States” – a statement hardly designed as a prelude for new overtures to the junta.

On May 19, ASEAN, as a group, expressed “grave concern”, saying that “the honor and the credibility of the [Burmese government] are at stake.” The current ASEAN Chair, Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, issued a joint ASEAN statement calling for Suu Kyi’s release. It

called upon Burma to abide by the terms of the new ASEAN Charter that obliges members to protect and respect human rights. This was the first time that the ASEAN Chair has directed criticism at Burma's leadership. Secretary Clinton congratulated the Thai government for its leadership on the issue, though the statement was actually drafted by Indonesia.

Burmese authorities have responded angrily to the ASEAN statement and U.S. condemnation from both the executive branch and Congress. Nyan Wan, the junta's foreign minister, labeled the Yettaw visit to Aung San Suu Kyi's home a Burmese opposition plot "to intensify pressure on Myanmar [Burma] by internal and external anti-government elements." Burmese media accused Thailand as ASEAN's spokesman of "interfering in the internal affairs of Myanmar" – an action "not in conformity with ASEAN practice...."

At the annual Asia-Pacific Defense Ministers Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on June 1, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates singled out Burma as an anomaly in a region pushing toward democratic reform, "an isolated desolate exception...." Nevertheless, at the time of this article's writing, Suu Kyi's trial continues, and it appears improbable that the junta will bow to international pressure. Its military leaders believe only the armed forces can protect the country from internal and external threats. Moreover, Burma's critical geographic position and rich natural resources mean that it is unlikely to be abandoned by its most important backers, China and India.

### **Thai political turmoil disrupts ASEAN meeting**

Thai politics in 2009 have witnessed pitched battles between an army-backed, monarchy-supported, urban elite called the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) government currently led by Prime Minister Abhisit vs. red-shirted opponents coming primarily from the urban and rural poor who defend exiled billionaire populist former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Violent confrontations in Bangkok spread to Pattaya in April, forcing an embarrassing last-minute cancellation of leaders' meetings by ASEAN Plus 3 and the East Asia Summit. The U.S. termed these developments "unacceptable" and said Thailand's international reputation as a viable democracy has been tarnished. On April 12, the *New York Times* assessed the Thai situation saying: "The subtext of the country's political crisis is an ailing king and disagreements about the future of the monarchy, friction between opposition politicians and a powerful influential military and, not least, an ailing economy." The last has been particularly harmed by the turmoil as tourism precipitously declined.

The Thaksin-backed opposition has pressed its case to U.S. diplomats, insisting that the will of the electorate has been repeatedly thwarted. Three prime ministers since 2006 have been forced from office – the first in a military coup and the last two removed in highly politicized trials. While Washington has not chosen sides, the U.S. seems more comfortable dealing with the current government that represents urban, educated, managerial, and professional classes as well as the army and monarchy. Nevertheless, the ongoing political unrest suggests that the urban poor and rural populations can no longer be denied a place at the Thai political table.

## **U.S. military continues to be featured in Philippine politics**

U.S. military activities in the Philippines were prominently featured this past quarter, both positively and negatively. On the plus side, this year's *Balikatan* joint exercise continues the series' civic action, emphasizing infrastructure along with medical and dental services in poor rural areas. Moreover, this year's exercise specifically focused on joint training in response to natural disasters in several locations, including Bicol in southern Luzon, and Zamboanga. When reports appeared in some local new outlets – subsequently proven false – that U.S. soldiers were consorting with prostitutes, Ambassador Kristie Kenney vigorously defended the U.S. forces' professionalism and the importance of the annual joint exercises, which this year involved 6,000 U.S. troops. Those who oppose the U.S. military presence claim that it violates Philippine sovereignty and the constitution's prohibitions on the stationing of foreign forces in the country. Opponents also scoff at U.S. civic action as “disguised humanitarian measures that are really aimed to gather intelligence on progressive groups in the country.”

In mid-May, the Philippines announced that President Obama had allocated \$667 million in foreign assistance to the Philippines in the budget he submitted to Congress. Most of that aid will be directed to Mindanao where the Philippine government faces two insurgencies: one led by elements of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the other by the New People's Army of the Philippine Communist Party. The military component of the aid consists of training support through the International Military and Education and Training (IMET) program as well as Foreign Military Financing (FMF) program for armed forces modernization. The U.S. is also involved in assisting the Philippine Navy through the provision of surveillance, communications, and interdiction capabilities for Coast Watch South – an effort to interdict contraband and terrorist movements from Borneo into the southern Philippines.

In mid-April, the U.S. offered to assist Philippine military efforts to end a hostage crisis in the south involving two European Red Cross volunteers who had been kidnapped by the Al Qaeda-affiliated Abu Sayyaf. The assistance would consist of technical intelligence but no U.S. military forces. Abu Sayyaf heavily relies on kidnapping to raise funds. On a June 1 visit, Defense Secretary Gates pledged more assistance to help Philippine forces cope with terrorism and promised to enhance U.S. support for training in Sulu province, a stronghold of Abu Sayyaf.

A State Department report on global terrorism in late April listed Sulu as a safe haven for Abu Sayyaf. While the report noted that Philippine forces using U.S. reconnaissance and surveillance have significantly reduced “the remaining numbers” of Islamist terrorists, discontent and distrust of the central government pervade the southern Muslim population. On May 5, a Philippine military spokesman disputed the U.S. assessment, saying government forces have captured several foreign extremists and has many others on the run, thus rendering them unable to launch new terrorist attacks.

Nevertheless, on May 24, the State Department announced new rewards for the capture of three Abu Sayyaf leaders – \$1 million each for Radullan Sokiran and Abdul Basit Usman while a \$550,000 bounty was put up for the arrest of Kahi Mundos. The three are considered a “threat to U.S. and Filipino citizens” and have long been involved in kidnapping, murder, and bombings. While previous rewards for the capture of Islamist radicals have borne fruit, there are complaints

that the Filipinos who provided the crucial information received only a small fraction of the rewards promised, while high-ranking military officers pocketed most of the money.

Finally, the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) was in the news again. In late April, the Philippine Court of Appeals overturned a lower court's sentence of a U.S. marine who had been convicted of rape and sentenced to life in prison. Pending appeal, the marine had been housed in the U.S. embassy compound to the dismay of many Filipinos, who saw this arrangement as another example of the preferential treatment accorded to U.S. military personnel through the VFA. In an odd twist, the marine was freed by the Court of Appeals when his accuser recanted her testimony upon immigrating to the United States. He was immediately flown out of the country. In response to the subsequent public outcry, the Philippine President's Office stated it would engage in new talks with the U.S. about the custody provisions under the VFA. In reply, Ambassador Kenney essentially stonewalled, saying on April 28 that the VFA "works well" and that its stipulations had been strictly followed in the rape case. Regardless, the Philippine Senate has begun a new review of the visiting forces arrangement.

### **Malaysia and Singapore**

At a mid-May meeting with Secretary Clinton in Putrajaya, Malaysian Foreign Minister Datuk Anifah Aman offered to share his country's newly acquired antipiracy expertise coming from Malaysian naval deployments in the Gulf of Aden. Clinton described Malaysia's efforts in the Gulf since last fall as "very effective," going on to cite its long experience in antipiracy activities in Southeast Asia. At the same time, USPACOM Commander Adm. Timothy Keating praised the joint efforts of Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines for bringing Southeast Asian piracy to a virtual end – from 50 attacks per year a few years ago down to five in 2008. Clinton also urged Malaysia "to broaden and deepen our strategic cooperation" to include reaching out to the Islamic world through Kuala Lumpur's membership in the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

Singapore's Foreign Minister George Yeo, in a late April visit to Washington, lamented the postponement of ASEAN meetings in Thailand "in a manner which caused us in ASEAN great humiliation." He expressed concern that the ASEAN project not be "derailed," noting its centrality "to the construction of a larger architecture of peace in Asia." Yeo also underlined the continued importance of U.S. leadership in global affairs and its participation in Southeast Asia. He emphasized that the region looked forward to Secretary Clinton's presence at the ASEAN Regional Forum and President Obama's at the November APEC summit in Singapore.

### **Human rights in Southeast Asia**

Human rights concerns and political freedom remain high on the U.S. agenda in relations with Southeast Asia. Clint Williamson, the U.S. ambassador-at-large for war crimes issues, on May 22, while praising Cambodia's lengthy trial of Khmer Rouge war crimes also insisted that the Cambodian government must tackle corruption in the UN-backed court. Political interference with the tribunal and claims that members of the Cambodian staff were required to pay kickbacks has led the UN to withhold some funds from the tribunal. In early June, the U.S. embassy in Phnom Penh claimed the country was losing up to \$500 million per year through

corruption. Cambodia's response was to urge diplomats to "refrain from interfering." In 2008, Transparency International designated Cambodia one of the most corrupt countries in the world – 14<sup>th</sup> among 180 nations studied.

In late April, the Obama administration published its first annual U.S. watch list on human trafficking, identifying countries that have not done enough to prevent the practice. In Southeast Asia, Burma, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Brunei, Thailand, and Malaysia were all cited. (If a country appears on the watch list for two consecutive years, it may be subject to U.S. sanctions.) While most of the Southeast Asian states listed were described as attempting to stop the sale of people for sex, forced labor, and extortion – though often with little success – Malaysia and Burma were singled out as among the worst offenders. Referred to as Tier 3 nations, they were characterized as having no standards and no efforts to establish any.

Malaysia was accused of handing thousands of Burmese refugees to Thai traffickers for work in brothels, fishing boats, and restaurants on the Thai side of the Malaysian border. Although Malaysia claimed the Tier 3 designation was unfair and did not take into account the country's 2007 anti-trafficking law, Prime Minister Najib admitted his country had a problem and promised to take "appropriate action....We do not want Malaysia to be used as a point for human trafficking." Cambodia and Brunei were put back on the watch list – the former for not punishing traffickers or protecting victims who are "trafficked to Thailand and Malaysia...as domestic workers and forced prostitution." Brunei is listed as a destination country for men and women from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, China, and Thailand used for low-skill labor. Working long hours with little time off, those workers were described in the U.S. report as involved in "involuntary servitude."

In a separate human rights matter, on June 16, the State Department said it was "deeply concerned" by the arrest of activist lawyer Le Cong Dinh in Vietnam and called for his release. Dinh is one of Vietnam's most respected attorneys and was arrested for his defense of pro-democracy advocates and his use of the internet to disseminate his views. Reporters without Borders in Paris also speculated that Dinh's arrest could be linked to a complaint filed by several Vietnamese lawyers against the government over its granting of a bauxite mine concession to a Chinese company. State Department spokesman Ian Kelly said: "Vietnam's arrest of Mr. Dinh contradicts the government's own commitment to internationally accepted standards of human rights and to the rule of law."

### **Multilateral security cooperation**

Indicative of Washington's praise for Southeast Asian maritime security collaboration was Adm. Keating's May 15 statement about the partnership among Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines that has led to increased patrols, enhanced maritime domain awareness, and law enforcement. Keating enthused that these states "are sharing a common operational picture" and "passing information back and forth." Under the National Defense Authorization Act, the U.S. has funded capacity building in the region through the provision of coastal radars, radio transmission devices, and training opportunities. Keating also stressed the advantage of partnership: "We in the United States don't have to be everywhere, doing everything. By increased cooperation and collaboration, we can rely on and depend on our

friends, allies, [and] partners throughout the region.” Secretary Gates at the Shangri-La Security Dialogue on May 30 echoed these sentiments, stating that U.S. forces in Asia place “ever greater emphasis on building the capacity of partners to defend themselves.” At the same time, the U.S. will rebalance the mix of *hard* and *soft* elements of national power, “where military, diplomatic, economic, cultural, and humanitarian elements are integrated seamlessly.”

Both Secretary Gates and Secretary Clinton emphasize that the U.S. will maintain a robust military presence in Asia that will be strengthened and deepened through partnerships. In an implicit reference to the concern expressed in the Australian Defense White Paper published in May about the prospect of America’s declining predominance, Clinton stated in a May 21 briefing for foreign journalists: “We want Australia as well as other nations to know the United States is not ceding the Pacific to anyone.”

### **Looking ahead**

In the coming months, the U.S. will have two opportunities to demonstrate its commitment to Southeast Asia’s future – the ARF meeting in Thailand and the APEC gathering in Singapore. Secretary Clinton has promised to attend the former, and President Obama is expected at the latter. These two organizations comprise two components of Asia’s future orientations, the ARF for security and APEC for economic relations, particularly trade. Because a number of economic analysts see Asia recovering from the global recession more rapidly than the G8 countries, the U.S. should assure its Asian partners that Washington will continue to support the World Trade Organization (WTO) free trade regime, thus linking the U.S. to Asia’s economic recovery. In recent years, with U.S. prodding, the ARF has focused on counter-terrorism with some success. However, other security concerns should also be addressed, including public health measures to control pandemics such as swine flu and better cooperation in suppressing human trafficking. The U.S. can provide financial and technical assistance for all of these needs. These actions will underscore U.S. commitment to remain an active participant in Asian affairs.

## **Chronology of U.S.-Southeast Asian Relations April-June 2009**

**April 1, 2009:** Twelve members of the U.S. Congress urge internet giants Google, Microsoft, and Yahoo to resist Vietnam’s efforts to restrict online political speech.

**April 1, 2009:** U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Jim Steinberg says the U.S. is open to a new framework to discuss relations with Burma.

**April 2, 2009:** U.S. charge d’affaires in Burma Larry Dinyer says Washington has so far provided a total of \$74 million in humanitarian assistance to Cyclone *Nargis* survivors.

**April 7, 2009:** Visiting Vietnam, Sen. John McCain calls for closer economic relations and also greater political freedom.

**April 10-12, 2009:** The annual ASEAN summit convenes in Pattaya, Thailand, including meetings with the association's major dialogue partners. On April 12, the meeting is disrupted by pro-Thaksin opposition demonstrators and foreign leaders flee by helicopters and ships.

**April 11, 2009:** Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in a Cambodian New Year's message cites progress in Khmer-U.S. relations over the past year including U.S. Navy humanitarian ship visits, economic assistance, and the presence of U.S. Peace Corps volunteers in 11 provinces.

**April 13, 2009:** A group of 10 U.S. women senators urge UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to put pressure on Burma's ruling junta to scrap election plans and release Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest.

**April 14, 2009:** State Department spokesman Robert Wood characterizes the anti-government violence in Thailand that led to the cancellation of an ASEAN plus 3 and the East Asia Summit as "unacceptable" and urges political opponents to return to peaceful demonstrations.

**April 16, 2009:** The U.S. offers to assist the Philippines with technical support, though not direct combat assistance, in freeing two Red Cross hostages being held by the Abu Sayyaf in the southern Philippines.

**April 16-29, 2009:** The annual Philippine-U.S. *Balikatan* joint exercise takes place in the Bicol region. For the first time in 16 years, U.S. aircraft for the exercise operate from Philippine bases.

**April 17, 2009:** U.S. Justice Department documents on harsh interrogation techniques practiced against top Al Qaeda detainees in 2002 are released indicating that these actions occurred in Thailand, a revelation previously denied by the Thai government.

**April 25, 2009:** Malaysian Prime Minister Najib promises to investigate after a U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee report claims that thousands of Burmese refugees were handed over to human traffickers in Thailand and forced to work in brothels, fishing boats, and restaurants to earn enough money to buy their freedom.

**April 27-28, 2009:** Singapore Foreign Minister George Yeo meets Secretary Clinton who refers to the city-state as a critical part of the global economy and praises its efforts to combat piracy in the Gulf of Aden.

**April 28, 2009:** U.S. Ambassador to the Philippines Kristie Kenney says the Visiting Forces Agreement works well and needs no modification. The Philippine Senate is considering a review of the arrangement.

**April 29, 2009:** The State Department pays tribute to ASEAN for its work in helping bring relief to the victims of Cyclone *Nargis* in Burma as well as ASEAN's continued work with humanitarian aid groups.

**April 30, 2009:** The State Department states that the U.S. is not considering lifting sanctions against Burma as Washington reviews its Burma policy.

**May 5, 2009:** Indonesian Air Force Chief of Staff General Subandrio states that future suppliers for the Indonesian armed forces must guarantee that there will be no embargo of their sales. This is a reaction to U.S. embargos imposed by Washington during the latter Suharto years.

**May 6, 2009:** Burma's military junta arrests John W. Yettaw, a U.S. citizen, for swimming across a lake to the residence of detained opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi.

**May 12, 2009:** State Department spokesman Ian Kelly urges Burma's junta to provide medical care for Aung San Suu Kyi who is ill and whose physician has been arrested.

**May 13, 2009:** U.S. embassy officials are given access to John W. Yettaw, who is being detained in Insein Prison along with Aung San Suu Kyi.

**May 14, 2009:** Secretary Clinton meets visiting Malaysian Foreign Minister Datuk Anifah Aman to discuss maritime piracy among other issues, including the stalled Malaysian-U.S. trade agreement.

**May 15, 2009:** President Obama extends sanctions on Burma for another year saying the junta's actions "are hostile to U.S. interests" and pose an "extraordinary threat" to U.S. national security.

**May 19-22, 2009:** On a four-day visit to Phnom Penh, U.S. Ambassador-at-large for War Crimes Clint Williamson says the Cambodian Khmer Rouge tribunal is "making real progress" but needs to implement anti-graft mechanisms.

**May 20, 2009:** Secretary Clinton excoriates Burma's leaders for trying opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, saying the trial is "outrageous" and that her detention is based solely on the desire to stifle her "political popularity."

**May 29-31 2009:** The 8<sup>th</sup> Shangri-La Defense Dialogue among Asia-Pacific defense ministers meets in Singapore.

**May 31-June 1, 2009:** Defense Secretary Robert Gates visits the Philippines and promises additional aid for building Philippine military counterinsurgency capacity.

**June 2, 2009:** The Cambodian government complains that Ambassador Williamson's criticism of corruption in Cambodia is "incomplete, irresponsible, and unfounded."

**June 8-19, 2009:** The U.S. and Singapore navies in their 15<sup>th</sup> annual *CARAT* exercise deploy submarines for the first time alongside surface combatants.

**June 9, 2009:** The second security dialogue between the U.S. and Vietnam is held in Washington and discusses peacekeeping training as well as disaster relief, counterdrug, and counterterrorism cooperation.

**June 16, 2009:** The annual U.S. watch list of countries suspected of not doing enough to combat human trafficking is released and includes most Southeast Asian countries.

**June 17, 2009:** A two-week peacekeeping training exercise involving 20 Asia-Pacific countries and fully funded by the U.S. Pacific Command begins in Indonesia.

**June 17, 2009:** Thirty-one members of Congress petition Secretary Clinton to convince Thailand not to repatriate Hmong refugees to Laos and to allow outside access to a Hmong refugee camp along the border.