

# Comparative Connections

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## US-Southeast Asia Relations: Engagement with Burma Ramps Up

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High-level US efforts to convince Burma's military government to open its political system to the democratic opposition and release political prisoners prior to scheduled 2010 elections accelerated this quarter. President Obama, Secretary of State Clinton, and Assistant Secretary of State Campbell all weighed in during meetings in Burma and at the first ASEAN-US summit in Singapore after the annual APEC leaders meeting. The ASEAN states welcomed the first US summit with all 10 members. Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan noted that President Obama's praise for ASEAN's key role in Asian international organizations debunked claims by some that ASEAN is no longer the centerpiece of the region's architecture. Singapore's prime minister insisted that the US continues to be Asia's "indispensable" player despite the rise of China and India. In the Philippines, the Visiting Forces Agreement continues to be a political football in domestic Philippine politics as President Arroyo's political opponents claim that the US military violates the Philippine constitution by engaging in combat – an allegation denied by both the US embassy and the Philippine government. On a tip from the US, Thai authorities detained a cargo aircraft coming from North Korea with a load of sophisticated weapons in violation of a UN Security Council Resolution.

### Engagement with Burma

During the quarter, the Obama administration continued to promote "pragmatic engagement," initiated by Sen. Jim Webb, who met Burma's military leader Gen. Than Shwe soon after opposition leader and Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's house arrest was extended by 18 months for allowing an uninvited American to stay in her lakeside home. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell made it clear that any US dialogue would supplement but not replace existing sanctions "until we see concrete progress." In his report to President Obama, Webb emphasized China's increased influence in Southeast Asia as one reason why Washington needed to reevaluate its Burma policy.

The progress to which Secretary Campbell referred is democratic reform. At the United Nations in late September, speaking to the "Group of Friends of the Secretary General on Myanmar," Secretary of State Hillary Clinton averred that the "basic objectives" of US policy toward Burma have not changed: "We want credible democratic reform, a government that responds to the needs of the Burmese people, immediate, unconditional release of political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi." Moreover, the military government must also initiate a "serious dialogue with the opposition and minority ethnic groups." Aung San Suu Kyi has reportedly backed the

Obama administration's engagement policy as long as it includes a role for her opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD).

At a media briefing on Sept. 28, Secretary Campbell stated that the Obama administration's review of Burma policy began in March 2009 and that it involved discussions with several "stakeholders," including Congress, the international community, and elements of the NLD inside Burma. He went on to note that for the first time representatives of the junta have "shown an interest in engaging with the United States" as revealed in Sen. Webb's meeting with Gen. Than Shwe, and subsequent discussions with Burma's Prime Minister Gen. Thien Sein, in the US. While Campbell acknowledged skepticism about the scheduled 2010 elections in Burma, expecting that they will be neither "free or fair," nevertheless, he was prepared to sustain US efforts to "encourage Burma to be more open," beyond the elections and was heartened by Burma's cooperation "behind the scenes" in implementing UNSC Resolution 1874 when the Burmese government refused access to a North Korean ship that might have been exporting weapons in violation of that resolution.

In an August 2009 report, the highly respected International Crisis Group recommended that opposition groups in Burma take part in the 2010 elections even though they would undoubtedly entrench the military's power because the changes would at least establish "shared political spaces – the legislatures and perhaps the Cabinet – where cooperation could be fostered." In a late September Senate Committee on Foreign Relations hearing, Secretary Campbell added that Aung San Suu Kyi welcomes the new US approach, though "there must be a parallel dialogue with the political opposition, and we support that." On Oct. 1, Aung San Suu Kyi sent a letter to Than Shwe offering to work with him in helping to ease sanctions from the West. In her letter, she requested a meeting with the US charge d'affaires and ambassadors from the EU and Australia. On Oct. 10, the junta granted her request.

Washington's interest in political change in Burma also extends to the country's impact on regional security, including narcotics and human trafficking as well as the large number of minority ethnic groups that have fled to neighboring countries. The primary US lever in dealings with the junta is the prospect for Burma's access to the US market for labor-intensive production and light manufacturing. If the junta provides an opening to the NLD's participation in the 2010 elections, Burma could be on a glide path to the lifting of US economic sanctions. However, it should also be noted that, in fact, Burma has not been "isolated" for some time. Its external trade in 2008 was almost 2.5 times that of 1997, and some \$10.7 billion worth of foreign direct investment projects have been inaugurated since the 1997 US ban on new investments. Moreover 360,000 tourists entered the country in fiscal year 2007-08. Thus, the junta may be less interested in economic incentives from the US than in acquiring an improved political relationship to balance China's influence.

In an early November visit, Secretary Campbell met both Aung San Suu Kyi and Prime Minister Gen. Thien Sein, telling the latter that reconciliation with Burma's democratic opposition will lead to better relations with Washington. Campbell is the highest level US official to visit Burma in more than a decade. He was accompanied by Deputy Assistant Secretary Scot Marciel, who doubles as the first (nonresident) US ambassador to ASEAN. On Nov. 5, Marciel appeared to up the ante for improved relations by stating it would be "very hard" for the 2010

elections to be considered legitimate without the release of democratic opposition detainees and the participation of Aung San Suu Kyi. As yet, the opposition NLD has not indicated whether it would participate in the polls.

Subsequent to these meetings in Burma, at the first US-ASEAN summit in Singapore, on the sidelines of the APEC leaders gathering, President Obama on Nov. 19 personally urged Burma's prime minister to release Aung San Suu Kyi – a request, however, that did not make it into the summit communiqué. Before arriving in Singapore, Obama insisted that the release of all political prisoners, an end to conflicts with minority groups, and a “genuine dialogue” with the opposition and minorities comprise “a precondition for any softening of sanctions against the country's military junta.” Obama's discussion with Prime Minister Thein Sein was the first meeting with a US head of state since 1966.

The United States also turned to the ASEAN states individually and through the group. At the APEC meeting on Nov. 12, Secretary Clinton urged them to “reach out to the Burmese leadership, persuade them it is time to start planning for free, fair, and credible elections in 2010.” Clinton went on to say that Southeast Asian states “have an especially important role to play in encouraging the Burmese government to move forward on reform, to start a meaningful internal dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi, political parties, and ethnic minorities.” Nevertheless, she seemed to weaken her own argument by concluding that these political changes can only be solved by “the Burmese people themselves, so we are not setting or dictating conditions.”

Although it seems that Than Shwe's regime seeks international approval for its forthcoming elections, as renowned Burma specialist David Steinberg pointed out in a Dec. 3 *PacNet Newsletter*, foreign observers have not laid out conditions for free and fair elections. Steinberg suggests that in addition to fair vote counting, these should include relaxation of the rigid censorship law, allowing participation of the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi, who should be released from house arrest, and altering the new constitution so that provisions designed specifically to prevent her candidacy would be removed. These changes would be a very high bar for the junta to hurdle.

### **ASEAN welcomes more robust US role; US aids Indonesia in the wake of a disaster**

ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan seized on President Obama's first summit with the leaders of ASEAN member states to debunk the views that ASEAN no longer plays a central role in Asia's evolving intergovernmental architecture. Insisting that Obama's citation of ASEAN's key role in promoting Southeast Asian democratization and the appointment of a resident US ambassador to ASEAN illustrated its continued importance, Surin claimed that ASEAN would remain “the cornerstone of the region's architecture.” Surin's defense of ASEAN appears to be a rejoinder to the October meeting of 16 Asia-Pacific leaders in Thailand at which the Australian and Japanese prime ministers called for a new regional bloc that would increase Asia's clout in global affairs.

ASEAN leaders indicated that although the first US-ASEAN summit was much appreciated (and long overdue), they would prefer that future meetings be held annually and as stand-alone events rather than as add-ons to the APEC meetings because Cambodia, Laos, and Burma are not part of

APEC. To demonstrate the importance Washington attaches to Southeast Asia, President Obama's entourage for both APEC and the ASEAN summit included Secretary of State Clinton, Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner, Commerce Secretary Gary Locke, and US Trade Representative Ron Kirk. As Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stated before the summit, the US remains the "indispensable" player despite the rise of China and India.

In a smaller scale replay of US aid to Indonesia in the aftermath of the December 2004 tsunami, the archipelago was hit by a powerful earthquake on Oct. 5 that left hundreds of thousands homeless on Sumatra. Within two days US forces set up a field hospital and rerouted three Navy ships loaded with supplies, food, and heavy equipment to clear roads and excavate buildings. Eleven doctors were flown in from the US and Japan opened a 300-bed field hospital outside Padang. While the humanitarian response to yet another Indonesian natural disaster was appreciated, commentators expressed disappointment that President Obama bypassed the country on his November visit to Singapore. The director of Indonesia's most prominent think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, was quoted on an internet news site as saying that Obama's decision not to visit Indonesia makes his description of the country as a close friend "less meaningful."

President Obama did meet Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono at the APEC meeting and praised Indonesia's importance as a G20 member, democratic country, as well as the world's largest Islamic country. He also stated that Indonesia could serve as a model for interfaith relations and promised to visit Indonesia in 2010 at the invitation of Yudhoyono. Less euphoric about the relationship, the Indonesian president, in an address to APEC on Nov. 13, warned that the world economy could no longer rely on a single engine for growth, "like the United States." Asian countries should open their trade and investment flow to each other so that "multipolar economic growth" can be achieved.

### **US military presence remains hot topic in the Philippines**

US military advisors in the southern Philippines continue to be a political football in domestic politics with leftist and nationalist opposition to Philippine President Arroyo insisting on either the renegotiation or abrogation of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA). US Ambassador Kristie Kenney in late September stated that the US was happy with the agreement and saw no need to renegotiate. One focus of the Philippine opposition is an addendum to the original VFA that was not submitted to the country's Senate for approval, dubbed VFA2. It allows US military personnel accused of a crime to be detained in the US embassy rather than in a Philippine jail. The opposition also claims that although US troops are ostensibly involved only in temporary training exercises, in fact, they have been embedded in the southern Philippines for almost a decade in violation of the Philippine Constitution, which prohibits foreign forces from engaging in combat in the country. Both the US and Philippine governments deny that US advisors engage in combat, insisting that their mission is confined exclusively to training the Philippine army. Philippine authorities say that US Special Forces' training, begun in 2001, has helped to reduce the number of Abu Sayyaf terrorists from about 1,000 to between 300 and 400.

While US intelligence and new weaponry helped Philippine soldiers capture or kill the original leaders of Abu Sayyaf, in recent years, younger, more radical rebels have taken their place and

are even more aggressive. According to a Nov. 12 *Agence France Presse* report, 48 Filipino soldiers and at least 70 Abu Sayyaf militants have been killed in 2009. One US official stated that the Mindanao militants are now employing “tactics and strategies that have been perfected in Iraq...,” including roadside bombs. Philippine military intelligence claims that Abu Sayyaf is primarily funded through kidnapping and extortion and that 80 percent of its members are under 25 years of age and high school dropouts lured by the monetary rewards of criminal activity.

On Sept. 29, two US soldiers and a Filipino Marine were killed in Sulu in a landmine explosion while helping to build a school, the first deadly attack on US forces since 2002. The Philippine chief of the Western Mindanao Command, Maj. Gen. Ben Dolorfino, claimed that the attack showed Abu Sayyaf was being trained by bomb experts from Indonesian terrorist organization Jemmah Islamiyah, who had sought refuge in the southern Philippines. For a time thereafter, US forces in the south were confined to their base during a Pentagon investigation of the incident.

### **Other Southeast Asian developments**

At the US-ASEAN Business Council meeting in Washington, D.C. in late October, **Singapore’s** elder statesman and Minister Mentor Lee Kwan Yew noted that a number of Asian countries were vying for leadership positions in the region, including China, Japan, India, Australia, and South Korea. However, ASEAN still believes “that the US remains irreplaceable in East Asia. Nevertheless, new regional architecture, such as an East Asian Community, will be the new route for regional stability and ASEAN plans to continue to be at the center of these developments as it has been in APEC, ASEAN Plus 3, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the East Asia Summit. However, “ASEAN lacks strategic weight.” That is why all ASEAN countries “welcomed Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s decision to re-engage Southeast Asia.” Lee went on to praise the US decision to sign ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation as well as hold a summit with all ASEAN leaders in Singapore, including Burma for the first time. In an implicit criticism of Japan, Malaysia and perhaps China, Lee said: “It would be a serious mistake for the region to define East Asia in closed, or worse, racial terms.” He concluded by noting that the US is still the world’s largest economy and that the dollar will remain its primary reserve currency, though other currencies are beginning to share that role. Finally, he insisted that “US core interests require that it remains the superior power on the Pacific.”

Based on a tip from the US intelligence community in mid-December, authorities in **Thailand** seized a cargo plane from North Korea loaded with conventional arms. Both US and Thai officials cited the seizure as a success in efforts to enforce United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1874 banning weapons exports by the North Korean government. That resolution was passed by the UNSC in 2009 after the DPRK conducted its second nuclear test. A great deal of speculation surrounds the ultimate destination for the armaments ranging from Iran to Pakistan, though no definite conclusion had been reached by late December.

On Dec. 15, Secretary of State Clinton praised “the strong action taken by the Thais ... [which] demonstrates the importance of international solidarity behind the sanctions that were adopted at the United Nations earlier this year.” US Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair in a Dec. 19 contribution to the *Washington Post* applauded the weapons interdiction as an example of “[t]eamwork among different agencies in the United States and partners abroad...”

Some Thai military officers tried to link the arms seizure to domestic instability in southern Thailand, saying that Thai cooperation with the US could turn international terrorist attention to assist the southern insurgency – a speculation discredited in a Dec. 18 editorial published in *The Nation Online*. On Dec. 19, the Russian daily *Kommersant* reported that the cargo plane was not scheduled to refuel in Bangkok at all but had been forced to land there by Thai fighter planes after it entered Thai airspace.

On Dec. 28, Thailand began the forcible repatriation to Laos of 4,000 Hmong refugees who had been kept at a remote camp near the Lao border. The refugees, a mixture of those who fear persecution as well as economic migrants, are the last of about 150,000 Hmong who fled to Thailand in the wake of the Second Indochina War in 1975. Most were resettled in the United States. The Hmong had aided US forces fighting the communist government in Laos from the 1960s to 1975 and fear persecution if returned because a low-level Hmong insurgency continues in Laos. The US, UN, and numerous human rights groups have protested the repatriation, although the Thai government claims it has been given assurances that the Hmong returnees will be well treated. On Dec. 27, US Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration Eric Schwartz said he recently met Thai officials and offered to assist with third-country asylum for political refugees. He went on to say that Thailand rejected his offer.

At the ASEAN-US summit in Singapore, President Obama was reported by the Malaysian news agency *Bernama* on Nov. 16 to have praised **Malaysia's** role in tackling terrorism, serving as an intermediary in an effort to resolve the conflict in the southern Philippines, maintaining security in the Malacca Strait, and checking human trafficking to third countries. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak also disclosed that Obama requested Malaysia's assistance in arranging interfaith dialogues with Muslim countries. At the same ASEAN-US meeting, Malaysia's Trade Minister Mustapa Mohamed stated he was told that Washington was reducing its emphasis on bilateral free trade and is now emphasizing a regional approach. US-Malaysian bilateral trade negotiations have bogged down on the sensitive issue of Malaysia's system of affirmative action that favors Malays. In particular, the US has sought access to Malaysian state contracts that are now directed to Malays and indigenous minorities (*bumiputra*).

While US relations with **Cambodia** are generally positive, human rights concerns persist. Washington aids Cambodia's demining, public health, education, and even its military, as stated by Cambodia's Foreign Minister Hor Namhong in early October. In response to human rights complaints from the US, the Cambodian official stated that his country had over 100 groups working on human rights, including the well-known Asia Watch. Since their criticisms can be found in the Cambodian press and in the National Assembly, this clearly shows Cambodia honors freedom of expression. At the same time, he cautioned that freedom of expression should not be confused with defamation and that all democratic countries have laws against defamation. Despite Phnom Penh's claim to respect human rights, the government forcibly repatriated 20 Uighur refugees on Dec. 18 at China's insistence in violation of the international convention on refugees and over the objections of the UN, US, and European Union. Soon after the Uighurs' return to China, Beijing signed aid agreements with Phnom Penh totaling over \$1 billion.

## Looking ahead

High-level US attention to Southeast Asia has clearly increased in the Obama administration's first year, notably the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, the appointment of a US ambassador to ASEAN, enhanced cooperation with ASEAN in the run-up to the 2010 election in Burma, and the first US-ASEAN summit. As Asian states discuss the prospect for new regional architecture – an East Asia Community – it is important that Washington be a part of these deliberations. Most ASEAN members do not want to see the US excluded from any new important Asian group, so, US involvement in these discussions would be welcome. A step in this direction could be a US application for membership in the East Asia Summit – the venue for much of the discussion about future regional organization. Finally, because relations with Indonesia are such an important component of US-Southeast Asian ties, President Obama should keep his promise to visit his “Asia home” in 2010.

### Chronology of US - Southeast Asian Relations October - December 2009

**Oct. 1, 2009:** President Barack Obama says that “the United States stands ready to help in this time of need” after a devastating earthquake struck Padang Sumatra, killing over 1,000 people.

**Oct. 3, 2009:** The US embassy in Jakarta says it has already provided \$300,000 in aid to victims of the Padang earthquake and has earmarked an additional \$3 million.

**Oct. 7, 2009:** Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell at a US Senate hearing says baseline conditions for Burma's electoral process must include release of all political prisoners, open candidacies, free media, and an open campaign.

**Oct. 9, 2009:** US forces bring aid to flooded areas around the Philippine capital and to the northern Philippines after that area was affected by a devastating storm.

**Oct. 9, 2009:** US Navy ships arrive in Padang, Sumatra to distribute aid and help survivors of the previous week's earthquake. Navy helicopters evacuate survivors and provide food and other materials to villages cut off by the quake.

**Oct. 18, 2009:** More than 1,000 Indonesian and US Marines engage in a joint exercise in East Java to help the Americans learn about jungle warfare from the Indonesians while the latter learn about urban warfare from the Americans.

**Oct. 20-30, 2009:** On a 10-day US visit, Singapore's founding father and Minister Mentor Lee Kwan Yew meets Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Secretary of Treasury Timothy Geithner, Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke, Director of the National Economic Council Lawrence Summers, as well as President Obama.

**Oct. 21, 2009:** Secretary Campbell announces at a House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee hearing that the US will send a high-level fact-finding mission to Burma.

**Oct. 23-25, 2009:** The fourth East Asia Summit convenes in Hua Hin, Thailand, involving ASEAN, China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, and New Zealand. Topics covered include the economic crisis, food and energy, climate change, and natural disasters.

**Oct. 26, 2009:** US Ambassador to the Philippines Kristie Kenney says it is up to the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front to determine what role the US might play in their peace process.

**Oct. 27, 2009.** Singapore hosts a Proliferation Security Initiative exercise with 2,000 personnel, 18 ships, and eight planes from several countries, including Japan and the US. The exercise involves interdicting a ship carrying weapons of mass destruction.

**Nov. 1-24, 2009:** Singapore air and ground forces engage in their most complex air-ground joint exercises with 540 personnel at Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

**Nov. 3-4, 2009:** Secretary Campbell and Deputy Assistant Secretary Scot Marciel travel to Burma to meet senior officials of the government, members of the opposition including Aung San Suu Kyi, and representatives of ethnic groups.

**Nov. 4, 2009:** Secretary Campbell says that the US will not lift sanctions on Burma until there is some progress toward democracy.

**Nov. 9, 2009:** The lawyer for Aung San Suu Kyi says she is hopeful that US engagement with the country's military rulers will spur democratic reforms.

**Nov. 9, 2009:** US and Indonesian Navy Special Forces begin a 24-day joint exercise on Sumatra, focusing on counter-terrorism.

**Nov. 11-13, 2009:** Secretary Clinton visits the Philippines to express US support in the wake of devastating typhoons. She also urges Asian nations to encourage Burma's leadership to hold "free, fair, and credible elections."

**Nov. 13-15, 2009:** The annual APEC leaders meeting is held in Singapore.

**Nov. 15, 2009:** President Obama holds a one-day summit with ASEAN leaders in Singapore after the conclusion of the annual APEC meeting. In the past, no such summit was held because of the US refusal to meet with Burma's ruling junta.

**Nov. 15, 2009.** The US and ASEAN agree that Burma's 2010 elections must be "free, fair, and transparent" to be credible.

**Dec. 3, 2009:** The Singapore Foreign Ministry welcomes President Obama's continued commitment in Afghanistan as "a positive and pragmatic way forward."

**Dec. 3, 2009:** China and Thailand announce they will conduct their first joint military exercise next year to which the US will be invited to send observers.

**Dec. 11, 2009:** The US and Indonesia sign an agreement establishing a Peace Corps program that will begin in mid-2010. The first group of 25 volunteers will be English language teachers.

**Dec. 11, 2009:** Thai authorities, based on information from US intelligence, detain a cargo plane from North Korea loaded with weapons bound for an undetermined destination. Seizure of the aircraft was authorized by UN Security Council Resolution 1874.

**Dec. 14, 2009:** The US signs an agreement with Cambodia to help Phnom Penh strengthen seaport security against smuggling of nuclear and other radioactive material.

**Dec. 17, 2009:** On a visit to Spain, Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet applauds President Obama's first year in office as "very positive" and "courageous."

**Dec. 19, 2009:** Despite objections from the US and UN, Cambodia deports 20 Uighur refugees who had sought asylum back to China. A US embassy spokesman said it was wrong to expel the Uighurs "without the benefit of a credible refugee determination process."

**Dec. 24, 2009:** Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajira, in response to objections by US senators and human rights groups about the possible expulsion of 4,000 ethnic Hmong to Laos, states his government "will act according to the law, and we will be very careful." The Hmong, who fought on the US side in the Second Indochina War, fear political persecution if repatriated.

**Dec. 28, 2009:** Thailand begins repatriating 4,000 Hmong refugees to Laos despite pleas from the US, UN, and human rights groups. Some of the Hmong are eligible for UN refugee status.