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US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

REGIONAL SKEPTICISM

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Unlike its predecessor, the Trump administration has not devoted much attention to Southeast Asia; there is no clear policy toward the region. Instead, two areas have been emphasized: an increase in the number of Navy ship-days in the South China Sea and regular economic pressure on Southeast Asian states based on the president's "America First" principle. Insofar as there is a security policy, it has been to gain support for Washington's efforts to isolate North Korea. US relations with the Philippines have improved because there have been limited complaints about President Duterte's war on drugs and increased support for the Philippine Armed Forces' counterterrorism actions in Mindanao. Vietnam Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc's trip to Washington focused on reducing Hanoi's trade surplus, and, in August, Secretary of Defense Mattis promised a visit by a US aircraft carrier to Vietnam, the first since the end of the Vietnam War. Washington applauded the ASEAN-China agreement on a framework for a code of conduct for the South China Sea, urging that the actual code be legally binding, a stipulation opposed by China.

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US position in Southeast Asia

Since 9/11, the US international security focus has been on the Middle East (Iraq, Syria), Afghanistan-Pakistan, the Arabian Gulf (Iran, Yemen), and the Horn of Africa (Somalia). US armed forces have been engaged in counterinsurgency, fighting Taliban, Al Qaeda, and ISIS in the longest wars in US history (Afghanistan and Iraq), training fledgling armed forces, and providing military and economic assistance to their governments. With several thousand military personnel in Afghanistan and Iraq, Asia has been viewed as a secondary concern.

President Obama attempted to change this perception when he took office and initiated a “pivot” and then a “rebalance” to the Asia-Pacific, with a special focus on Southeast Asia. Highlights of the new emphasis were the creation of a US mission to ASEAN in 2010, the establishment of an ASEAN-US Strategic Partnership in 2016, and Washington’s stated commitment to deploy 60 percent of its military assets to the Pacific by 2020. There has been apprehension in Southeast Asia that the Trump administration would ignore the region, especially since in one of his first actions as president, Trump withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and spoke against multilateral trade arrangements.

Nevertheless, the US has been engaged in the region. It conducted three separate freedom of navigation (FON) patrols in May, June, and August near Chinese-occupied features in the South China Sea. Vice President Mike Pence visited the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta. In April, the US House of Representatives established an “ASEAN Caucus.” Secretary of State Rex Tillerson attended the ASEAN ministerial meetings in August. In June, Defense Secretary James Mattis delivered a major address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore where he also met ASEAN defense ministers.

However, note the disparity between the \$425 million Southeast Asian security appropriation in the last year of the Obama administration and the hundreds of billions of dollars spent in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past 15 years. In an acerbic early-August editorial carried by the *Philippine Inquirer*, Secretary Tillerson was characterized “as the diminished representative (at the helm of a dysfunctional hollowed-out State Department) of a diminished superpower

(the American security umbrella in the Asia-Pacific is now in the small shaky hands of a blundering undisciplined commander-in-chief).” The 10 ASEAN foreign ministers met Tillerson in Washington on May 4. The following day, Singapore Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan, voicing the sentiments of most Southeast Asian countries, stated: “[Southeast Asia] supports half a million American jobs. America has more invested in Southeast Asia than it has in India, China, and Japan combined.... we want a regional, all-encompassing welcoming architecture, and – I want to say – America is most welcome to participate.”



1Secretary Tillerson hosts foreign ministers of ASEAN for a special US – ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting (US Department of State)

In late April, President Trump called the leaders of Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines, inviting them to the White House at some undetermined time. The primary subject of the phone calls was to convince these Southeast Asian partners to back US policy toward North Korea. As CSIS’s Murray Hiebert put it, the US president “missed a critical opportunity to allay concerns that the Trump administration is overly focused on Northeast Asia” and has yet to articulate a rationale for US engagement with Southeast Asia. Secretary Tillerson, in an effort to differentiate the Trump administration from its predecessors, told a gathering of State Department employees that human rights concerns will be subordinated to US national security and economic interests. Meanwhile, in addition to the freedom of navigation patrols mentioned above, the US Navy in the South China Sea continues both bilateral and multilateral exercises with Southeast Asian partners embodied in the *Cooperation Afloat and Training (CARAT)* and the *Southeast Asian Cooperation and Training (SEACAT)* exercises.

In a major policy address to the Shangri-La Dialogue, Secretary of Defense Mattis emphasized an additional component of US security policy in Southeast Asia – counterterrorism. In the years after 9/11, particularly in Indonesia with the Bali and Jakarta bombings perpetrated by *Jemmah Islamiya*, Washington and Canberra collaborated to assist Jakarta in creating a counterterrorism police unit, *Densus 88*, whose purpose was to identify and apprehend radical Islamists bent on violence. More recently, with the disintegration of the ISIS Caliphate in Syria and Iraq alongside its leaders' urging members to return to their home countries to wage *jihād*, the US has stepped up counterterrorism cooperation with Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Cooperation includes intelligence sharing and enhancing national capacities for maritime domain awareness, particularly through the provision of additional ships for coast guards and navies by the United States, Japan, and South Korea.

At the Shangri-La conclave, Secretary Mattis gave a presentation that demonstrated the Trump administration's Asia policy has continued many of the actions of its predecessors: exercises with partners, military equipment transfers, and joint training. Alliances are being strengthened and US regional military capabilities enhanced. Commander of the US Pacific Fleet Adm. Scott Swift, during a June 15 port call in China, said the US warships planned 900 "ship-days" in the South China Sea, up from 700 "ship-days" in 2016. In her Senate confirmation hearings, the US Ambassador to Singapore KT McFarland emphasized that the island city-state's primary utility to the United States is its location at the gateway between the Indian Ocean and South China Sea. Though there is no formal alliance, Singapore is a key strategic partner. The US operates *Poseidon P-8* anti-submarine patrol aircraft and Littoral Combat Ships from Singapore and Singapore maintains fighter aircraft training units in Arizona and Idaho and helicopter training units in Arizona and Texas.

A Pew Research Center global survey of public opinion about the United States released in June included three Southeast Asia states: Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Indonesia's favorable rating of the US declined from 62 percent in 2015 to 48 percent this year. Only 23 percent of Indonesians surveyed expressed a

favorable view of President Trump compared with 64 percent for President Obama. 67 percent of Indonesians surveyed disapprove of the proposed partial US travel ban on Muslims, though Indonesia is not one of the designated countries. Filipinos express a favorable rating for the US president, with 67 percent believing he is well qualified for his office. The overall favorability rating of the US by Filipinos remains high at 85 percent, a clear disjunction with President Rodrigo Duterte's anti-US rhetoric. Vietnam is the only one of the three where positive views of the US have increased since Trump took office" 71 percent believe he is well qualified to be president, though 61 percent of Vietnamese disapprove of his decision to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Progress toward a code of conduct framework with pitfalls

Since 2002, when China and ASEAN inked the Declaration of Conduct (DOC) for the South China Sea, the Association has been trying to advance that Declaration (often breached in practice) to a more formal code of conduct (COC). On Aug. 6, China and ASEAN signed a framework for such a code. However, the framework seems to marginalize ASEAN's role in that it emphasizes Southeast Asian claimants *only* plus China. It also appears to exclude the US and Japan as external actors who "interfere" in the disputes.

While ASEAN's Secretary General Le Quang Thuan argues that a COC, unlike the 2002 DOC, should be legally binding, Beijing insists that adherence must be voluntary. Moreover, the putative code would not resolve sovereignty disputes in South China Sea waters. In fact, the framework for a COC, agreed upon at an August ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Manila, only covers what South China Sea issues should be discussed in reaching the new code and which disputes should be included in the future agreement. While incident management and mechanisms to monitor COC implementation are included as topics to be addressed, details on how to do so are not. Nor has there been discussion of joint conservation of the Sea's resources, law enforcement cooperation, or encounters among military forces. A good place to begin, according to Greg Poling of CSIS, would be to determine which maritime areas are in dispute and which are not. Dispute settlement mechanisms should also be included. The claimants – China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia,

Brunei, and the Philippines – all have different interpretations about the meaning of these provisions. Since any ASEAN-wide agreement, according to the ASEAN Charter, must be by consensus, progress toward a final agreement is likely to continue to be slow.

An agreement that was first drafted in 2014 at the Western Pacific Naval Symposium is the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES); it seems to be a good starting point for a more binding code. Initially a Cold War undertaking between the Soviet Union and the United States, CUES has been extended to all ASEAN Defense Ministers Plus countries; in other words, the 10 Southeast Asian states as well as those external powers that regularly steam through the South China Sea. As currently constituted, CUES is confined to navy ships, though several ASEAN states, led by Singapore, have urged that it be extended to coast guard and fishing vessels. (Many PRC fishing boats are armed and form a kind of maritime militia.)



24th ASEAN Regional Forum Retreat (ASEAN)

Meeting on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the US, Japan, and Australia expressed “serious concerns” over the South China Sea maritime disputes and raised “strong opposition to coercive unilateral action that could alter the status quo and increase tensions.” In a provision directed at China (without naming it) the three foreign ministers urged South China Sea claimants to refrain from land reclamation, construction of outposts, militarization of disputed features, and actions that damage the marine environment. The three also supported those ASEAN members led by Vietnam and supported by the Philippines advocating a legally binding COC. Negotiations on COC details are scheduled to begin in November.

Counterterrorism as a US wedge in the Philippines

US-Philippine relations under President Duterte have been troubled from the beginning. Notorious for killing thousands of alleged drug dealers extra-judicially when he was mayor of Davao and subsequently as the country’s president, the Philippine president bristled when President Obama condemned his impunity. Duterte responded by cancelling joint military exercises with the United States and banning US Navy vessels from using Philippine bases for freedom of navigation (FON) operations. He also cancelled plans for joint patrols in the South China Sea. However, with the election of Donald Trump, who has refrained from criticizing the Philippine president’s anti-drug campaign, relations between Manila and Washington have improved. Military cooperation is being restored, the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) is being implemented, and Trump has invited Duterte to visit the White House. The Duterte administration once again has acknowledged the indispensability of US military support both in the South China Sea and against insurgents and terrorist groups in Mindanao. US Special Forces in the southern Philippines are providing intelligence and equipment. Nonetheless, in late July, Philippine Foreign Secretary Alan Peter Cayatano admonished Washington saying, “Do not pretend that you’re protecting the Philippines. You’re protecting your interest.” He went on to unfavorably contrast Washington’s unequivocal support for Japan’s position in the Senkakus with its unwillingness to give the Philippine claims in the South China Sea similar guarantees.

With the May takeover of the center of Marawi City by ISIS-affiliated terrorists, Philippine armed forces pushed back against Duterte’s plans to remove US Special Forces from the region, and he relented. On July 1, US and Philippine ships conducted a joint patrol in the Sulu Sea, an area where Muslim militants moved and supplied their forces. US Navy Singapore Area Coordinator Rear Adm. Dan Gabrielson averred, “Our at-sea operations with the Philippine Navy demonstrates our commitment to the alliance and deter piracy and illegal activities.” In June, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia began conducting trilateral maritime patrols to monitor terrorist and criminal activities in the Sulu and Celebes Seas. To assist these new monitoring activities,

on July 27, the US transferred 10 new surveillance aircraft to the Philippines. They are built for maritime patrols and have a range of 1,000 nm. The whole package, which is worth \$30 million, is funded by the Obama administration's \$425 million Maritime Security Initiative and includes intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance gear.

The fighting in Marawi is not a great departure from the norm in Mindanao. Two groups linked to ISIS are at the center of the conflict: the Maute Group, which is from the local area, and an Abu Sayyaf group that came to Marawi from the island of Basilan. Efforts to stem the flow of foreign fighters from the collapsing Caliphate in Syria and Iraq have boosted cooperation among the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Fighters from Southeast Asia as well as Chechnya, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia have been killed in Marawi. The need for US support led President Duterte to refer to himself in an early August Manila meeting with Secretary Tillerson as "your humble friend in Southeast Asia." (Quite a change in rhetoric from the previous year.) Now, the US is providing grenade launchers, state-of-the-art machine guns and automatic rifles to the Philippine armed forces. US counterterrorism operations in Iraq have proved valuable for the transfer of urban counterinsurgency skills to the Philippine armed forces in Marawi. Even fighter jets provided last year by South Korea and declared useless by Duterte are now being used in Marawi.

US participation in the Marawi conflict is justified, according to Philippine spokesman Ernesto Abello, on the basis of protocols in the Mutual Defense Treaty Security Engagement Board. The treaty, the utility of which was questioned a year ago by the Duterte government, is now touted as essential for defeating the Maute Group in Marawi. As Adm. Harry Harris, commander of the US Pacific Command, put it in mid-June: "We are involved in activities in Mindanao to help the Armed Forces of the Philippines take the fight to ISIS [Islamic State] in the Philippines." On Aug. 8, Philippine media stated that the US NBC network reported that a Pentagon official said US drones could be used to strike ISIS insurgents in Marawi. However, the Philippine Armed Forces chief of staff insisted that no lethal US military operations are permitted unless the Philippines is attacked by another country.

Closer ties between Washington and Hanoi

Hanoi's interest in good relations with the Trump administration is based on two related considerations – the US is the only external balancer against China because ASEAN cannot play that role, and better trade relations, where Hanoi needs to convince Washington that Vietnam is a reliable partner. Hanoi had been a major supporter of the TPP and Trump's abandonment of the multilateral trade arrangement has been a significant disappointment for Vietnam. The US Trade Representative pointed out during the Washington visit by Prime Minister Phuc in late May that Vietnam's \$32 billion annual trade deficit with the US presented "new challenges" to bilateral relations. Prime Minister Phuc responded by noting that a large part of Vietnam's exports are the "finishing" of goods whose value chains originate in China and Korea. The Vietnamese leader also offered ideas in discussions with Trump on how US businesses could increase sales to Vietnam. The joint communiqué noted that \$8 billion in new commercial deals was reached during the visit. Three billion of that amount, according to the US Commerce Department, involved more than 23,000 US jobs. Vietnam has retained a Washington lobbying firm, the Podesta Group, to promote Hanoi's interest to the US. Another positive feature is that the US Ambassador Ted Osius, a career Foreign Service officer, speaks Vietnamese. While Vietnam has backed off a Spanish oil concession in the South China Sea after threats from China, Hanoi has proceeded with drilling plans for natural gas near the disputed Paracel Islands with ExxonMobil, the US oil giant whose most recent CEO was Secretary of State Tillerson.

On the security front, closer relations are predicted. Secretary of Defense Mattis, in discussions with Vietnamese counterpart Ngo Xuan Lich in Washington on Aug. 8, promised a visit by a US aircraft carrier in 2018 and deeper defense cooperation. Prior to Prime Minister Phuc's White House visit, the US handed over six new patrol boats and a used US Coast Guard cutter (the same kind delivered in recent years to the Philippines). Vietnam has roughly doubled the size of its Coast Guard from 2013 to 2017.

India and Japan are also assisting Vietnam's maritime buildup. A year ago, India pledged to give Hanoi a \$500 million defense credit; this

year Delhi sold its 25-mile range surface-to-air *Akash* missile to Vietnam. The *Akash* can be launched from a submarine, increasing its value. More broadly, according to Hong Kong's *Asia Times Online* on June 14, ASEAN supports a greater Indian role in the region's political and security domain. Japan and Vietnam have also signed defense agreements worth \$350 million for additional coast guard vessels.

ASEAN's future relations with the US

ASEAN is regarded by many observers as a success not so much for its achievements but rather because since its inception 50 years ago, its theretofore fractious members have mostly avoided warfare against one another and have adopted a "live and let live" attitude toward fellow members. Yet, ASEAN has no constitution (only a charter), parliament, or dispute settlement mechanism. Its headquarters in Jakarta operates on a modest annual budget of \$20 million in 2017. With decision making obtained only through consensus by its 10 members, ASEAN is a confederation of the willing.

President Obama made ASEAN a centerpiece of his "rebalance to Asia." By contrast, the Trump administration has not articulated a coherent Southeast Asia policy. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Patrick Murphy in an Aug. 10 Washington press briefing [explained](#) Secretary Tillerson's recent ARF attendance by stating the US had four objectives for his Southeast Asia meetings: "First was to demonstrate the US commitment to the Asia-Pacific region; secondly, was to advance our key security priorities in the multilateral fora that are offered through ASEAN; third, strengthen our alliances and partnerships; and fourth, underscore our commitment to a rules-based approach to the region."

This statement could have been made by the Obama administration, meaning that Tillerson has emphasized continuity toward Southeast Asia rather than change. In part, this may be because the Trump administration's Asia policy is devoted primarily to the Korean Peninsula and China, leaving Southeast Asia to professional diplomats who had been involved with the policies of Trump's predecessor. (The author had a discussion in July with a serving US ambassador in the Pacific who stated that in the absence of specific directions from Washington,

this diplomat followed policies and programs already in place.)

In their Aug. 6 communiqué, ASEAN foreign ministers pleased the US when they called for non-militarization and self-restraint by South China Sea claimants, language seen to be directed primarily at China. In ASEAN discussions as well as in the final communiqué, concerns were voiced about land reclamation "and activities in the area which have eroded trust and confidence, increased tension, and undermine peace, security, and stability." This year's final ASEAN communiqué took a stronger position than an earlier draft. Moreover, three of the Association's major foreign partners – the US, Japan, and Australia – met on the sidelines of the ARF in Manila for their Seventh Trilateral Strategic Dialogue. The ministers voiced strong opposition to coercive unilateral actions that could alter the status quo in the South China Sea and increase tension; they indicated that the three countries would continue to fly, sail, and operate where ever international law allows; urged South China Sea claimants to refrain from land reclamation, construction of outposts, militarization of disputed features; or causing physical changes in their maritime environment. The ministers also urged the claimants to make and clarify their claims based on the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), once again endorsed the Permanent Court of Arbitration July 2016 decision (that denied the legitimacy of China's nine-dash line claims in the South China Sea), and hailed ASEAN progress toward a code of conduct.

The US-Japan-Australia meeting affirmed their intention to continue maritime capacity building and defense transfers to ASEAN states. In his Aug. 8 visit to Jakarta, PACOM Commander Adm. Harris noted that Indonesian-US military collaboration included 200 combined activities. Indonesian Security Affairs Minister Wiranto stated that their discussions also covered "how the US can participate in securing the region, focusing on addressing the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's [another name for ISIS] new base in Southeast Asia."

In the decade after 9/11, Southeast Asia became a kind of second front after west Asia with respect to radical Islamic violence. *Jemmah Islamiya* conducted bombings in Indonesia and *Abu Sayyaf* plagued the southern Philippines as well as Manila. Also, southern Thailand was

harassed by a Salafi secessionist movement with links to Malaysia. Because insular Southeast Asia is primarily a maritime environment, ASEAN concerns about terrorism contain a maritime component. In particular *Abu Sayyaf* has operated kidnap-for-ransom schemes in eastern Malaysia, using small, fast boats to move their victims to Mindanao. *Abu Sayyaf* has also hijacked vessels and moved radical fighters by boat from east Malaysia to Marawi in the Philippines. US support for the Malaysia-Indonesia-Philippines joint patrols in the Sulu and Celebes Seas alongside training and intelligence in Marawi are indicators of Washington's commitment to assist Southeast Asian states in their efforts to suppress the region's jihadists.

US relations with Malaysia and Thailand

Washington's relations with Kuala Lumpur are generally correct if not always warm. The election of Donald Trump has been met with suspicion among Malaysia's political classes. The US abandonment of the TPP and a narrow threat-oriented "America First" prism focused on terrorism and China will lead to more missed economic opportunities, particularly when compared with China's active investment initiatives. The armed forces of the US and Malaysia have been a consistent bright spot in their bilateral relations as navies, air forces, and ground forces regularly exercise together, and Malaysian military officers are among those going to the United States for training and education (IMET).

However, a number of new obstacles pose problems. One is the US president's "Muslim ban" on individuals from a number of Arab states, still working its way through the US judicial system. Although no Southeast Asian country is involved, the policy is extremely unpopular in Malaysia. Another problem is found in long-term US concerns about democracy and human rights issues. A third is centered on the US Department of Justice probe of a Malaysian financial institute, IMDB, linked to Prime Minister Najib Razak and his associates.

Finally, the US and Malaysia have different interpretations regarding the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the UNCLOS. The US interpretation, also held by the majority of other states, is that external countries have the right to conduct military exercises in coastal states'

EEZs. Malaysia's position is that no country has the right to do so without the consent of the state with EEZ rights. According to the UNCLOS, states engaged in military exercises must have "due regard" for the "rights and duties" of the coastal state, including any interference with maritime resources in the EEZ.

Thai-US relations have been strained since the May 2014 coup that deposed a democratically elected government and brought the military to power again. Under US law, military aid was significantly curtailed because of the coup, and US officials during the Obama years criticized Thailand for human rights shortcomings and the absence of democratic processes. This began to change when President Trump telephoned Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha in May, inviting him to the White House. Then, at the Shangri-La Dialogue in early June, Secretary of Defense Mattis stated that Washington looked forward to Thailand's return to democracy as the junta announced its intention to hold elections after which the US would foresee "the expansion of our military-to-military relationship...." In late June, Army Chief of Staff Gen. Chalermehui Sitthisart announced that the US had approved a Thai purchase of four *Black Hawk* Helicopters that would be added to the Thai army's inventory of 12.



US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson shakes hands with Thailand's Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha during a meeting at the Government House in Bangkok (Associated Press)

During Secretary of State Tillerson's visit to Thailand in early August after the Manila ARF meeting, Prime Minister Prayut assured him that Bangkok has made progress on suppressing human trafficking and protecting intellectual property. The Thai premier also confirmed Thailand had a road map for the return of

democratic rule. (The Obama administration had a particular concern about human trafficking, while Trump focuses on intellectual property protection in line with his “America First” economic priority. With respect to the latter, Thailand was hoping to be removed from the US Priority Watch List.)

An assessment

The Obama administration over its eight years developed a policy (some would say strategy) that inserted the US into Southeast Asia’s future. That policy had three components: (1) repositioning 60 percent of US air and naval assets to the Pacific by 2020; (2) emphasizing ASEAN as the centerpiece of US diplomacy; and (3) the creation of a multilateral trade and investment arrangement – the TPP – that would embed US economic activities in the region’s future. By contrast, in its initial year, the Trump administration has no apparent Asia-Pacific strategy, and the State Department has vacancies in its Asian middle- and upper-level positions. If the current budget submission passes Congress, State’s funding will be reduced by about 30 percent, a massive cut that has been endorsed publicly by Secretary Tillerson. This seems to leave the region’s political and economic future to China. Southeast Asian leaders see a US retreat from the region and await signs from Washington that they still matter.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

MAY – AUGUST 2017

April 30, 2017: President Trump calls Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha and Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to invite them to the White House reportedly to convince them to pressure North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons program.

May 4, 2017: Secretary of State Rex Tillerson meets 10 ASEAN foreign ministers in Washington.

May 4, 2017: Eleven Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) signatories agree to continue discussions to reach a trade and investment accord despite the US departure from the partnership.

May 4-5, 2017: Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi visits Washington to meet senior US officials to discuss Jakarta's counter-narrative for a peaceful Islam to combat increasing prejudice against Muslims.

May 8-16, 2017: Annual US-Philippine joint military exercise *Balikatan* is held, though scaled back this year, excluding conflict scenarios and emphasizing humanitarian activities.

May 10, 2017: Ten Republican and Democratic senators send a letter to President Trump urging him to resume freedom of navigation patrols in the South China Sea.

May 18, 2017: The ASEAN states and China reach agreement on a framework for a code of conduct on the South China Sea. The framework will form the basis for the next round of more detailed talks.

May 21, 2017: TPP countries meet in Vietnam to consider the free trade pact minus the US. The 11 countries agree to provide a way for the US to join the TPP if it comes into existence.

May 24, 2017: *USS Dewey*, a guided-missile destroyer, makes a freedom of navigation (FON) patrol within 12 nm of Mischief Reef, a South China Sea feature occupied by China.

May 24-31, 2017: Vietnam Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc is the first Southeast Asian leader to visit the US since Donald Trump became president. This follows an April visit by Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh.

June 2, 2017: US delegation led by Sen. John McCain, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, visits Vietnam to discuss defense cooperation and humanitarian assistance.

June 2-5, 2017: Annual Shangri-La Dialogue convenes in Singapore. Secretary of Defense James Mattis delivers a major address on US security policy and meets defense officials of the 10 ASEAN countries on the sidelines.

June 11, 2017: US Embassy in Manila acknowledges that US forces in Mindanao are involved in providing intelligence and technical support for Philippine forces fighting against radical Islamists occupying parts of Marawi City.

June 12, 2017: US Navy announces that a US warship will visit Vietnam's Cam Ranh Bay for maintenance service.

June 27, 2017: State Department releases its annual [Trafficking in Persons Report](#). It upgrades Burma and Malaysia to tier two, meaning there had been a noticeable improvement in human rights practices. Humanity United criticizes the report, saying there was no justification for the upgrades and that Thailand should have been downgraded.

June 29, 2017: Thai Army Chief of Staff Gen. Chalermchai Sitthisart announces that the US will sell four *Black Hawk* helicopters to Thailand, reversing the suspension of their sale after the 2014 military coup.

July 1, 2017: Philippine and US navies conduct a joint patrol of the Sulu Sea.

July 2, 2017: Guided-missile destroyer *USS Stethem* conducts a FON operation, sailing within 12 nm of Triton Island, part of the Paracel Islands.

July 5-9, 2017: Two US warships sail into Cam Ranh Bay for the annual *Navy Engagement Activity*, the first time the exercise is held in the port.

July 11, 2017: Sen. Cory Gardner, chairman of the Subcommittee on East Asia in the keynote address to the CSIS annual conference on the South China Sea, declares that Washington made a mistake in abandoning TPP and that Congress remains “strongly pro-trade” and should “[enter] those institutions involved....”

July 14, 2017: Indonesia renames the northern reaches of its EEZ in the South China Sea as the North Natuna Sea, an assertion of sovereignty in an area that overlaps China’s nine-dash line.

July 14, 2017: Thai-US Strategic Dialogue is held in Washington. Both sides pledge support for FON patrols and over-flights as well as a stable South China Sea.

July 15, 2017: State Department issues a travel warning to US citizens about “non-essential travel” to the southern Philippines because of threats to kidnap foreigners for ransom.

July 27, 2017: United States transfers two new single-engine surveillance aircraft to the Philippines, boosting its capacity to patrol maritime borders.

Aug. 2-8, 2017: ASEAN Ministerial and post-ministerial meetings with ASEAN partners as well as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) are held in Manila. Secretary Tillerson attends.

Aug. 6, 2017: On the sidelines of the ARF, Secretary Tillerson meets President Duterte. According to reports, they do not discuss Philippine drug problems or human rights.

Aug. 7-8, 2017: Secretary Tillerson accompanied by two congressmen visits Thailand and meets Prime Minister Prayut.

Aug. 7-10, 2017: Vietnam’s Defense Minister Gen. Ngo Xuan Lich visits Washington and meets Secretary of Defense Mattis to discuss the South China Sea and strengthening Vietnam’s defense capacity.

Aug. 8, 2017: *USS San Diego* stops at Cam Ranh Bay after a routine training exercise. A US embassy press release says it is another example of the growing depth of the US-Vietnam comprehensive partnership.

Aug. 8, 2017: USPACOM Commander Adm. Harry Harris meets Security Affairs Minister Wiranto in Jakarta to discuss ISIS efforts to establish a new base in Southeast Asia.

August 9, 2017: Secretary Tillerson visits Malaysia and meets Prime Minister Najib Razak.

Aug. 21-Sept. 1, 2017: Annual US-sponsored *Southeast Asia Cooperation and Training (SEACAT)* naval exercise is conducted at several locations in Southeast Asia with participants from the US, Brunei, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand. The goal of the exercise is to increase multilateral cooperation and information sharing among navies and coast guards across South and Southeast Asia.

Aug. 23-24, 2017: USPACOM Commander Adm. Harris visits the Philippines and meets President Duterte and other senior leaders.

Aug. 24, 2017: Rakhine Advisory Commission, led by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, releases [a report](#) that says the Muslim community in Myanmar’s Rakhine State has become particularly vulnerable to human rights violations due to protracted statelessness and profound discrimination.

Aug. 25, 2017: Muslim militants stage a coordinated attack on 30 police posts and an army base in Rakhine state. At least 59 militants and 12 members of the security forces are killed. The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), a group previously known as Harakah al-Yaqin claim responsibility for the attack.