



**Statement before the**  
**House Foreign Affairs Committee**  
**Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific**

***“Revitalizing U.S.-ASEAN Relations”***

A Testimony by:

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Chairman Yoho, Ranking Member Sherman, and distinguished Members of the subcommittee, it is an honor to appear before you today to discuss the future of U.S. security relations with the Southeast Asia.

### **Opportunities and Challenges**

This year marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of U.S.-ASEAN relations, making it a natural time to take stock of U.S. ties with Southeast Asia and consider ways to improve relations with this increasingly important region.

This is also the first year of a new administration, and this hearing comes at an opportune time to inform the still-developing Asia policy of the Trump White House. The administration recently began its outreach to Southeast Asia in earnest with phone calls from the President to three key allies and partners in the region, a visit by the Vice President to Indonesia, Southeast Asia's largest country, and the Secretary of State's meeting earlier this month with the foreign ministers from the 10 ASEAN countries. With the White House looking to Southeast Asia, now is the time to reiterate the importance of this vital region and make recommendations to strengthen U.S. influence there.

Southeast Asia is an integral part of the larger Asia Pacific that will play a key role in propelling the U.S. economy in the decades ahead. ASEAN is at the heart of Asian economic integration efforts, and brings together Asia-Pacific leaders every year to discuss strategic issues at its diplomatic meetings and summits. Southeast Asia—located at the crossroads between East and South Asia, and the Pacific and Indian Oceans—is also increasingly the arena in which geopolitical rivalries between the United States, China, Japan, and India play out. ASEAN centrality in the regional architecture also gives it an important normative role to play, and its promotion of norms and rules, including the peaceful resolution of disputes and respect for international law, in turn help to uphold the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

The rise of China is rapidly changing the strategic picture in the region, and Beijing's actions in disputed areas like the South China Sea are being watched warily by Southeast Asian nations as an indication of China's broader plans and intentions for the region. The waterways of Southeast Asia—the Strait of Malacca and South China Sea in particular—are key conduits for maritime navigation and trade, and potential threats to commercial shipping in these areas have led regional states to devote increasing attention to police their maritime domains.

This growing focus on maritime security is about more than just concern over China's efforts to exert control over the South China Sea. Piracy has long been a threat in Southeast Asia, one which remains a recurrent problem despite successful cooperation between Southeast Asian states to manage it. Combating illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing is also a key concern of many Southeast Asian nations, as is preventing the trafficking of people, goods, and illicit substances across porous maritime borders.

Maritime security challenges in the region intersect with counterterrorism efforts particularly in the southern Philippines and neighboring areas, where armed groups like Abu Sayyaf blur the line between terrorism and organized crime. Kidnap-for-ransom operations in the Sulu Sea are both a maritime security and counterterrorism issue, one that countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines are working together to address along with key outside partners like the United States.

Terrorism remains a persistent concern in Southeast Asia, as it has since the first Bali bombing in 2002. The current counterterrorism focus in the region is on outreach by ISIS to extremist groups in Southeast Asia—particularly those in the southern Philippines who have sworn allegiance to ISIS—and the threat posed by Southeast Asian fighters returning to the region after having fought with ISIS and other groups in Syria and other parts of the Middle East.

### **The Current State of Play**

The strategic importance of Southeast Asia, while growing, is not new and the United States has longstanding security ties with several countries in the region. The Philippines and Thailand are formal U.S. treaty allies, and countries like Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia have robust defense relationships with the United States encompassing military exchanges, joint training and exercises, and defense trade. The past two administrations made real progress in strengthening ties with Southeast Asia, and maintaining focus on this vital region is key to broader U.S. strategy in Asia.

The strategic rebalance to the Asia-Pacific built upon a strong base to strengthen key relationships and build new partnerships. Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreements signed with both the Philippines and Singapore allow for greater rotational access for U.S. forces to facilities in those two countries. The defense relationships with Malaysia and Indonesia are as strong as they have ever been. And the rebalance expanded U.S. strategic options in mainland Southeast Asia, with Vietnam emerging as an important partner and Burma being incorporated back into the international community.

Concerns about Chinese actions in the South China Sea have created an increased demand signal from many Southeast Asian countries for an expanded U.S. security presence in the region. U.S. freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea are quietly welcomed by most Southeast Asian countries, even those whose excessive maritime claims are challenged along with those of China. Routine presence operations, such as U.S. Navy patrols in the South China Sea, and rotational deployments of U.S. forces to the region are also viewed as a positive contribution to regional stability.

There is also an increasing demand in Southeast Asia for assistance with maritime security capacity building, which has led to the refocusing of existing U.S. security assistance programs—such as the Foreign Military Financing and Excess Defense Articles programs—towards maritime security. New programs—such as the Southeast Asia Maritime Security

Initiative—have also been created to augment existing programs and fill gaps to improve the effectiveness of U.S. maritime capacity building efforts with allies and partners in Southeast Asia.

The United States also continues to support counterterrorism efforts in Southeast Asia, and continuing cooperation between U.S. defense and intelligence agencies and their Southeast Asian counterparts will be key to successfully combatting the influence of ISIS and other Middle Eastern terrorist groups on radical groups in Southeast Asia. Existing engagement on CT issues is strong, but the shifting nature of the extremist threat in Southeast Asia provides an impetus to refine existing cooperation and refocus efforts toward problem areas like deradicalization and the tracking of fighters returning from conflicts in the Middle East.

### **Recommendations to Build on Success**

Southeast Asia is important to U.S. interests, and not only because of the strong and longstanding security relationship between the United States and many countries in the region. The ASEAN countries are in a prime geostrategic location, are home to a young and growing population of 630 million, and make up the third-largest economy in Asia after China and Japan. ASEAN is the United States' fourth-largest global trading partner and supports about half a million jobs in the United States. The stock of U.S. direct investment in ASEAN totaled \$250 billion at the end of 2015, more than all U.S. investment in China, India, South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and New Zealand combined.

The case for continued high-level and intensive engagement with Southeast Asia is compelling, and members of both the executive and legislative branches should not hesitate to make that case to the American people. U.S.-ASEAN relations are a success story, but one that is all too often overlooked due to crises in the Middle East and Northeast Asia. It is important to U.S. interests to remain engaged and active in Southeast Asia, and making that case publicly is noticed by our allies and partners in Southeast Asia.

Our allies and partners also watch our strategic messages and policy pronouncements very closely, and often shape their policies with an eye on those of the United States. Given this dynamic, it is important that the U.S. government issue clear and consistent strategic messages, particularly on hot button issues like the South China Sea, to avoid confusing our allies and partners with inconsistent articulation of our objectives and strategy. Inconsistent execution of policies—with on-again, off-again FONOPs being the best example—also lead to confusion and undercut the perception of our resolve.

Moving forward, FONOPs and routine presence operations should be executed on a regular basis in the South China Sea to demonstrate our resolve to fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows. The U.S. government should also avoid providing shifting explanations for how the United States plans to manage China's rising power and influence, which is of the utmost

importance to Southeast Asian countries and has a great impact on how they devise their own approaches to the geopolitical environment in the Asia-Pacific.

U.S. defense relationships in Southeast Asia are strong and it is all too easy to fall into the trap of defaulting to military solutions to security challenges rather than economic or diplomatic solutions that may also be effective. This is a mistake, as Southeast Asian countries view security through the lens of economic growth and integration, and they place a high priority on both their economic and political relationship with the United States. The often-voiced criticism of the rebalance as being too focused on security stems in part from this imbalance between actual and desired engagement.

Diplomatic and economic efforts are currently underrepresented in U.S. policy outreach to Southeast Asia, and their greater incorporation into the policy toolkit will be important for successfully sustaining strong relationships in the region over the long-term. The U.S. withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership is a step in the wrong direction on this front, and Washington will need to devise and promote other ideas and vehicles for economic engagement with Southeast Asia in order for U.S. leadership in the region to remain credible in the long run.

Things are easier on the diplomatic front in Southeast Asia, where 80 percent of success is showing up. There is no substitute for high-level participation at ASEAN-centered regional meetings, which is why the President's announcement that he will attend both the East Asia Summit in the Philippines and the APEC forum in Vietnam in November is so important.

The groundwork for a successful EAS and APEC is laid at other meetings earlier in the year, however, so it will be very important that the Departments of State and Defense formulate a Southeast Asia strategy before Secretary Tillerson attends the ASEAN Regional Forum in August and Secretary Mattis attends the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus in October. Secretary Mattis has a valuable opportunity to preview the administration's approach to Southeast Asia at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore next month, a venue past U.S. defense secretaries have used to great effect to lay out the U.S. security vision for Southeast Asia.

That security vision need not be dramatically different from the status quo given the successes previous administrations have had in Southeast Asia. The political situation in several Southeast Asian states, most notably U.S. allies the Philippines and Thailand, have created a more complicated operating environment in Southeast Asia, however, which the new administration will have to address.

Reinvigorating the strained alliances with the Philippines and Thailand will be job number one for the administration. In the Philippines, the United States should strive to preserve the alliance to the greatest extent possible while taking a firm position on the human rights excesses of the Duterte administration. Given the difficulties in working with Duterte, there should also be consideration of shifting the spotlight in the bilateral relationship from hard security issues to

build on the already strong institutional, economic, and people-to-people ties between the United States and the Philippines.

In Thailand, the United States should explore whether the new constitution and the tentative preparation for elections in the wake of the royal transition provide an opportunity to begin resetting ties without rewarding the military government. The Department of State and Defense should also immediately resume dialogues with Thailand on issues of mutual strategic interest. Following the Thai elections, the United States should move quickly to restore fuller relations assuming that acceptable standards of democratic governance and human rights have been met.

While the formal treaty alliances in Southeast Asia are strained and in need of repair, some of the best opportunities for positive U.S. engagement in the region lie with other partners. Singapore is arguably the United States' most important partner in the region, providing consistent cooperation on a wide variety of economic, diplomatic, and security issues. Engagement with Jakarta remains key because of Indonesia's size, strategic location, and ability to play a leadership role within ASEAN. Malaysia and Vietnam are important emerging partners with shared interests in cooperating with the United States on economic issues and security challenges in the South China Sea.

The United States should seek to deepen these key partnerships and encourage greater cooperation between these countries and U.S. allies in Southeast Asia. The United States should also continue to support Myanmar in its ongoing bumpy transition toward democracy, including by encouraging the peace process with the armed ethnic groups in the north, addressing the plight of the Rohingya Muslim population in the west, and making military-to-military engagement contingent on the transition to civilian control of the military. In the meantime, U.S. officials should be given more leeway to discuss these key issues with the military.

Finally, the United States should continue to deepen cooperation on core challenges like maritime security and counterterrorism that appeal to many Southeast Asian countries, and to key U.S. partners in particular. Maritime security engagement is welcomed not only by South China Sea claimants, but also by ASEAN states concerned with piracy, illegal fishing, and energy security in their waters. U.S. security cooperation programs should continue to respond to this demand signal from the region. The administration should consider expanding these maritime security capacity-building initiatives and coordinating these efforts more closely with key allies like Japan and Australia.

The United States should also intensify capacity building efforts with allies and partners to improve their ability to resist Chinese coercion. Successful capacity building efforts will allow Southeast Asian states to better help themselves, bolstering deterrence against low-level Chinese coercion and allowing the U.S. military to focus more on deterring high-level contingencies.

The United States has several enduring advantages that lead Southeast Asia to continue to turn to it as the security partner of choice, including the world's best military, high favorability ratings

in most local populations, and a less threatening foreign policy than that of China. Given these advantages, Washington can continue to play the long game in Asia, confident that Chinese adventurism is likely to push many states to turn to the United States for support. The United States has successfully built a strong security relationship with Southeast Asia over the past 40 years on the basis of these strengths, and the opportunity is there for the new administration to take this relationship to even greater heights.