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**US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS**

## ENGAGEMENT IN ABSENTIA? ASEAN WORRIES OVER LACK OF US ATTENTION

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Stung by a US delegation to the East Asia Summit of lower rank than previous years, ASEAN leaders retaliated by presenting National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien with a partial boycott of the adjacent US-ASEAN Summit. The Trump administration brushed off the incident with a State Department [fact sheet](#) that began, "US engagement with the ten member states of ASEAN has never been stronger."

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Although ASEAN's disappointment was real, the record suggests that Washington had stepped up momentum in relations with Southeast Asia in the final months of 2019. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper made his Southeast Asia debut in his new capacity at the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus in November. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell and Commander of the US Pacific Fleet Adm. John Aquilino also visited Southeast Asian countries in their new roles. Institutionally, the US and ASEAN crossed new thresholds: an agreement to begin formal negotiations on linking the ASEAN Common Window to US electronic customs; inauguration of the US-ASEAN Maritime Exercises; and the first US-ASEAN Dialogue on Cybersecurity.

This period was not without divergence, even disagreement, between the United States and ASEAN countries. Washington continued to press Southeast Asian leaders to choose a Western hardware provider for fifth-generation (5G) technology over Chinese companies, particularly Huawei. And although neither ASEAN nor Myanmar's neighbors support repression of the Muslim Rohingya by the Myanmar Armed Forces (Tatmadaw), ASEAN's consensus-based process makes direct action difficult.

But the strongest dynamic in US relations with Southeast Asia in late 2019 remained the impact of US-China trade tensions. Some Southeast Asian countries, particularly Vietnam, benefit from diversion of trade and investment, but that advantage is offset by a pervasive climate of trade uncertainty and continued pressure from Washington when trade surpluses with the United States increase. In mid-December, the announcement that China and the United States had reached agreement on the [first phase](#) of a trade agreement was met with some relief in Southeast Asia, but this was not viewed as a resolution to US-China trade friction.

The latter months of 2019 also saw internal political adjustments and issues in Southeast Asia. Inaugurated for a second term as president, Indonesia's Joko Widodo announced his cabinet picks, intended to invigorate economic reform. However, the appointment of his political rival, Prabowo Subianto, as defense minister adds a wrinkle to US-Indonesia security relations. In Thailand, judicial proceedings against a prominent opposition

figure raised questions about the strength of Thailand's newly revived democracy.

### Diplomatic Spat

Thailand had hoped to cap its year as ASEAN chair with a high-profile East Asia Summit (EAS) that brought US President Donald Trump to Bangkok for the first time in his presidency. From the start, however, the chances of Trump attending were slim, since he was more focused on the APEC meeting that had been expected to take place in Chile, and the anticipated announcement—with Chinese President Xi Jinping—of the conclusion of the first phase of a new trade agreement. When Chilean President Sebastián Piñera cancelled the APEC meeting (and a major climate change conference), Bangkok renewed hope that Trump would attend the EAS.

At the last minute, the White House [decided to send](#) National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien in Trump's place. Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross was also in the delegation, but not a participant; his role in Bangkok was as co-chair of a business forum that brought a number of high-profile US companies to Southeast Asia. The US delegation was the lowest-ranking ever since the United States entered the EAS in 2011. The summit also lacked Xi, who, like Trump, had opted for Chile over Bangkok, but Premier Li Keqiang attended in his place. Russian President Vladimir Putin was also absent, but he customarily does not attend the EAS. As with the Shangri-La Dialogue in June, China overshadowed the United States at the EAS by virtue of its higher representation.

Responding to the perceived snub from Washington, only [three heads of government](#)—from Thailand (then 2019 ASEAN chair); Vietnam (the 2020 ASEAN chair); and Laos (the current ASEAN Coordinator for relations with the United States)—attended the US-ASEAN Summit on the margins of the EAS. The other seven ASEAN states sent foreign ministers. The Trump administration likely anticipated a negative response: O'Brien, co-chair of the US-ASEAN Summit, came armed with an invitation from Trump for a special US-ASEAN Summit in the United States in early 2020. No agreement on a time or place for the meeting was reached in Bangkok, and ASEAN leaders are of mixed feelings about its utility under difficult political circumstances in the United States.

## Raising the US Defense Profile

Another ASEAN meeting, the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus in Bangkok Nov. 16-17, was the occasion for Mark Esper, the new US secretary of defense, to initiate relations with his Southeast Asian counterparts. Esper followed the ADMM-Plus with visits to the Philippines and Vietnam. Throughout his trip, Esper followed the hard line on China that has been the hallmark of the Trump administration at regional and security meetings over the past year. This extends to new US criticism of the ASEAN-China Code of Conduct on the South China Sea negotiation process, to the extent that Singapore Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen publicly pushed back at the ADMM-Plus, a sign of growing ASEAN concern over US-China tensions.

While in Manila, Esper [encouraged](#) Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana to be more vocal publicly about Chinese incursions into the Philippine EEZ. As Secretary of State Pompeo did when he visited the Philippines in March, Esper reaffirmed that the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) covered attacks on Philippine naval vessels in the South China Sea. Although no assurances were made, Esper did not actively oppose Lorenzana's request to review the MDT; Manila is expected to make a formal request to do so at the next meeting of the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Board in 2020. In Hanoi, Esper announced that the Pentagon would give a second Coast Guard cutter to Vietnam.

## The Prabowo Dilemma

Arguably the most significant moment of Esper's Southeast Asia trip was his bilateral meeting with new Indonesian Defense Minister [Prabowo Subianto](#) on the margins of the ADMM-Plus. During the regional meeting, Prabowo was conspicuously courted by his counterparts from China and Russia, signalling a new competition for security ties with Indonesia. In the 1990s US-Indonesia security relations were strained by the human rights abuses of Kopassus, the Indonesian military's special forces unit, in East Timor and against student protestors. US military assistance to Indonesia was removed under sanctions heavily endorsed by the US Congress. Since then, Prabowo has been denied entry into the United States, most recently in 2012.

Different circumstances may apply in the current security environment in Southeast Asia. The return of Islamic State fighters to Southeast Asia from the Middle East; rising religious tensions in the region; and increasing Chinese assertiveness in regional waters have intensified US-Indonesian security relations. As a result, since February 2018 the Pentagon has quietly attempted to resume ties with Kopassus, leaving open the question of whether it should also be free to work with former Kopassus leaders.

Prabowo's selection as defense minister pushes this question into new territory. Washington and Jakarta agreed (through public press releases) that the meeting between Esper and Prabowo was cordial, even productive. The two defense officials agreed that a greater number of Indonesian military officers would receive US training, a traditional signal of increased momentum in US relations with a security partner. Esper was invited to visit Indonesia and said that he looks forward to doing so in the near future.



*Figure 1 US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper and Indonesian Prime Minister Prabowo Subianto meet on the margins of the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus in Bangkok on November 17, 2019. Photo: jakartaglobe.id*

## Trade: Waiting the Wings

With the first phase of a US-China trade agreement scheduled for signing on Jan. 15, Southeast Asian leaders are relieved that Beijing and Washington have come to terms on aspects of their trade dispute. However, enforcement mechanisms for reported aspects of the first phase, such as China's agreement to cease pressuring US companies for technology transfer, are unclear. This is in keeping with a growing perception in Southeast Asia that the first phase was a victory for China: Beijing was able to dodge significant structural changes,

particularly on government subsidies and the use of state-owned enterprises. Such issues are reserved for the second phase, the timing and outcome of which are uncertain.

More fundamentally, the past year in US-China trade relations and its impact on Southeast Asia, have raised serious issues about the future direction of international trade and the principles on which it will operate. The Trump administration's trade policy shows signs of a managed trade approach. The first phase of the China agreement contains specific levels for Chinese imports of US products, for example. This is a corollary to Washington's insistence that Southeast Asian countries reduce their trade surpluses with the United States by increasing their imports. Equally important, it signals a retreat by the United States from the global liberal trade order.

That Southeast Asia is still committed to that order is evident in ASEAN's attempts to bring the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) to completion. Apart from the reduced US delegation in Bangkok, ASEAN was also disappointed that the RCEP agreement, scheduled to be formalized on the margins of the EAS, was derailed at the last minute when India [refused to sign](#). Hanoi has set February of this year as the new target date for completion; ASEAN hopes that Tokyo will be able to persuade New Delhi to sign, but there was little indication of that at year's end. Nevertheless, even without India RCEP will become the world's largest trading bloc, including 45% of the global population and a third of the world's GDP.

In the near term, it is less clear the extent to which Southeast Asia will benefit from the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Trade Partnership (CPTPP). A reconfiguration of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) following US withdrawal, the CPTPP has only two of the four Southeast Asian TPP partners, Singapore and Vietnam—Brunei and Malaysia have yet to ratify. The original lure of the TPP was greater access to the US market in a regional FTA. Although the CPTPP is viewed by some countries, particularly Australia, as a potential “docking station” for the US to return to the TPP, Southeast Asians see no hope of that if Trump is re-elected in 2020.

Nor do Southeast Asian trade ministers see much hope for new and more liberal trade agreements with the United States in the near

term. If anything, the momentum seems to be in the opposite direction: Washington has suspended trade preferences for Thailand and Indonesia under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP); Bangkok and Jakarta are now focused on attempting to negotiate their partial or full restoration. However, US trade officials point out, with justification, that there is room for expansion in regional and bilateral US trade and investment framework agreements (TIFAs). In late 2019, the US and ASEAN agreed to begin formal negotiations to link the ASEAN Single Customs Window to US electronic customs, which is expected to streamline and facilitate US-Southeast Asian trade.

### The Rohingya in Focus

For much of 2019, the Trump administration's singular focus in its human rights policy for Southeast Asia has been the plight of the Muslim Rohingya in Myanmar, most of whom are now in camps in Bangladesh. Since the outbreak of violence in August 2017 in Rakhine State, and the crackdown on Rohingya by Myanmar's armed forces, US relations with Myanmar have been on a downward slide, particularly in the nascent military-to-military relationship developing since the 2012 elections. Formal dialogue between the two militaries has been suspended and the Department of Defense depends primarily on multilateral events (usually organized by ASEAN) for contact with the Tatmadaw. Myanmar was included in the first-ever US-ASEAN Maritime Exercises in September in Thailand, but as observers rather than full members, and over the vociferous objections of the US Congress.



Figure 2 State Counselor Aung Sang Suu Kyi arrives at the Hague to lead Myanmar's defense against charges of genocide before the International Court of Justice, December 14, 2019. Photo: thehindu.com

With nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees still in Bangladesh and no tangible near-term prospects for improvement in the situation, Congress has increased pressure on Myanmar through enhanced sanctions. However, the legislature has shown some restraint: there seems to be little desire on the Hill to return to the broad sanctions of the 1990s. On June 11, H.R. 3190, the Burma Unified through Rigorous Military Accountability Act of 2019 was introduced in the House of Representatives. Over three months, the bill acquired 54 sponsors—a large number—from both Democratic and Republican quarters. On Sept. 24 the bill was approved in the House by a [large margin](#)—95% in favor—and referred to the Senate, where it is under consideration by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. It is expected to be approved in the Senate and become law.

The bill has three main objectives: (1) to extend the current policy of “targeted” sanctions; (2) to increase assistance to minorities; and (3) to attempt to weaken the Tatmadaw’s financial base by tightening restrictions on Myanmar gem imports to the United States (without prohibiting them altogether). Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing and three of his top generals [were entered](#) onto the US Treasury Department’s list of Specifically Designated Nationals (SPD) in August; the new legislation would encourage the administration to dig deeper and include lower-level officials involved in the 2017 crackdown. It would also narrow the number of Myanmar gem companies permitted to export to the United States and require that the State Department report to Congress on war crimes in Myanmar.

The Rohingya issue was given even higher profile in December when Myanmar was called to the International Court of Justice in The Hague in December to respond to charges of genocide related to the Rohingya brought by Gambia (with the backing of the 57 members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation). Aung Sang Suu Kyi, in her capacity as foreign minister, chose to lead her country’s delegation to the ICJ and to make remarks [defending the government](#) against the charges. Her defense was centered on two points: that the Tatmadaw was responding to an attack by Rohingya insurgents in August 2017, and that the government had conducted an accountability exercise to investigate the crackdown and punish those responsible for it. She also

admitted that the force of the military’s response “may have been considered excessive by some.” Although the government in fact court-martialed some military officials involved in the events of 2017, human-rights groups maintain that the probe was neither wide nor deep, and that the offenders were given light sentences.

The case could take years before a final ruling, but Gambia has asked the ICJ for an order of provisional measures to protect the Rohingya. If an order is issued, it will likely be a signal for the United Nations Security Council to consider a binding resolution laying out consequences for genocidal acts on the part of the Tatmadaw. Rulings on provisional measures are usually made quickly in the ICJ, and a decision could come in early 2020.

### Cybersecurity and the 5G Debate

On Oct. 3 the United States and ASEAN conducted their first [formal dialogue](#) on cybersecurity, an outgrowth of a joint statement released at the US-ASEAN meeting on the margins of the ASEAN Regional Forum in Bangkok in August. The dialogue took place in Singapore and co-chaired by Laos and the United States. The joint statement issued after the dialogue indicated that the group discussed 5G wireless networks, the digital economy, and cyber capacity-building. As with most new forms of cooperation between ASEAN and its external partners, however, the primary “deliverable” was the meeting itself. It is expected that the dialogue will continue on an annual basis, but no firm plans for a 2020 meeting have been made.

Three main partners have emerged for ASEAN to help strengthen cybersecurity: Japan, the United States, and the European Union. There is no clear division of labor among these three as yet, but a rudimentary framework is beginning to emerge. Japan has become the primary provider of expertise and funds for training in cybersecurity, primarily through the ASEAN-Japan Cybersecurity Capacity Building Center (AJCCBC) in Bangkok, which opened in 2018. Courses in cyber defense, forensics, and malware analysis are included in the curriculum.

The European Union provides assistance in regulatory reform for cybersecurity, through dialogue and through the negotiation of its free

trade agreements with individual ASEAN states. As in other areas of regional integration, ASEAN looks to the EU as a model for the role of cybersecurity in economic integration.

It is not yet clear what role the United States will play in this division of labor other than convening regional dialogues. One blot in Southeast Asia's perception of Washington as a neutral broker in cybersecurity is the intense campaign to dissuade Southeast Asian countries from acquiring 5G networks from Chinese companies such as Huawei Technologies. Below the regional level, however, the United States provides considerable bilateral assistance on cybersecurity to ASEAN states, primarily through military-to-military relations.

Most Southeast Asian states are on the fence about the choice of a 5G provider, and some are attempting to split the difference between China and the West. In October the Viettel Group, Vietnam's largest mobile carrier, announced that it would launch a trial service of 5G networks in Lao; the group already operates in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar. While Viettel rejects using equipment from Huawei domestically, it has not specified whether it will use Chinese technology for its networks in other parts of Southeast Asia. Viettel is owned by Vietnam's Ministry of National Defense, and its technology choices carry considerable weight in Vietnam and in Southeast Asia.



Figure 3 Southeast Asia hopes to side-step pressure from Washington to choose between Chinese or Western 5G providers. Photo: aspistrategist.org.au

### Political Transitions and Adjustments

When Indonesian President Joko Widodo's announced his cabinet picks in October, [his choice](#) of his chief political rival, former Gen. Prabowo Subianto, as defense minister was

motivated largely by a desire to prevent Prabowo's party, Gerindra, from blocking government reform initiatives. Prabowo also has more support from Indonesia's Islamic community, and his inclusion in the cabinet, as well as that of Vice President Ma'ruf Amin (himself a cleric), was designed to shore up critical religious support.

When he was elected to a second term in April, Joko Widodo made clear that his main policy priorities would be economic, to stimulate growth and help Indonesia avoid the "middle income trap." These include attracting more investment for Indonesia, developing human capital, job creation, and infrastructure spending. Although his investment goals have an obvious international dimension, this list is largely domestic. That the newly reelected president has planned no major new initiatives in foreign policy was reinforced with his re-appointment of Retno Marsudi as foreign minister.

To encourage this economic reform and public acceptance of it, the cabinet is a mixture of political figures, technocrats, and a few young entrepreneurs who Joko hopes will attract support from Indonesia's millennials (42% of Indonesians are under age 25). Although he is not a member of the economic team per se, the surprise appointment of 35-year-old Harvard-trained Nadiem Makarim, founder of the ride-sharing Gojek, as minister of culture and education is considered a nod to the "new economy."

In Thailand, the challenge for Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha has been less in forming a Cabinet and more in managing the unwieldy government coalition in Parliament. His civilian pro-military government, formed after March elections after five years of junta rule, began with an 19-party coalition. His backup is the appointed senate, most of whose 250 members come from or were chosen by the military. Nevertheless, in the lower house the ruling coalition holds only a slim margin, which will make the passage of each budget or major law a challenge for Prayuth. Historically, large government coalitions stimulate money politics in Thailand and raise corruption, which in turn increases the chances of a military takeover.

For the time being, however, the political focus is on Thailand's second-largest opposition party, the Future Forward Party, and its

embattled leader, tycoon Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit. On Nov. 20 Thantahorn was [convicted](#) by the Thai Constitutional Court of conflict of interest, having made investments in a media company while he was campaigning for Parliament, and the court stripped him of his parliamentary seat. FFP leaders fear an attack on the party itself through the courts, a repeat of the dissolution of two pro-Thaksin parties in the late 2000s. On Dec. 16 Thanathorn was charged by police with leading a public protest against perceived judicial activism against the FFP, although the legal basis for the charges was not clear.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Hun Sen of Cambodia has had little problem quelling his own political opposition. On Nov. 7 Sam Rainsy, an exiled leader of the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), the main opposition group, attempted to fulfill a longstanding promise to return to Cambodia, taking a Thai Airways flight from Paris to Bangkok and onward to Phnom Penh. Hun Sen made strong protests to the Thai government, and Rainsy was [not permitted](#) to board the flight in Charles de Gaulle Airport. Mu Sochua, the exiled vice president of the CNRP, also attempted to enter Cambodia but returned to the United States after having been detained in both Bangkok and [Kuala Lumpur](#). Rainsy and Sochua had hoped to reach Phnom Penh by Nov. 9, Cambodian Independence Day. However, partly to defuse international protest over treatment of Rainsy and Sochua, Hun Sen [released](#) CNRP leader Kem Sokha from house arrest in Phnom Penh.

### Looking Ahead

In 2020, ASEAN leaders are bracing for a tumultuous year in US politics that will likely sideline US-Southeast Asian relations further. By the end of 2019, few governments had said definitively that they would attend a US-ASEAN Summit in the United States, wary that the meeting would be an attempt to divert attention from a Senate trial over Trump's impeachment.

More seriously, Southeast Asian leaders fear that they will be drawn into US efforts to move to more "maximum pressure" policies on both Iran and North Korea in 2020, given deteriorating US relations with both countries. Tehran is not a major player in the region, but has recently pressed for stronger relations with ASEAN and acceded to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2018. Greater US-Iran

tensions could also raise the terrorism threat in Southeast Asia: Hezbollah cells have been uncovered in the region [in the past](#). Early in the Trump administration, Southeast Asian governments were pressured by Washington to cut diplomatic and economic ties with North Korea; the apparent downturn in Trump's rapport with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un will likely cause a return to that pressure.

US-China relations will continue to complicate Southeast Asian dynamics with China in 2020. Conclusion of a second phase of the US-China trade agreement in 2020 is unlikely, leaving questions about the nature and direction of global trade up in the air. As the 2020 ASEAN Chair, Vietnam will welcome Washington's rhetoric against Chinese activities in the South China Sea but that is not likely to alter fundamental dynamics. Nevertheless, Hanoi and other security partners will seek to deepen security relations with the United States. The 2020 campaign and election all but guarantees a distracted US government at the highest levels. In this interval, Southeast Asian leaders will look for, and likely receive steadier attention from US Indo-Pacific Command than from the White House.

# CHRONOLOGY OF US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

## SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2019

**Sept. 2-6, 2019:** The first ASEAN-US Maritime Exercises [are conducted](#), involving eight warships, four aircraft from seven countries, and more than 1,000 personnel representing the 10 ASEAN member states and the US. Co-led by the US and Thai navies, the exercises had shore-based activities in Thailand, Singapore, and Brunei and a sea phase in international waters, including the Gulf of Thailand and the South China Sea.

**Sept. 3-6, 2019:** Assistant Secretary of State for Energy Resources Francis Fannon travels to Thailand to attend the ASEAN Ministers of Energy meeting and related regional energy conferences. Fannon's trip was also intended to advance the new Japan-US Mekong Power Partnership (JUMPP) announced in August 2019.

**Sept. 12, 2019:** Senior leaders of US Army Pacific and the Royal Thai Army come together for a [handover](#) of Stryker helicopters, which Thailand purchased through the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) program. The Strykers are symbolic of the restoration of full military-to-military relations following Thailand's general elections in March 2019.

**Sept. 16-20, 2019:** Idaho National Guard soldiers and airmen participate in an [expert exchange](#) with members of the Cambodian Armed Forces at the UN Peacekeeping Operations Center in Phnom Penh. They trained with member of Cambodia's Peacekeeping Directorate preparing to deploy to several countries for mine clearance activities.

**Sept. 23, 2019:** On the margins of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, President Donald Trump and Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien-Loong [renew](#) the 1990 US-Singapore Memorandum of Understanding Regarding United States Use of Facilities in Singapore, extending the agreement for another 15 years.

**Sept. 24, 2019:** US House of Representatives passes HR 3190, the Burma Unified Rigorous Military Accountability Act of 2019, which seeks to tighten sanctions on Myanmar and strengthen support for the Muslim Rohingya. The bill is under consideration by the Senate.

**Sept. 24, 2019:** US announces an additional [\\$127 million](#) in humanitarian assistance to Rohingya refugees and host communities in Bangladesh, as well as to internally displaced Rohingya in Rakhine State. Since the outbreak of violence in Rakhine in August 2017, the US has contributed \$669 million in humanitarian aid.

**Sept. 27-Oct. 4:** Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs Marie Royce [visits Thailand and Myanmar](#). In Bangkok she attends the 2019 Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) meeting. In Myanmar she delivers remarks on elections and the importance of democracy at the American Center in Yangon.

**Oct. 2-5, 2019:** Marines and sailors from the Boxer Amphibious Ready Group and the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit participate in [Tiger Strike exercises](#) in Malaysia to promote interoperability between US and Malaysian armed forces.

**Oct. 3, 2019:** US and ASEAN convene first session of the US-ASEAN [Cyber Dialogue](#) in Singapore, co-chaired by the United States and Laos, and addresses 5G technology, the digital economy, and cyber capacity building.

**Oct. 15-21:** US and Philippine navies and the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force conduct Third Annual Maritime Training Activity Sama Sama. [The exercises](#) feature both shore-based and at-sea activities.



**Oct. 20, 2019:** Joko Widodo is [inaugurated](#) as president of Indonesia for a second term, after winning the April 2019 election with 55.5% of the popular vote against Prabowo Subianto. He is sworn in under high security, since an Islamic State-linked bombing plot related to the election was foiled in the early summer. On Oct. 23 Joko announces his new Cabinet, with a surprise appointment of former general Prabowo Subianto as defense minister.

**Oct. 24-26, 2019:** Adm. John Aquilino, commander of the US Pacific Fleet, [visits Singapore](#), his first trip to the country in his current capacity.

**Oct. 27-Nov. 1, 2019:** On his way to the East Asia Summit in Bangkok, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell makes two first-time trips to Southeast Asian countries in his new capacity. He visits Myanmar [Oct. 27-30](#), which trip includes Rakhine State where he meets government and community leaders, as well as with victims of violence in the ethnic conflict. In Malaysia Oct. 30-Nov. 1, Stilwell follows an agenda that touches on the full complement of policy areas in the US-Malaysia relationship.

**Oct. 31, 2019:** US Department of Justice announces that it has struck a deal to [recoup \\$1 billion in funds](#) allegedly looted from the 1 Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) by fugitive financier Jho Low, by seizing assets Low was holding in the US, including a private jet and real estate in Beverly Hills. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad responded with a statement that Malaysia would file a claim on the forfeited assets.

**Nov. 2, 2019:** Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom [Sam Brownback](#) visits Thailand to deliver remarks at the 5th Annual Southeast Asia Freedom of Religion or Belief Conference.

**Nov. 3, 2019:** 2019 Indo-Pacific Business Forum, co-chaired by Thailand and the United States, opens in Bangkok. It brings together nearly 1,000 government officials, private sector actors, and analysts to expand cooperation in areas such as energy, infrastructure, and the digital economy. On the margins of the forum, the US and ASEAN [announce](#) that they will begin formal negotiations to streamline customs procedures through the ASEAN Single Window.

**Nov. 3, 2019:** The State Department releases [progress report](#) on implementation of the US whole-of-government strategy for the Indo-Pacific region, presented on the margins of the East Asia Summit (EAS) by Keith Krach, undersecretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy Security and the Environment.

**Nov. 4, 2019:** The 14th East Asia Summit is held in Bangkok. Eighteen governments participated in the summit, which was chaired by Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, the 2019 ASEAN Chair. Compared to previous years, the US delegation was reduced, represented by Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross and National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien.

**Nov. 4, 2019:** Protesting scaled-down US representation at the EAS, seven of 10 ASEAN governments reduce their representation at the follow-on US-ASEAN Summit by sending their foreign ministers rather than heads of government.

**Nov. 16-18, 2019:** The 6th iteration of the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus, the only official Defense Ministers dialogue framework in the Asia-Pacific region, is held in Bangkok. The 10 ASEAN defense ministers and their counterparts from the US, Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, and Russia participate.

**Nov. 16, 2019:** On the margins of the ADMM-Plus, US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper meets Prabowo Subianto, newly appointed Indonesian minister of defense. They agree to expand military education for Indonesian armed forces.

**Nov. 19-20, 2019:** Esper makes [first visit](#) to the Philippines in his new capacity. He meets Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana and Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin. In response to continued pressure from Manila to review the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty, Esper reiterates the US commitment to the MDT.

**Nov 20–22, 2019:** Esper visits Vietnam in his new role. [In a speech](#) at the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, he accuses China of using coercion against smaller Asian nations to impose its will in the South China Sea. In a meeting at the headquarters of the Vietnamese Communist Party he expresses strong US opposition to “violations of international law by China and excessive claims in the South China Sea.” Esper also announces that the US will provide Vietnam’s Coast Guard with a surplus US ship in 2020.

**Nov. 21–22, 2019:** Amb. Nathan Sales, State Department Coordinator for Counterterrorism, visits Manila to discuss joint US-Philippine efforts to stem terrorism financing.

**Dec. 9, 2019:** Esper and Singaporean Minister of Defense Ng Eng Hen meet on the sidelines of the Reagan National Defense Forum in Washington and sign a nonbinding MOU to establish a Singapore Air Force permanent fighter training facility in Guam. Training will commence in 2029.

**Dec. 9, 2019:** The State Department [designates](#) Cambodian government official Kun Kim, his wife, and children as foreign officials involved in significant corruption under Section 7031(c) of the 2019 State Department Authorization Act. Kun Kim was a senior general in the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces and allegedly profited from relationships with a Chinese state-owned enterprise. The Treasury Department subsequently announces that it will impose sanctions on him.

**Dec. 10, 2019:** Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte approves a recommendation to [end martial law](#) in the southern Philippines, more than two years after the Armed Forces of the Philippines defeated militants linked to the Islamic State (IS), who took over the city of Marawi for 5 months in 2017.

**Dec. 10–13, 2019:** Commander of the US Pacific Fleet Adm. John Aquilino [visits Thailand](#) to strengthen relations with the Thai Navy and to witness the procession of the Royal Barge.

**Dec. 11–13, 2019:** US and Indonesia convene a Nuclear Security Insider Threat Mitigation Workshop in Serpong, Indonesia, bringing to completion eight years of cooperation to strengthen nuclear security in Indonesia.

**Dec. 11–14, 2019:** James Richardson, State Department director of US foreign assistance resources, [visits Vietnam](#) to review US assistance under the US-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership. On Dec. 13 he tours Bien Hoa Airbase, where USAID is helping to design a plan to remediate the largest remaining hotspot of dioxin contamination in Vietnam. On Dec. 5 the US and Vietnamese governments officially launched [remediation operations](#) at Bien Hoa; the US has committed to provide \$300 million to restore the airbase and surrounding areas.

**Dec. 14, 2019:** Myanmar State Counselor Aung Sang Suu Kyi addresses the International Court of Justice in The Hague, responding to charges of genocide by Myanmar against Muslim Rohingya.

**Dec 16, 2019:** Thai police [file charges](#) against Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, leader of the opposition Future Forward Party, for mounting a public demonstration to protest government actions against the FFP. On Nov. 20 the Thai Constitutional Court stripped Thanathorn of his seat in Parliament for having invested in a media company while he was a candidate in the March election.

**Dec. 16–18, 2019:** Assistant Secretary of State Stilwell visits Hanoi to commemorate the [25th anniversary](#) of the normalization of US-Vietnam relations and discuss priorities for Vietnam’s chairmanship of ASEAN in 2020 and its term membership on the United Nations Security Council in 2020–2021.

**Dec. 18, 2019:** The State Department re-designates Myanmar as one of 10 “Countries of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, for having engaged in or tolerated “systemic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom.” The primary reason for designating Myanmar, the only listed Southeast Asian country, is the repression of Muslim Rohingya.

**Dec. 23, 2019:** The *Abraham Lincoln* carrier strike group, commanded by Rear Adm. Michael Boyle, [hosts leaders](#) of the Royal Thai Army, Navy, and Air Force to allow them to see US naval carrier operations firsthand.