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US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

SMALL BUT TELLING SHIFTS

CATHARIN DALPINO, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

Despite the current calm in broader US-China relations, and likely because of it, Chinese offensive actions around Second Thomas Shoal have kept security in the South China Sea as the organizing principle for Washington's relations with the maritime Southeast Asian states, most notably the Philippines. In April President Biden hosted the first-ever trilateral summit with Japan, the Philippines, and the United States, on the margins of a major agreement to expand the US-Japan alliance that will reverberate in Southeast Asia. In Myanmar, the United States moved cautiously toward the provision of non-lethal aid to resistance forces as they made headway against the military. This aid will be limited, but it could put Washington in competition with China and Russia, both of which provide arms to the junta. Although Southeast Asian leaders continue to worry about US distraction in the face of wars in other regions and the November elections, Washington continued to act as a fulcrum in major multilateral exercises in the region. In Thailand, [Cobra Gold](#) was expanded to include cooperation in space, while the *Balikatan* exercises in the Philippines expanded to include new participants, most notably the French Navy.

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However, the ISEAS-Yusof Ishok annual survey on Southeast Asia showed that a slim majority of elites in the region would align with China against the United States if forced to choose. The outcome of the February elections in Indonesia, which will bring Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto to power later in the year, signals that competition between the United States and China in Southeast Asia could intensify in the near-term.

Shifting Alignments

Framing the debate over US relations with Southeast Asia this spring was the [release](#) of the annual survey by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishok Institute in Singapore on The State of Southeast Asia, based on data collected in February. The Survey, which probes regional views on security, economic and politics flagged two noteworthy findings.

1. By a slim majority, Southeast Asians were more inclined toward alignment with China than with the United States if they are forced to take sides, a departure from the more pro-US position since 2020. On this score, China climbed from 38.9% in 2023 to 50.5% in 2024. The United States fell from 61.1% in 2023 to 49.5%. However, ASEAN members are by no means a monolith on the US-China rivalry. In 2024 China won support from Malaysia (75.1%), Indonesia (73.2%), Laos (70.6%), Brunei (70.1%), and Thailand (52.2%). Lining up in support of the US were the Philippines (83.3%), Vietnam (79.0%), and Singapore (61.5%).

Japan remains the most trusted power in Southeast Asia, at 58% this year, while China and the United States typically compete for the lowest rung in trust. However, Tokyo's image in the region is based largely on its longstanding reputation as a trading partner, investor, and aid donor. If as expected, Japan becomes more forward-leaning on security, confidence in Tokyo could dim, particularly if Japan is viewed as contributing to US-China rivalry in the region.

2. The greatest geopolitical concern in the region is the Israel-Hamas war, unusual since top security concerns for ASEAN are traditionally within the Indo-Pacific region. Concern over the latter was due primarily to fears that the war would

exacerbate violent extremism in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Although the shift in alignment is notable, the slim margin is a mitigating factor. Some of the issues that have encouraged a swing toward China are likely short-term, such as uncertainty over the approaching US elections. There is also likely some residual resentment for the 11th-hour suspension of the trade pillar in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) by the United States last November.

To the extent that Indonesian and Malaysian views of the US are entangled with the Israel-Hamas war, the Biden administration's recent shift toward greater concern over the humanitarian crisis in Gaza may ease some fears of the further radicalization of *jihadi* groups in Southeast Asia. Recently, Washington and Jakarta have cooperated on delivery of humanitarian aid in Gaza. Lastly, the passage in April of a foreign aid bill reflected near-unanimous bipartisan support for US involvement in the Indo-Pacific compared to more checkered support for aid to Ukraine or Israel. This may reassure Southeast Asians that US domestic politics are unlikely to undercut Washington's commitment to the region.

Nevertheless, Beijing's slight edge is hardly surprising. For several years regional leaders have viewed China as the most influential economic power in Southeast Asia (59.5% of respondents in the 2024 Survey) and the most influential and strategic power as well (43.9% in 2024). Regardless, Southeast Asians will continue to avoid having to choose one power over the other if they can. A plurality of 46.8% in this year's Survey favored "enhancing resiliency and unity" to fend off pressure from Beijing and Washington.

Shifting Alliances

As a follow-on to the Japan-US Summit in Washington on April 10, President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida were joined the following day by Philippine President Marcos for an inaugural Japan-Philippines-United States [Summit](#). The trilateral summit marked a turning point in a gradual process toward ventilating the response of the United States and likeminded countries to China's growing aggression in the exclusive economic zones (EEZ's) of Southeast Asian states, with the Philippines the most

obvious bullseye. Marcos proposed a “trilateral alliance” to Kishida during his visit to Japan in February 2023. On April 7, just prior to the summits, defense forces from Australia, Japan, the Philippines and the US conducted maritime exercises in the Philippines’ EEZ. On April 10, the Joint Leaders Statement from the Biden-Kishida Summit called out China’s coercion, “including destabilizing actions in the South China Sea, such as unsafe encounters at sea and in the air,” a reference to the PRC’s use of water cannons against Philippine Coast Guard vessels around Second Thomas Shoal.



Figure 1 US President Joe Biden (center) with Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr (left) and Japan Prime Minister Kishida Fumio, on their way to a trilateral summit at the White House on April 11. Photo: Kevin Lamarque/Reuters

First Among Equals?

After the US withdrawal from the Vietnam War in 1973, Washington embarked upon an attempt to redesign and redirect its alliances in Southeast Asia. They were no longer a single path on which security, political, and economic relations were entwined, but instead a multi-lane highway with firewalls separating defense cooperation, trade preferences, and economic assistance. This was a rude surprise to Bangkok and Manila at times: Thailand was resentful that its status as a US ally did not shield it from sanction threats over intellectual property rights in the late 1980s, and Ferdinand Marcos, Sr., was no doubt displeased that Washington withdrew support from him after he attempted to overturn the results of the 1986 elections.

Moreover, although the Philippines and Thailand remained spokes in the hub-and-spokes configuration of US alliances in the Pacific, Washington had diversified its defense relations dramatically, particularly in the 1990s after the withdrawal of US bases from Clark and Subic Bay

in the Philippines and following the normalization of relations with Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. To accommodate this diversity as well as the inclination of Southeast Asian states to balance relations with the US and China, the Biden administration is attempting to replace the hub-and-spokes with the looser “lattice” configuration, evoking a fence in which there is space between each plank. The lattice model accommodates a more multilateral security structure and enables countries that would eschew a formal alliance with the United States, such as Singapore, to work closely with Washington on defense.

However, as Washington and Manila deepen the bilateral relationship and, with Japan, develop a trilateral menu of cooperation, the close coordination of security and economic initiatives is evocative of a pre-1973 alliance arrangement. In March US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo [led](#) a Presidential Trade and Investment Delegation to the Philippines, at which time agreements and pledges for \$1 billion in projects were announced. Equally spectacular was the announcement at the trilateral summit of the launch of the Luzon Economic Corridor, the first such corridor to be established in the Indo-Pacific region under the G7 Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII).

Early response in Southeast Asia to the trilateral summit have been predictably split, between confidence that the combined attention and assistance of the US and Japan to the Philippines’ security will deter China and fear that it could spur China to greater aggression. The latter has produced some speculation that the first direct military clash between China and the United States could be around Second Thomas Shoal rather than the Taiwan Strait. More generally, however, the inclusion of Japan, as well as Australia, in South China Sea exercises is viewed as an insurance policy against US inattention.

Cobra Gold and Balikatan

Compared to the current dynamism in the US-Philippines alliance, the US-Thailand alliance is more low-key and often said to have been in a state of drift for years, even decades. With the Cold War threat of a communist takeover now gone, Thailand has reverted to its longstanding principle of preserving its sovereignty through balancing external powers, often against each other. The Biden administration has pursued an episodic policy of attempting to revive and reset

the alliance, albeit on 21st century terms. In the meantime, however, continuity in the alliance is maintained through the annual *Cobra Gold* exercises.

One of the largest and longest-running multilateral exercises in the world, *Cobra Gold* is co-hosted by Bangkok and Washington and conducted on Thai territory, usually in rural areas. Thailand has the final say on the invitation list, which is graded according to tiers. Held this year from Feb. 27 to March 8, 9,500 *Cobra Gold* participants were grouped into 4 tiers: full partners (Japan, the United States, Thailand, South Korea, Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia); limited partners (Australia, China, and India); observers from the Multinational Planning Augmentation team of MPAT (Bangladesh, Canada, France, Mongolia, Nepal, New Zealand, Philippines, Fiji, United Kingdom, and Brunei); and observers from the Combined Observer Liaison team or COLT (Cambodia, Laos, Brazil, Pakistan, Vietnam, Germany, Sweden, Greece, Kuwait, and Sri Lanka). The 2024 exercises marked the China's elevation out of observer status, although its participation (and that of India) was confined to humanitarian assistance exercises and is likely to remain in that sector indefinitely.

Since its inception as a bilateral exercise in 1982 *Cobra Gold* has been limited in some years, such as after coups in Thailand or, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic, but it has expanded significantly over the long-term. Live-fire exercises, which were removed after the 2016 coup led by former Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, were restored in 2023. 2024 saw a notable expansion, the inclusion of space in the exercises, along with land, sea, air and cyber, making *Cobra Gold* is an all-domain exercise. The US Space Command was a participant for the first time. For the past several years humanitarian assistance and disaster relief have also been a standard feature.

Apart from a continual rationale for maintaining the US-Thailand alliance, *Cobra Gold* is useful to the United States in several ways. Although its participation is limited, the PLA has participated in *Cobra Gold* every year since 2014, even in those years in which US-China tensions have been high. Both Washington and Beijing are able to take public refuge in the fact that the exercises are multilateral and that China is invited by Thailand rather than the US, but both sides are strongly in favor of China's continued

participation. This is often in contrast to the annual Shangri-la Security Dialogue in Singapore, in which Chinese and US defense officials often spar from the podium. The exercises are also a *de facto* weapons fair, in which countries that are considering purchasing arms from the United States could view some of their potential purchases and even to handle them to some extent.



Figure 2 The annual *Cobra Gold* Exercises, co-hosted by Thailand and the United States, traditionally commence with demonstrations of traditional Thai martial arts. The 2024 *Cobra Gold* exercises were held in Rayong, Thailand from Feb. 7 to March 8. Photo: Exercise *Cobra Gold*

The annual [Balikatan](#) (“shoulder-to-shoulder”) exercises between the US and Philippine armed forces, which opened this year on April 22 and conclude on May 10, are in the process of transformation from bilateral to multilateral exercises. *Balikatan* hosts a smaller range of participants than *Cobra Gold* but a larger number overall, with roughly 16,000 members of the Philippine and US armed forces training together. 2024 marks the 39th iteration of *Balikatan*.

Apart from the Philippines and the United States, only two countries rank as partners at *Balikatan*: Australia and, this year for the first time, France. Like *Cobra Gold*, the exercises will host several observers: Brunei, Canada, Germany, Great Britain, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Not surprisingly, given tensions in the South China Sea—particularly the Philippines' EEZ—*Balikatan* is primarily a group of US security partners and does not include either China or India. This difference is underscored with a Multilateral Maritime Exercise in the Philippines' EEZ among the

Philippine, US, and French Navies on the agenda. In addition, several of the exercises will occur in the vicinity of South China Sea flashpoints.

Washington Wades into the Myanmar Conflict

Since the fall of 2023 armed resistance groups in Myanmar have seized several military strongholds, particularly in border areas. Despite these gains, there is no clear path to victory and, according to the United Nations, “255 of Myanmar’s 330 townships, or nearly four in five, had been [impacted by armed clashes](#) between the military and those resisting its rule.” An estimated 2.8 million people have been displaced by the conflict.

These resisters include armed ethnic groups, some of which have waged insurgencies against the central government since Burma gained its independence in 1948, as well as the newer People’s Defense Force (PDF), the military arm of the National Unity Government (NUG), both established in response to the 2021 military coup. Ethnic armies often control territory and have diverse sources of income, often from drug trafficking and other forms of cross-border crime. The PDF and the NUG depend primarily on external funds, mostly in the form of donations from overseas Burmese. The NUG presses Western governments for diplomatic recognition as well as for funds and arms to continue its insurgency against the junta.

To date, no government has recognized the NUG, but the United States is preparing to provide assistance to resistance groups with funds appropriated through the 2023 Defense Authorization Act, as the first implementation of the BURMA Act of 2022. The act authorizes appropriations to be allocated annually from FY 2023 through 2027, with \$121 million earmarked for FY 2024. The bulk of the 2024 appropriation will be applied to humanitarian aid, including to displaced Burmese in Thailand and India, but \$25 million is planned for “technical support and non-lethal assistance” to armed groups. The use of the funds for the junta or for military-affiliated entities, the primary targets of US sanctions, is prohibited.

While he was in Thailand in late March, State Department Counselor Derek Chollet [met](#) with representatives of four ethnic armed groups from Myanmar known as the “KC3 alliance,” comprised of the Kachin Independence Organization, the Karen National Union, the

Karenni National Progressive Party and the Chin National Front. The alliance is politically aligned with the NUG and cooperates militarily with the PDF. Although the Biden administration has made no announcements as yet, the PDF and the KCS alliance are widely assumed to be the intended recipients of the non-lethal assistance.



Figure 3 U.S. State Department Counselor Derek Chollet (right) meets with Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi (left) during a trip to Jakarta, Indonesia, Mar. 10, 2023. Photo: U.S. State Department

Shortly thereafter, China issued a statement criticizing the use of US funds to support armed groups, charging that Washington sought to undermine China’s role in Myanmar. Beijing alleged that some resistance groups should be classified as terrorist under US law. In reality, China’s role in Myanmar is increasingly complex and self-contradictory at times. Beijing provides arms to the Tatmadaw and supports the junta in conflicts in Rakhine State, through which Chinese oil and gas pipelines pass. However, they support some resistance groups on the eastern border, for various reasons. For example, some groups are instrumental in mining critical minerals and exporting them to China. China also worries about the conflict in Chin State, on the China-Myanmar border, and its potential to spread violence across the border.

But although the West and like-minded countries generally welcome the US appropriation, some analysts question the wisdom of providing aid to armed groups. “Non-lethal aid” to military and paramilitary groups is usually anything that stops short of weapons and arms, and can include a broad range of equipment as well as training and intelligence. They question whether a coherent program of assistance to arms groups can be implemented, given the wide spectrum of armed groups with an equally wide range of motivations for

resisting the central government. They also fear that foreign assistance to resistance groups will further inflame the xenophobia that has characterized military regimes throughout Myanmar's history and that it risks turning an already complicated internal conflict into a proxy war.

In the meantime, ASEAN is attempting to make subtle shifts in its policy toward Myanmar without abandoning the Five-Point Consensus Plan. In January, the first ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting of the year in Luang Prabang was [attended](#) by an official from Myanmar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the first time since the 2021 coup. Vientiane, the 2024 ASEAN chair, urged engagement with all parties in the Myanmar conflict and insisted that Myanmar, as well as neighboring Thailand, should play a greater role in formulating ASEAN policy on the conflict.

However, the war continues to escalate, giving ASEAN little interval in which to ply its new policy. In mid-April, ASEAN Foreign Ministers issued a joint statement calling for an end to the conflict after the rebel Karen National Union (KNU) announced that it had seized Myawaddy, an important trade hub on the Thai border in Kayin State in southeastern Myanmar, following a months-long offensive. Myawaddy is the largest of six border crossings into Thailand and a critical trade hub.



Figure 4 Karen National Liberation Army troops near Myawaddy on April 15. Myanmar's civil war has strengthened ethnic armed groups. Photo: Reuters

Prabowo Prepares for Power

The results of the Feb. 14 elections in Indonesia came as little surprise, since Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto had been the favorite since the fall, when he chose Gibran Rakabuming Raka, the

38-year-old son of current President Joko Widodo as his running mate. In March the Indonesian Elections Commission [confirmed](#) that Prabowo and Gibran had won more than 58% of the vote. This gave them the first absolute majority in an Indonesian election in the "Reformasi" period, therefore requiring no run-off election. As well, Prabowo swept 36 of 38 provinces. Prabowo's nearest rival was Anies Basdewan, who won 25% of the vote and 2 provinces (Aceh and West Sumatra). Third in place was Ganjar Pranowo, who won 14% of the vote but no provinces.

Prabowo will be inaugurated Oct. 20, 2024 and must announce his Cabinet no later than two weeks after that. In the meantime, Joko Widodo will remain as head of state and Prabowo will continue as defense minister. He will need the interval to assemble a Cabinet that assures his coalition a majority in Parliament, which the legislative elections failed to give him. Two of Joko's key Cabinet officials—Finance Minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati and Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi—have announced that they will leave at the end of the year. Prabowo will presumably also need to replace himself as defense minister, although there is some speculation that he may keep that portfolio as a concurrent role.

Shortly after confirmation of his election, Prabowo embarked upon a three-country tour of the region, an unusual step for a president-elect, albeit one who still a serving minister of defense. His choice of countries was taken as an indication of his likely priorities: a first stop in Beijing and a meeting with Xi Jinping; on to Tokyo to confer with Prime Minister Kishida; finishing in Kuala Lumpur to meet with Anwar Ibrahim. Given the preliminary nature of his trip, the only "deliverables" were the visits themselves.

The agendas and rhetoric attached to the China and Japan visits were intended to signal that Prabowo gave the two powers equal weight. At the same time, he underscored his desire to expand both security and economic relations with China; Xi took pains to insist publicly that China and Indonesia shared a similar position on the war in the Middle East. Prabowo's meeting with Anwar in Malaysia was primarily a gesture of solidarity over the war in Gaza but also an acknowledgment that the ASEAN chair will rotate to Kuala Lumpur in 2025. Above all, the trip was an indication that Prabowo plans to be more

active in Indonesia's foreign policy than Joko has been.

Establishing relations with Washington will be a more delicate dance, for both sides. A former son-in-law of the late President Suharto and an adherent to his ideology of a strong role for the military in Indonesia's political and economic affairs, Prabowo has re-invented himself as an elected leader but has shown little evidence of the reformist streak that other post-Suharto military leaders have adopted. He was in fact expelled by the military for suspected human rights violations against Indonesian and East Timorese civilians when he led the military's special forces, although he was never formally charged. During this time, he was also banned from entry into the United States.

However, Washington took a more pragmatic approach to Prabowo when he became defense minister. In 2020, the visa ban was set aside when he was invited to visit the Pentagon. After that, Prabowo took an active role in upgrading Indonesia-US relations and worked with Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to finalize the Defense Cooperation Arrangement (DCA) between Indonesia and the United States in November 2023. Both sides will attempt to build on this new relationship when Prabowo takes office, although his determination to deepen defense cooperation with China as well as the impact of the Israel-Hamas war will be early challenges to establishing a solid foundation.

Looking Ahead

All eyes will be on the Shangri-La Security Dialogue in Singapore on May 31-June 2 as a barometer of Southeast Asian reaction to a stronger security role for Japan; the increasing "mini-lateralization" of security cooperation, in particular the US-Japan-Philippines triangle; the impact of the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East on the Indo-Pacific region; and the foreign policy positions of new Southeast Asian leaders, particularly Prabowo Subianto.

Political uncertainty will likely rise in Vietnam, with the toll of the anti-corruption purge on government leadership, and in Thailand, where the political landscape could be shaken with court rulings on the main opposition party, Move Forward, and internal machinations within the Pheu Thai Party. However, neither of these situations is likely to alter Southeast Asia's tilt toward or away from China or the United States,

as Indonesia's would. In May Lawrence Wong is scheduled to replace Lee Hsien-Loong as prime minister of Singapore, but he will take pains initially to underscore continuity with his predecessor in foreign policy.

Uncertainty over Washington's staying power in the run-up to November elections and after will permeate the region in the summer and fall. Many Southeast Asian leaders assume that President Biden will not attend the East Asia Summit in Laos, and those who are APEC members (the 10 ASEAN states minus Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar) will fix their sights instead on the APEC Leaders Meeting in Peru in December. Several will likely make side-trips to Washington to confer with the foreign policy teams of the winner in the November elections.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

JANUARY-APRIL 2024

Jan. 5, 2024: *Nimitz*-class aircraft carrier *USS Carl Vinson* (CVN 70), flagship of Carrier Strike Group (CSG) 1, [arrives](#) in the Philippines for a scheduled port visit.

Jan. 17-20, 2024: Adm. John C. Aquilino, commander US Indo-Pacific Command, [travels](#) to Thailand, where he meets Minister of Defense Sutin Klungsang and Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTARF) Chief of Defense Gen. Songwit Noonpackdee.

Jan. 25, 2024: Under Secretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment Jose Fernandez [meets](#) with Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh in Hanoi. He expresses support for the rapid development of Vietnam's semiconductor ecosystem as part of the US-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and lauds Vietnam's goal of achieving net zero emissions by 2050. The two leaders also discuss expanding cooperation on renewable energy science and technology.

Jan. 26, 2024: National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [visits](#) Bangkok and meets Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin and Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Parnpree Bahiddha-Nukara. They discuss a range of bilateral issues, as well as the need to promote a resolution to the conflict in Myanmar and efforts to obtain the release of hostages held by Hamas, which include both Thai and US nationals.

Jan. 29, 2024: With Laos as 2024 chair, ASEAN [holds](#) its first Foreign Ministers Meeting (FMM) in Luang Prabang. For the first time since the February 2021 coup, a representative from Myanmar participates in an FMM.

Jan. 31, 2024: United States, European Union, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Norway,

Republic of Korea, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom [issue](#) a joint statement marking three years since the military coup in Myanmar on Feb. 1, 2021. The statement condemned the military's ongoing human rights abuses and urged "unified efforts by ASEAN" to resolve the crisis.

Jan. 31, 2024: United States [designates](#) four additional individuals and two entities linked to Burma's military regime for sanctions. The new designations target the junta's sources of revenue which support military activities against civilians. The action also targets those who provide material and support to produce arms in Burma.

Feb. 1-2, 2024: Deputy Secretary of State Richard Verma [visits](#) Indonesia to discuss bilateral cooperation following announcement of the Indonesia-US Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) in November 2023. In a meeting with Indonesian Vice Foreign Minister Pahala Mansury, the two officials finalize negotiations on a CSP Plan of Action to guide bilateral engagements over the next five years. The deputy secretary and vice foreign minister also discuss economic cooperation and regional and global issues, including the situation in the Middle East and importance of global health security.

Feb. 2, 2024: Former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak [receives](#) a reduction in his prison sentence for corruption related to the 1MDB scandal. He will be released in 2028 and had his fine reduced from \$44 million to \$11 million.

Feb. 9, 2024: US Navy and Philippine Navy (PN) [conduct](#) third iteration of the Maritime Cooperative Activity (MCA) in the South China Sea.

Feb. 12-15, 2024: US Marines from III Marine Expeditionary Force and the US Agency for International Development [assist](#) the government of the Philippines in providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in response to severe flooding and landslides in the southern Philippine province of Mindanao.

Feb. 12, 2024: Secretary of State Antony Blinken [meets](#) Thai Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Parnpree Bahiddha-Nukara in Washington, DC. The two officials discuss opportunities to strengthen cooperation across a range of bilateral and global issues, including the need to deliver humanitarian aid to Myanmar.

Feb. 14, 2024: Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto [wins](#) Indonesian presidential race with an absolute majority, the first candidate to do so since the 1998-99 democratic transition in Indonesia. Prabowo's campaign coalition does not win a majority in Parliament, which will require that he build a broad coalition within his Cabinet.

Feb. 23-March 4, 2024: Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink [travels](#) to Singapore; Phnom Penh, Cambodia; Bangkok, Thailand; Hanoi, Vietnam; and Bandar Seri Begawan, and Brunei.

Feb. 24, 2024: First agreement from the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) [goes into effect](#) for five of the 14 IPEF members: Japan, India, Singapore, Fiji, and the United States.

Feb. 27-March 8, 2024: 43rd iteration of *Joint Exercise Cobra Gold*, co-hosted by Thailand and the US, [takes place](#) in Rayong, Thailand. Over 33 nations train in the air, sea, and space domains.

Feb. 27, 2024: Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs Permanent Secretary Albert Chua and Assistant Secretary Kritenbrink [meet](#) in Singapore to co-chair the 6th United States-Singapore Strategic Partnership Dialogue. The co-chairs discuss the longstanding bilateral security relationship and also focused on new

areas of cooperation, including supply chain coordination.

Feb. 28-29, 2024: In Bangkok, Assistant Secretary Kritenbrink [co-leads](#) 9th US-Thailand Strategic Dialogue alongside Ministry of Foreign Affairs Permanent Secretary Eksiri Pintaruchi as well as the Second Strategic and Defense Dialogue alongside Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Jediah Royal. Both dialogues are conducted under the auspices of the US-Thai Communiqué on Strategic Alliance and Partnership.

March 5, 2024: Assistant Secretary Kritenbrink and Vietnam Standing Vice Foreign Minister Nguyen Minh Vu [conclude](#) 10th Asia-Pacific Dialogue in Hanoi, the first under the US-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

March 5, 2024: State Department [issues](#) a statement calling out PRC provocative actions against lawful Philippine maritime operations in the South China Sea on March 5 employing water cannons against Philippine vessels carrying provisions to Filipino service members stationed at the *BRP Sierra Madre*. These maneuvers caused multiple collisions, damaging at least one Philippine vessel, injuring Filipino service members, and jeopardizing the safety of the Filipino crew. The statement refers to the July 2016 decision of the Arbitration Tribunal of the UN Law of the Sea Treaty, which found that the PRC has no lawful maritime claims to the waters around Second Thomas Shoal and calls upon the PRC to abide by the ruling.

March 6-14, 2024: Adm. Aquilino [visits](#) Singapore March 6-10 and meets Minister of Defence Ng Eng Hen. From March 10-14 he [visits](#) the Philippines, where he meets President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr., Armed Forces of the Philippines Chief of Staff Gen. Romeo S. Brawner Jr.; Secretary of National Defense Gilberto C. Teodoro Jr.; and National Security Adviser Eduardo Año.

March 11-12, 2024: US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo [leads](#) first-ever Presidential Trade and Investment Delegation to the Philippines. The focus of the trip is to enhance US companies' contributions to the Philippines' innovation economy, connective infrastructure, clean energy transition, critical minerals sector, and the food security in the Philippines.

March 19, 2024: Secretary Blinken [meets](#) Philippine President Marcos, in Manila. They discuss developments in the South China Sea and recent initiatives to strengthen US-Philippine economic relations.

March 20, 2024: Secretary Blinken [issues](#) a statement congratulating Indonesian Defense Minister and President-Elect Prabowo Subianto on confirmation of his election by the Indonesian Election Commission.

March 20-24, 2024: State Department Counselor Derek Chollet [visits](#) Indonesia and Thailand. While in Thailand he meets with ethnic armed groups from Myanmar aligned with the opposition National Unity Government (NUG).

March 21, 2024: Vietnamese President Vo Van Thuong, in office only a year, [is pushed out](#) of power in the Vietnamese Communist Party's anti-corruption purge. A successor is not yet named.

March 23, 2024: State Department [issues](#) a statement condemning PRC actions against Philippine maritime operations in the South China Sea, pointing to the repeated use of water cannons and reckless blocking maneuvers resulted in injuries to Filipino service members and significant damage to their resupply vessel, rendering it immobile.

March 25, 2024: Secretary Blinken [meets](#) Vietnamese Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son in Washington, for the inaugural Comprehensive Strategic Partnership foreign ministerial meeting. They discuss operation in the semiconductor ecosystem, supply chain diversification, education and culture, security,

and human rights as well as promoting security in the South China Sea.

March 27-29, 2024: Adm. John C. Aquilino, commander of US Indo-Pacific Command, [hosts](#) a delegation led by Gen. Songwit Noonpackdee, Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTARF) Chief of Defense, for the annual US-Thailand Senior Leader Dialogue (SLD) in Honolulu.

April 1, 2024: US State Department [issues](#) a statement expressing concern over convictions of Vietnamese ethnic minority and religious freedom advocates, including five convictions since January 2024.

April 2, 2024: ISEAS-Yusof Institute in Singapore [releases](#) the 2024 State of Southeast Asia Survey. The Survey finds that a slight majority of respondents in the region would align with China rather than the United States if they felt compelled to choose.

April 4, 2024: Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell [meets](#) Bruneian Foreign Minister II Dato Erywan Yusof in Washington, DC during the fifth US-Brunei Senior Officials' Dialogue.

April 7, 2024: Defense forces from Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and the United States [conduct](#) the first-ever quadrilateral maritime exercises in the Philippine EEZ.

April 8-19, 2024: Marines from the Philippine Marine Corps and the US Marine Corps [conduct](#) the second iteration of the *Philippine Marine Exercise* at Camp Iranun, Mindanao, Philippines. The *MAREX PHL* exercise led by the Philippine Marine Corps, promotes military interoperability and maritime domain awareness capabilities.

April 11, 2024: President Biden [hosts](#) Philippine President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio at the White House for the first trilateral US-Japan-Philippines leaders' summit. The leaders affirm the alliances between the United States and the Philippines, as well as the United States and Japan. They also discuss trilateral cooperation to

promote economic growth and emerging technologies; advance clean energy supply chains and climate cooperation; and further peace and security in the Indo-Pacific and around the world. On April 11 Biden also hosts a bilateral summit with Marcos.

April 12, 2024: Inaugural Philippines-United States 3+3 Senior Officials Meeting [is launched](#) in Washington when Secretary Blinken, Secretary of Defense Austin, and National Security Advisor Sullivan meet with Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Enrique Manalo, Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro, and National Security Advisor Eduardo M. Año. The meeting follows Biden's bilateral meeting with Philippines President Marcos Jr. and the historic Japan-Philippines-United States Trilateral Leaders' Summit on April 11.

April 12, 2024: Truong My Lan, a real estate tycoon convicted of Vietnam's largest-ever financial fraud, [is sentenced](#) to death by a court in Ho Chi Minh City. Her sentence sends a strong signal that the Party's anti-corruption campaign will target the private sector as well as the government bureaucracy, which sparks worry in the foreign investment sector.

April 18, 2024: ASEAN Foreign Ministers [issue](#) a joint statement of concern over the recent escalation of conflict in Myanmar, including around Myawaddy, Kayin State, along the border area between Myanmar and Thailand and in Rakhine State of Myanmar, both which have caused significant displacement of civilians.

April 22, 2024: Philippines and the United States [kick off](#) the 2024 *Balikatan Exercises*, to conclude on May 10. The largest bilateral training exercises between the two allies, this year's *Balikatan* involves more than 16,000 US and Philippine forces, along with contingents from the Australian Defence Force and, for the first time in *Balikatan's* history, the French Navy. In addition, 14 countries field observers to the exercises.

April 23, 2024: Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell [chairs](#) a session of the Philippines-United States 3+3 Senior Officials Meeting in Washington. Deputies from the US Departments of State and Defense and the National Security Council meet with counterparts from the Philippines Departments of Foreign Affairs and Defense as well as the National Security Council.

April 24, 2024: Secretary Austin [speaks](#) by telephone with Indonesian Defense Minister and President-Elect Prabowo Subianto. Austin congratulated Prabowo on his election as president in February. They discussed plans for Indonesia and the United States to deepen interoperability through closer cooperation on air and maritime defense capabilities. Austin thanked Minister Prabowo for Indonesia's recent airdrop of humanitarian assistance into Gaza.

