

SOUTHEAST ASIA BULLETIN



CSIS SOUTHEAST ASIA INITIATIVE

The CSIS Southeast Asia Initiative is a project of the International Security Program, Asia Group. CSIS launched the initiative in January 2008 to provide a venue for greater focus, examination, and analysis of Southeast Asian affairs within Washington’s policy community. The initiative will include regular roundtables, conferences, studies, and forums to spotlight developments in the region. CSIS will also seek to partner with other interested organizations and individuals within and outside Washington to maximize the flow of information, analysis, and outreach on Southeast Asian affairs in the United States.

An important component of the initiative will be the monthly *Southeast Asia Bulletin*, which will provide a timely overview of key developments, events, and facts about the region, and offer a forum for short essays by official and unofficial commentators on regional affairs.

Derek Mitchell, director, Southeast Asia Initiative, and Brian Harding, research associate, welcome your feedback on the *Southeast Asia Bulletin* at [dmitchell@csis.org](mailto:dmitchell@csis.org) and [bharding@csis.org](mailto:bharding@csis.org) respectively.

Other projects & reports from the International Security Program’s Asia Division can be found at [www.csis.org/isp/asia](http://www.csis.org/isp/asia).

Feature Article

THE PHILIPPINE-U.S. ALLIANCE:  
A STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP  
IN TACTICAL MODE

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If we track the development of Philippine foreign policy since its independence in 1946, two tendencies emerge, the effects of which contextualize the relationship between the Philippines and the United States. On one hand was a realist tendency that emphasized the security of the Philippines and the bilateral defense arrangement with the United States. This tendency was particularly evident during the Cold War years and reemerged in the course of the Global War on Terror. At the same time, particularly following the end of the Marcos years in the Philippines, a second tendency emphasizing closer attention to the Philippines’ multilateral ties in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) provided a counterpoint to the bilateral security relationship with the United States. Even as these two tendencies provide competing approaches and agendas, however, the United States plays a very important role in both of them.

To a very significant extent, the United States remains the most important strategic partner of the Philippines. This is due primarily to the comprehensive nature of the relationship. The United States remains the most important single country with which the Philippines is engaged. It is still the Philippines largest economic partner—whether in terms of trade or capital investments. It is the country where the largest concentration of Filipinos can be found outside of the Philippines and continues to be the preferred destination of Filipinos seeking to migrate for economic or other reasons. It is, however, the realm of security that remains the bedrock of the relationship, even as the nature of that relationship has changed since the end of the Cold War and the departure in 1992 of the U.S. Navy and Air Force from their facilities in Subic Bay and Clark Air Base, respectively.

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The Philippine government's quick response in support of the U.S. government's declaration of war against global terrorism in 2001 and participation in the "coalition of the willing" during the invasion of Iraq in 2003 emphasized the resilience of these security ties. These close ties have always been explained in terms of the historic relations between the two countries. The bases of the security ties have, however, become more tactical rather than strategic in nature since the closure of the U.S. military facilities. Whereas containing communism in Southeast Asia was a common strategic objective of the bilateral alliance during the Cold War, the recently (after being moribund after 1992) revived relationship is directed at serving converging tactical interests. To a large extent, Philippine political leaders saw the security relations with the United States as serving their country's own security interests, directly in relation to the Philippines' external security environment (mainly as insurance against the growing power of China) and indirectly with regard to its domestic security concerns (especially the secessionist movement in Mindanao that reportedly has had links to global and regional terror networks). In comparison, U.S. objectives for revitalizing the alliance with the Philippines are completely connected to the Bush administration's Global War on Terror. It is the tactical convergence of the objectives that the two partners have in their bilateral security relationship that is the glue that has reinvigorated the alliance.

Both the Philippines and the United States, however, see nothing incongruent in expanding the scope of the security relationship between the two countries beyond the parameters defined in the Mutual Defense Treaty of 1951. There is continued cooperation on strengthening coordination at the operational level and interoperability at the tactical level. This is particularly evident in special operations through the Piston Series of joint training exercises conducted by the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the U.S. special operations group. But such cooperation is also being extended to areas such as humanitarian assistance and disaster response (via the SAGIP gaming exercises) and planning for coordinated and combined operations on actions during crisis situations including nontraditional security conditions (via the HANDA annual seminars). More significantly, the Philippines and the United States are taking the lead in the ASEAN Regional Forum (which feeds into the second tendency in Philippine foreign policy) in organizing its first exercise, which will be on disaster management. The nontraditional security context of the revitalized relationship even extends to food security with the signing of the Framework Agreement of Cooperation on Agriculture and Related Fields.

Even as the security relationship remains rooted in agreements based on Cold War strategic calculations (the relevance of which to current security realities might be in doubt), there is a certain degree of flexibility in how both the Philippines and the United States have adopted it to suit their respective political and security objectives. Its realization in terms of strengthening coordination and cooperation at tactical levels and its further expansion in terms of scope to include nontraditional security situation, however, is hardly a testament to prospects of a clear future direction for the strategic partnership.

### SEPTEMBER TIMELINE OF EVENTS

**September 3, 2008:** The Philippine government dissolves the panel that had been negotiating with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) after a breakdown in talks in August and the MILF's return to violence (see the **September 2008 edition of the *Southeast Asia Bulletin***). Violent conflict between the two sides continued throughout September.

**September 4, 2008:** Singapore and China conclude a bilateral free-trade agreement, the first such pact between China and an Asian neighbor. The agreement reportedly covers trade in goods and services, movement of people, investment, and more, although full details will be released only when the agreement is signed at the October 24–25 Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) summit in Beijing.

**September 5, 2008:** The government of Vietnam files two formal protests with the Chinese government in response to the posting on China-based Web sites of Chinese invasion plans and military occupation of the country. With no sources and apparently unofficial, the plans described a 31-day invasion, including five days of missile strikes from land, sea, and air, electronic jamming of Vietnamese command and communications centers, a blockade in the South China Sea, and finally an invasion involving 310,000 troops sweeping into Vietnam from the Chinese provinces of Yunnan and Guangxi and the South China Sea.

**September 10, 2008:** The Members of Parliament Union (Burma), whose members won seats in Burma's 1990 elections, petition UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon to have their representatives replace those of the ruling military junta at the United Nations and set up a permanent mission in New York led by U Thein Oo. The secretary-general's office only said that it would study the proposal.

## SEPTEMBER TIMELINE OF EVENTS

### Continued

**September 11–14, 2008:** A series of attacks in the Indonesian province of Papua damage two roadways and an electricity distribution unit. Authorities believe that the attacks aimed to instill fear rather than cause strategic infrastructure damage. Papuan separatists have been blamed.

**September 15, 2008:** Thailand's ruling People's Power Party nominates Somchai Wongsawat as new prime minister, replacing the embattled Samak Sundaravej, who was forced from office on September 9. Somchai officially became prime minister on September 17. **See Major Regional Developments**

**September 16, 2008:** The deadline set by Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim for toppling the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO)-led government passes without incident. **See Major Regional Developments**

**September 17, 2008:** Indonesia and South Korea sign a deal for the latter to lease 25,000 hectares of the former's coastal waters for the cultivation of seaweed for processing as bioethanol fuel.

**September 18, 2008:** Thailand joins Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore as the fourth nation to cooperate in the Malacca Straits Patrols (MSP). The MSP monitors and promotes security in the Malacca Strait and the Singapore Strait.

**September 18, 2008:** The Philippine government announces that U.S. troops would begin assisting it to combat MILF rebels in Mindanao by expanding their mission to include intelligence sharing. Approximately 2,000 U.S. troops have been stationed in Mindanao since 2002, serving as advisers to assist the Philippines to combat the Abu Sayyaf Group. The announcement sparked renewed concern in Manila that U.S. forces may be engaging in combat activities and marked a notable evolution in U.S. assistance to include involvement in the Philippines' long-standing Moro (Islamic) issue.

**September 20, 2008:** Indonesia vice president Jusuf Kalla mediates negotiations in Jakarta between former Thai military commander Kwanchart Klaharn and representatives from Thailand's southern Muslim militant groups. Significant progress was made, including promises to meet twice more in coming months, but the Thai government has distanced itself from the meetings, claiming that Kwanchart did not attend in an official capacity and that it neither participated in nor is bound by the negotiations.

**September 22, 2008:** The ruling junta in Burma releases 9,002 prisoners, mostly drug dealers and petty criminals, but including one leading political prisoner, Win Tin, who was released for "good moral behavior." The junta claimed the others were released for the "social consideration of their families" and to take part in the country's scheduled elections in 2010. Approximately 2,000 political prisoners remain in Burma.

**September 22, 2008:** U.S. trade representative Susan Schwab announces that the United States will launch negotiations to join the Comprehensive Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership, or P4, a May 2006 free-trade agreement covering goods among Singapore, New Zealand, Chile, and Brunei. The United States already has free-trade agreements with Singapore and Chile. Vietnam, Peru, and Australia subsequently announced that they will begin negotiations to join as well.

**September 29, 2008:** Japan and Vietnam complete negotiations on an Economic Partnership Agreement aimed at facilitating trade between the two countries. Japan is Vietnam's third-largest trading partner, with a projected total trade volume of \$15 billion in 2008.

**September 29, 2008:** Indonesian president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono officially declares that he will seek reelection in 2009 and indicates that current vice president Yusuf Kalla will likely be his running mate.

## SOUTHEAST ASIA AT CSIS

The Southeast Asia Initiative of CSIS hosted a major conference on Southeast Asian affairs September 25–26 entitled "The United States and Southeast Asia: Toward a Strategy for Enhanced Engagement." Eighteen prominent Southeast Asian diplomats and scholars, and several senior U.S. government officials and other specialists, spoke at the event. An agenda and audio from the conference can be found **here**.

## U.S. ENGAGEMENT IN THE REGION

**September 10–16:** U.S. deputy secretary of state John Negroponte visited Vietnam for the first time since 1973, stopping in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. While in Vietnam, he met with Prime Minister Dung, Foreign Minister Khiem, Education Minister Nhan, and others. Throughout his trip and in his public **comments**, Secretary Negroponte discussed educational exchanges, cooperation on mitigating the effects of Agent Orange/dioxin, human rights, and enhanced economic and diplomatic engagement between the United States and Vietnam.

Secretary Negroponte next traveled to Cambodia, where he met with Prime Minister Hun Sen and other leaders to discuss deepening relations between the United States and Cambodia in security affairs, refugee matters, cultural exchange, and more. While in Phnom Penh, he signed a four-year bilateral agreement to provide \$24 million to support economic development in Cambodia, with an emphasis on small, rural enterprises, and announced that the United States will provide \$1.8 million to the extraordinary chambers in the courts of Cambodia after it is demonstrated that the Khmer Rouge war crimes tribunal meets international standards of justice. Secretary Negroponte's public remarks can be found **here**.

**September 17:** Burma and Laos were listed in a **presidential determination** for failing to meet international commitments to fight drug production and trafficking.

**September 23:** President and First Lady George and Laura Bush met with Burmese democracy leaders and human rights activists while in New York for the annual UN General Assembly meeting. The statement can be found **here**.

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## MAJOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

### Events Come to a Head in Thailand

September began with continued protests and occupation of key government buildings in Bangkok by the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD). The PAD is led by Sondhi Limthongkul, a media mogul and staunch opponent of ousted prime minister (and currently indicted and self-exiled) Thaksin Shinawatra, Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party, and its successor, the People's Power Party (PPP). An eclectic coalition of Bangkok elites—royalists, military, and businessmen—the PAD espouses what it calls "functional democracy," involving governance by representatives from a variety of elite occupations, over normal "representative democracy," which it claims has proved to be ineffective and imprudent for Thailand. As a result, the PAD has sought to depose Samak's democratically elected government and to install a legislature primarily comprised of appointed senators. The PAD accused Samak of aiming to eliminate the monarchy, despite his unquestionable royalist credentials, and of supporting the political rehabilitation of Thaksin.

After months of peaceful protests, violence broke out on September 2. Samak subsequently declared a state of emergency. In the following days, Thailand's foreign minister Tej Bunnag resigned and the ruling party approved holding a national referendum on its rule. When Thailand's Supreme Court on September 9 declared Samak guilty of ethics violations for accepting payment for serving as a guest host on a television cooking show, Samak stepped down from his position as head of the PPP and as prime minister. The PPP nominated Somchai Wongsawat, Thaksin's brother in law, to be prime minister on September 15, and he took office on September 17.

These developments did little to placate the PAD and its allies, however. By month's end, the PAD continued to occupy government offices, the Thai government continued to operate out of the old Thai airport (Don Muang), and Somchai was under investigation for violating the same ethics rules that brought down Samak, this time because he holds shares in an Internet service provider that does business with the government. Thailand's political crisis continues.

*Editor's Note: Violent clashes erupted between protesters and police in early October. A full recap of this evolving situation will appear in the November Southeast Asia Bulletin.*

## Political Drama Continues in Malaysia

Nearly six months after Malaysia's ruling coalition (Barisan Nasional) suffered its worst defeat at the polls in 50 years, opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim won a by-election in Penang on August 26, returning him to Parliament for the first time since his removal on false sodomy charges in 1998. Anwar immediately sought to build a coalition to topple the Barisan Nasional (BN) and very publicly targeted September 16 as the date when he would unveil enough defectors to do so.

The government's response to Anwar's announced intention indicated that it viewed them as credible. Forty-six suspect BN lawmakers were sent on a hastily arranged trip to Taiwan where they were expected to be out of range of Anwar's influence (several of Anwar's surrogates nonetheless followed them to the island). The government also increased its suppression of dissent by controversially invoking the Internal Security Act from the era of British rule to jail political opponents, including members of Parliament and journalists, without trial.

On September 18, Anwar called for an emergency session of Parliament at which he was expected to submit a vote of no confidence. However, Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi declined to hold the session, declaring that Parliament would begin as scheduled on October 13.

On October 9, UMNO—the leading party within the BN coalition—will hold its party leadership meetings, where Badawi is expected to announce his resignation plans. He has long planned to resign in 2010, but there are indications that the party considers him a liability and hopes that an announcement of an earlier resignation and handover to Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak will stave off Anwar's power bid. In a public opinion poll on who Malaysians thought would make a better prime minister, however, Anwar led Najib 40 percent to 34 percent. A takeover by Anwar's coalition would be a watershed for Malaysian politics, as UMNO, and Barisan Nasional more broadly, have led Malaysia since independence in 1957. (For a broader discussion of Malaysia's political dynamics see the **August 2008 edition of the *Southeast Asia Bulletin***)

## EVENTS TO WATCH FOR IN OCTOBER

**October 7:** The Malaysian Sessions Court will determine if opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim's trial on sodomy charges will be transferred to the High Court.

**October 9:** The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) will begin its party leadership selection process. News reports suggest that Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi may use this opportunity to announce a timeline for stepping down as party leader.

**October 11:** Hasan di Tiro, the elderly founder of the former Free Aceh Movement (GAM) rebel group in Indonesia's Aceh province, will return to Aceh after more than 30 years in exile in Sweden. Hasan was considered by GAM to be the rightful head of state of an independent Aceh, but any hope for independence faded after a landmark peace deal in 2005 between GAM and Jakarta.

**October 13:** Thai prime minister Somchai Wongsawat will visit Cambodia where he is expected to discuss the status of the disputed temple Preah Vihear as well as two other sites. Thailand's political crisis has held bilateral negotiations in abeyance since August.

## MISCELLANEOUS FACTS ABOUT THE PHILIPPINES

- There are more than 7,000 islands in the Philippines, with a combined area of more than 115,000 square miles, roughly the size of Italy.
- When the country is at war, the flag is hoisted upside down.
- The yo-yo is commonly believed to have been invented in the Philippines as a weapon for hunters.
- In 1941, census reports estimated the population of the Philippines as roughly 17 million. Today, the population is estimated at 96 million, making it the 12th-largest country in the world.