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Carpe Diem: U.S. Military Engagement with Myanmar

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U.S. secretary of defense Leon Panetta told Asian defense leaders meeting in Singapore June 2 that the United States is open to improving military ties with Myanmar if the country continues implementing democratic reforms and improves human rights conditions. In the context of the U.S. refocusing on Asia, Panetta said the United States would help countries develop their military capabilities. Many are seeking support from the United States and other partners. “We will encourage that kind of relationship with every nation we deal with in the region, including Myanmar,” Panetta said.

Interestingly, Panetta’s comments were followed at the same forum by Myanmar defense minister Hla Min, who said that his country’s military is “100 percent in support” of reformist president Thein Sein’s agenda, and that it will follow orders from his government. The minister added that the military’s guarantee of 25 percent of the seats in the country’s parliament, as enshrined in the constitution, could be reduced over time. Hla Min insisted this is not a “rigid” or long-term requirement. “When the time is right, we will make changes,” he said.

Hla Min’s statement was the latest in a succession of indications that at least some in Myanmar’s military leadership are open to amending the constitution and stepping back from politics. Army chief General Min Aung Hlaing said during an Armed Forces Day speech in Naypyidaw March 28 that the military is not above the law: “Our [army] has to *respect and obey* as well as preserve the state constitution [italics added].” Presumably

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that includes the clause allowing the constitution to be amended. The military's second-highest ranking officer, Soe Win, went further when he said during the May 19 signing of a peace deal with the Shan State Army-South, "In the constitution there are differences but we can work together and we can go into the parliament and maybe amend the constitution."

Hla Min's support for reforms and his suggestion that the military could reduce its political role over time may have opened the door a crack to begin contacts with the U.S. military. Myanmar's armed forces, which have long depended on China for most of their training and weaponry, are reportedly looking to the United States and other Western powers as well as Asian powers to help promote their evolution toward a more professional force under civilian control. Washington should carefully test that hypothesis.

Human rights groups and some in Congress are unlikely to welcome any engagement with Myanmar's military, considering the brutality with which it has treated the regime's opponents and the country's ethnic minorities over the past five decades. In the 1980s, military officers from Myanmar, then called Burma, studied in the United States under the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program. The U.S. and Myanmar militaries also worked together to tackle drug eradication efforts. But military cooperation ground to a halt in the mid-1990s as Washington imposed punitive sanctions against the country for the ruling junta's brutal crackdown on pro-democracy protests.

The day before Panetta and Hla Min spoke in Singapore, Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, on her first overseas trip in more than two decades, made clear in a speech in Bangkok that the pace of reform depends largely on support from the military, which remains the most influential political player in the country. Suu Kyi said she believes in "the sincerity of the president when he speaks about his commitment to reform." But she added that "he's not the only person in the government. And, as I keep repeating, there's the military to be reckoned with." Suu Kyi clearly recognizes that the country's nascent steps toward democracy can be halted abruptly if the military is not behind them.

Political advisers to President Thein Sein talk of looking to Indonesia as the model for how the role of the military could evolve over time. During President Suharto's rule, the Indonesian military had a dual function of preserving security and overseeing government policy. After Suharto was toppled in 1998, each new president negotiated step-by-step reforms



U.S. secretary of defense Leon Panetta said during the 2012 Shangri-La Dialogue that the United States seeks cooperative military relationships with Asian countries, including Myanmar. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/secdef/731779508/>

Carpe Diem: U.S. Military Engagement with Myanmar *(continued)*

with the military that resulted in its political influence being substantially reduced. Most importantly, by 2004 the military agreed to abandon its guaranteed 20 percent of seats in Indonesia's parliament. Increased exposure to Indonesia's experience and engagement with U.S. officers may help Myanmar's military to feel more confident in a professional and less political role in the country if it allows the reforms to move ahead.

"We need political relations between the military and the political parties to be cordial....Our military needs more political exposure," says one of the president's advisers in Yangon. "Without further benefits for the military, it will be hard for them to accept the changes. They need to be educated on how the military operates in democratic societies."

Panetta's comments in Singapore followed the U.S. administration's announcement last month that it would suspend hard-hitting sanctions barring financial transactions with and investment in Myanmar in response to the last year of political and economic reform. The defense secretary did not spell out what types of military engagement he had in mind, but it could begin with cooperation to search for the remains of several hundred U.S. pilots who were downed or crashed in northern Myanmar carrying supplies from India to China during World War II. Joint searches for the remains of missing American servicemen in neighboring Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos played a critical role in helping improve relations between the United States and those countries.

Myanmar could be invited to be an observer at annual U.S.-sponsored multilateral exercises like Cobra Gold in Thailand, or bilateral exercises like Balikatan in the Philippines and the eight Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training, or CARAT, exercises held each year around the region. More than 20 Asian countries already participate in Cobra Gold. The United States might also include Myanmar in the Navy's Pacific Partnership program or the Air Force's Pacific Angel operations, annual U.S.-sponsored humanitarian assistance exercises aimed at strengthening ties with host countries and responding to natural disasters and humanitarian emergencies. Australian and Japanese troops often participate in these programs, as do troops of regional host countries.

Expanding the ambitions of regional security cooperation and trust building within the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus forum is also a logical venue to expand contact with and training for Myanmar's military in a regional context. This approach has the benefit of involving all regional militaries including China.



U.S. and Indonesian marines train together during the 2010 Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training exercises. The Indonesian military offers proof that Myanmar's armed forces can enjoy a cooperative relationship with their U.S. counterparts if they reform. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/us-pacific-command/4669917320/>

Carpe Diem: U.S. Military Engagement with Myanmar *(continued)*



Members of the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command search in Laos in 2007 for the remains of U.S. service members lost during the Vietnam War. Cooperating to search for the remains of U.S. pilots lost during World War II could be an important step in developing U.S.-Myanmar military-to-military cooperation. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/soldiersmediacenter/2185587668/>

The United States could also send a military attaché to Myanmar with the task of regularly engaging the country's military, mapping opportunities to target training efforts to key leaders, and in general figuring out who is who. Among other things, the officer could put together an alumni group of Myanmar officers who have studied in the United States. That group would include some interesting and influential leaders such as the minister of social welfare, the agriculture minister, and the chairman of the investment board.

To be sure, Washington will want to begin any engagement by making it clear to Myanmar's military leaders up front that any further opening in military-to-military relations would depend on progress toward ending the decades-long conflicts in the ethnic areas, releasing of political prisoners, and continuing military support for the government's nascent reforms.

Little is known about why the military has allowed President Thein Sein to continue his reforms toward democracy. But it must have had little trouble recognizing how unpopular it was in the April by-elections when military-backed candidates lost all but one of the seats they contested, including several in the capital of Naypyidaw. The military might have realized that the 2015 general elections could be grim for it and its allies unless something is done to refurbish the army's image and change its role in the politics of Myanmar.

This realization may have opened a door for the Pentagon and its friends in Asia to consider re-engaging a military that they have largely shunned and isolated for the past two decades. As lessons learned in Indonesia have demonstrated, cutting off military-to-military ties with important countries in Asia does not promote U.S. national security interests. Engaging the military in Myanmar must be done carefully, step by step, but the first step should be taken sooner rather than later. ■

The Week That Was



Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh signed a number of agreements during a recent trip to Myanmar, including opening bus service from Imphal, India, to Mandalay, Myanmar. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/londonsummit/3409195494/>



A “yellow shirt” rally in 2008. Thousands of “yellow shirts” took to the streets of Bangkok recently to protest a proposed amnesty bill. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/keep-on-moving/3053066426/>

MYANMAR

- **Suu Kyi visits Thailand, addresses World Economic Forum.** Myanmar’s opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi addressed the World Economic Forum in Bangkok June 1 on her first trip abroad in 24 years. Suu Kyi warned attendees against “reckless optimism” about Myanmar’s reform process and cautioned that the political system still depends heavily on the country’s influential military. Suu Kyi also traveled to the Thai-Myanmar border to meet with Myanmar refugees before returning to Yangon June 3.
- **Indian prime minister visits Myanmar, signs deals.** Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh visited Myanmar May 27-29, held discussions with President Thein Sein in Naypyidaw May 28, and then traveled to Yangon to meet opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi May 29. Singh signed a number of agreements with Myanmar officials, including one granting an offshore oil and gas block to India’s Jubilant Energy and another establishing passenger bus service from Imphal, India, to Mandalay, Myanmar.
- **Defense minister says military committed to reform.** Myanmar’s minister of defense Hla Min June 2 told participants at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore that his country’s military is “100 percent in support” of ongoing reforms. His remarks came a day after opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi told the World Economic Forum in Thailand that the reform effort depends on the military. Hla Min also said that, although the military is currently guaranteed 25 percent of the seats in the parliament, its influence could be reduced or eliminated in the future.

- **Official says government to end media censorship.** Tint Swe, head of Myanmar’s Press Scrutinization and Registration Department (PSRD), told Agence France Presse June 1 that the government will stop censoring the media at the end of June. He said the PSRD, which is charged with overseeing press censorship in Myanmar, will be closed and a press council will be established as a liaison between the government and the press.

THAILAND

- **Yellow Shirts and opposition lawmakers block amnesty bill.** Thousands of supporters of the People’s Alliance for Democracy, known as “yellow shirts,” took to the streets May 30-June 1 to protest the government’s proposed amnesty bill. A scuffle broke out in the parliament May 31 when opposition Democrat Party lawmakers prevented the bill from being tabled, and the following day protestors surrounded the parliament and blocked

legislators from entering the building. The bill would grant a general amnesty to those involved in political violence in recent years, including ousted former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

- **Webmaster sentenced under Computer Crimes Act.** A Thai court May 30 convicted webmaster Chiranuch Premchaiporn of failing to quickly remove comments critical of Thailand's monarchy from her Prachatai website. Chiranuch was sentenced to an eight-month suspended sentence under Thailand's Computer Crimes Act. Although she avoided a potential 20-year sentence, the verdict was widely decried by human rights and press freedom groups, which worry that the decision sets a dangerous precedent for human rights in Thailand.
- **PTT expands East African oil holdings with Cove Energy acquisition.** Thai oil company PTT Exploration & Production announced May 23 it had reached a deal to acquire Cove Energy, which focuses on East African oil and gas resources, for \$1.92 billion. The latest bid increased an earlier offer from PTT in February and beat out one by Royal Dutch Shell, which said in April that it was poised to acquire Cove. The deal will substantially increase PTT's presence in East Africa, which is experiencing an oil and gas boom.

INDONESIA

- **Lady Gaga calls off show after protests.** Pop singer Lady Gaga decided May 27 to cancel a June 3 performance in Jakarta because of security concerns after weeks of protests from Islamist groups. Police were still in negotiations with the event's promoters over whether to permit the performance when Lady Gaga decided to cancel. The Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), a hard-line organization, threatened violence if the show went ahead. Some have criticized the police for being too lenient and allowing the FPI and other groups to act with impunity.
- **State Investment Agency to spend \$367 million to build geothermal power plants.** The State Investment Agency announced May 16 it will spend \$367 million on three geothermal power plant projects. The decision followed President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's announcement the previous week that energy giant BP will make a multibillion dollar investment in Indonesia's geothermal energy industry. Indonesia has more geothermal potential than any other country, but the industry has suffered from a lack of private-sector and government investment.



Lady Gaga called off a planned performance in Jakarta after weeks of uncertainty created by protests from hard-line Islamist groups. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/10363713@N08/5773396793/>

- **The *Wall Street Journal* to launch Bahasa Indonesia news website.** The *Wall Street Journal* announced May 29 that it would launch an Indonesian language website and mobile application for Blackberry phones to tap readership in Southeast Asia's largest country. In an interview with *Strategic Review*, the *Journal's* managing editor, Robert Thompson, said the move made sense given Indonesia's economic and political ascendance both regionally and globally. The *Wall Street Journal* has maintained a Jakarta bureau since 1976 and already provides content in Japanese, Chinese, and Korean.
- **Yudhoyono announces new policies to cut use of subsidized fuel.** President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono announced five new policies May 29 to cut the use of subsidized fuel. The policies include a sophisticated vehicle registration and tracking system to limit the consumption of subsidized fuel and a ban on its use in government, mining, and plantation vehicles. The decision comes two months after the House of Representatives rejected planned subsidy cuts in the face of widespread protests. The government also plans to encourage the use of natural gas for transportation and increase the energy efficiency of government institutions and state-owned enterprises.
- **Officials in four Kalimantan provinces end coal blockade.** Government officials in the four provinces of Kalimantan asked local activists May 30 to allow coal shipments to pass river blockades established to prevent fuel shipment to the state electricity company. The central government agreed to increase the quota of subsidized fuel for the provinces. The previous quota had been well below the expected level of consumption, causing shortages and long lines at gas stations.

PHILIPPINES

- **Supreme Court chief justice Corona sacked.** The Philippine Senate found Supreme Court chief justice Renato Corona guilty on corruption charges May 29 and removed him from his post. Prosecutors demonstrated that Corona had undeclared assets worth \$2.4 million in foreign currency accounts. The guilty verdict in the four-month-long impeachment trial is the biggest win thus far for President Benigno Aquino's antigraft campaign. Aquino said the outcome proves the Philippine justice system is impartial.
- **MILF, government conclude talks in Malaysia.** The 28th round of formal talks between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) ended May 30 with little progress made, but both sides



Philippine president Benigno Aquino is visiting Washington for his first meeting in the Oval Office with U.S. president Barack Obama. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/worldbank/6170232825/>

agreed to further refine their positions. The talks focused on issues from a landmark document on key principles inked last month, such as wealth-sharing, governance, and a transition roadmap. The parties have been negotiating since 1997 to end a decades-long armed rebellion that has plagued the country's poor south.

- **New ambassador to China appointed.** The Philippine Commission on Appointments May 31 confirmed Sonia Brady as the country's new ambassador to China. Her appointment comes as Manila and Beijing are embroiled in a territorial row in the South China Sea. Brady formerly served as ambassador to China from 2006 to 2010 and as a consul there in the 1970s. In her confirmation hearing, Brady said her experience in dealing with Chinese officials would help ease bilateral tensions.
- **President Aquino begins visit to United States.** Philippine president Benigno Aquino arrived in Washington June 6 for an official visit to the United States. Aquino plans to attend an afternoon meeting at the White House with President Barack Obama June 8, an inaugural dinner to launch the U.S.-Philippine Society, and meetings with the Filipino-American community in Los Angeles on his way home.
- **UN expresses concerns over human rights in Philippines.** Several members of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) questioned the Philippine government's human rights record during a May 30 meeting in Geneva as part of the UNHCR's Universal Periodical Review. They expressed particular concern about extrajudicial killings, disappearances, and torture. Those concerns were given added weight the following day when a witness to a 2009 election-related massacre of 57 people in Maguindanao was found murdered and dismembered. He was the third witness to the massacre killed.

VIETNAM

- **Vietnam and China in talks on marine cooperation.** Vietnamese and Chinese experts held two days of negotiations in China May 29-30 on low-sensitivity maritime cooperation programs. The two sides discussed environmental protection, research, search and rescue operations, and disaster prevention, among other issues. Chinese vice foreign minister Fu Ying was on hand to meet with the experts on the sidelines of the negotiations. A second round of talks will take place later this year.
- **Vietnam and Japan strengthen defense ties.** The chief of staff of the Japan Self-Defense Forces, General Shigeru Iwasaki, visited Hanoi May 29.

He met with the chief of general staff of Vietnam's army, General Do Ba Ty, and Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung to discuss strengthening the two countries' strategic partnership and confirmed Japan's support for resolving South China Sea maritime disputes through international law.

- **National Assembly votes to remove embattled deputy.** Vietnam's National Assembly May 26 voted to dismiss Deputy Dang Thi Hoang Yen for incorrect entries on her application for office. Yen's dismissal ended her months-long struggle against what many felt was a targeted attack against her. Yen is not a member of Communist Party, and few independents are elected to the Vietnamese legislature. Yen, 52, made her money developing industrial parks around Ho Chi Minh City and was one of the wealthiest tycoons ever elected to the National Assembly.

- **Panetta visits Vietnam.** U.S. defense secretary Leon Panetta visited Vietnam for two days of talks with Vietnamese officials June 3-4. He visited a U.S. ship making a port call at Cam Ranh Bay, a former U.S. deepwater port during the Vietnam War, and discussed military-to-military ties with Vietnamese officials in Hanoi as part of the United States' rebalance toward Asia. Panetta's stop in Vietnam was part of a week-long Asia trip that began with his attendance at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore and included a visit to India.



U.S. defense secretary Leon Panetta is greeted by Major General Nguyen Cong Son, deputy chief of office of Vietnam's defense minister, during a recent trip to Cam Ranh Bay. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/secdef/7327569826/in/photostream/>

- **Vietnam foreign ministry condemns U.S. human rights report.** Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Luong Thanh Nghi said that the U.S. State Department's human rights report on Vietnam, released May 24, "continues to make some partial remarks based on incorrect information." The report alleges Vietnam restricts freedom of press, speech, assembly, and religion. Vietnam has come under increasing scrutiny for suppression of nonviolent protesters and opposition groups, including the sentencing May 25 of four Catholic activists for distributing antigovernment leaflets.

- **Vietnamese state-owned companies required to disclose balance sheets.** Bloomberg News reported May 31 that Vietnamese prime minister Nguyen Tan Dung is expected to sign new laws in the coming weeks requiring independent auditors to examine the financial statements of Vietnamese state-owned enterprises before they are published online. Officials are attempting to lure back investors after multiple scandals involving poor investments and corruption in state companies by increasing oversight and accountability in the state-owned sector, which accounts for a third of the economy.



Malaysian prime minister Najib Razak recently announced a \$6.5 billion private investment plan to boost his country's economy. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/65619190@N04/5973404902/>

- **Mekong Delta wind power plant to be finished by 2015.** The Mekong Delta Wind Power Center in Vietnam's Bac Lieu city is expected to be completed by 2015, according to a May 23 report by *Viet Nam News*. Experts say the 500-megawatt eco-friendly plant will supply electricity for the Mekong Delta and promote more investment in industrial projects in the area. The project is funded by a \$1 billion loan from the U.S. Export-Import Bank.

MALAYSIA

- **Senators McCain and Lieberman visit Malaysia.** U.S. senators John McCain and Joseph Lieberman visited Malaysia from May 30 to June 1 for the Invest Malaysia 2012 conference. The senators also met with Malaysian prime minister Najib Razak and attended a dinner hosted by the Kuala Lumpur Business Club. After leaving Malaysia, they traveled to Singapore for the Shangri-La Dialogue June 1-3.
- **Najib unveils \$6.5 billion private investment plan.** Malaysian prime minister Najib Razak May 27 announced a \$6.5 billion private investment plan that seeks to bolster the Malaysian economy and attract more foreign direct investment. The plan supplements the prime minister's Economic Transformation Program, which seeks to support private-sector projects in Malaysia. Malaysia is on track to hit the government's target of \$11 billion in foreign direct investment in 2012.
- **2013 budget to be tabled on September 28.** Prime Minister Najib Razak announced May 29 that Malaysia's 2013 budget will be submitted to Parliament September 28. The announcement raised speculation that the prime minister will not call general elections until after the budget is passed, possibly as late as early 2013. New elections must be held by April 2013.

ASEAN

- **Sixth ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting in Phnom Penh.** Phnom Penh hosted the sixth ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting May 29. Ministers from the 10 ASEAN member states agreed to increase the frequency of the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meetings Plus (ADMM+), which include the United States, China, and other ASEAN dialogue partners, from every three years to every two. They also agreed to hold a joint humanitarian assistance and disaster relief exercise and an ADMM+ exercise in Brunei in 2013.

- **World Economic Forum releases annual tourism rankings.** The World Economic Forum May 30 released its Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index, which ranks 139 countries on 14 criteria. Three ASEAN states were ranked in the top 50: Singapore at 10, Malaysia at 35, and Thailand at 41. Among the other ASEAN countries, Brunei ranked 67, Indonesia 74, Vietnam 80, the Philippines 94, and Cambodia 109.
- **Fourteenth ASEAN-India senior officials meeting in Cambodia.** The fourteenth ASEAN-India senior officials' meeting was held May 27 in Cambodia. Officials discussed the construction of a Myanmar-Laos-Vietnam-Cambodia-India highway, progress on the ASEAN-India partnership, and implementation of the ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement.
- **ASEAN Plus Three senior officials meeting in Cambodia.** ASEAN, Japan, South Korea, and China held the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) senior officials meeting in Cambodia May 25. The ministers discussed implementation of the APT work plan, the Chiang Mai Initiative, and preparations for the upcoming ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting and ASEAN Summit. This year marks the 15th anniversary of the establishment of the APT.



A beach in Phuket, Thailand. Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand all ranked among the top 50 countries in the World Economic Forum's Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/vasenska/7008489157/>

SOUTH CHINA SEA

- **China and Philippine defense ministers agree to restraint in South China Sea.** Philippine defense minister Voltaire Gazmin and his Chinese counterpart Liang Guanglie met on the sidelines of the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting in Cambodia May 29 and agreed to exercise restraint in order to prevent escalation of an ongoing territorial row in the South China Sea. Both countries also agreed to keep lines of communication open until a peaceful solution is found.
- **ASEAN concludes drafting core elements of code of conduct.** ASEAN senior officials May 24 finished drafting the core elements of a binding code of conduct for parties in the South China Sea. The draft will be submitted to the ASEAN foreign ministers for a final decision in July before beginning negotiations with China. A nonbinding Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea was adopted by ASEAN and China in 2002 and both sides are now in the process of drafting a code for implementing it.
- **China cautions United States amid Law of the Sea debate.** U.S. and Chinese officials traded oblique warnings over the South China Sea recently as the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee took up debate

of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Secretary of State Hillary Clinton testified May 23 that accession to UNCLOS will provide firmer legal grounds for the United States to “challenge other countries’ behavior.” In response, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lei warned that countries “outside the region” should not get involved in territorial disputes surrounding the South China Sea.

CAMBODIA

- **China offers \$20 million in military aid, signs military cooperation pact with Cambodia.** Cambodian defense minister Tea Banh and his Chinese counterpart Liang Guanglie signed a military cooperation agreement May 28 that included \$20 million in military aid from China. They signed the agreement just before the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM) in Phnom Penh. Liang was invited to attend the ADMM by Cambodia, which is the ASEAN chair this year.
- **Cambodian human rights groups condemn government abuses.** The Cambodian Human Rights Action Committee, a coalition of 22 nongovernmental organizations, issued a statement May 30 condemning the use of government armed forces to “[evict] people from their home lands; [use] violent acts against peaceful assemblies; [commit] extra judicial killings; [cause] serious injuries; ...[and detain] citizens in custody without proper investigation.” The statement followed the widely condemned May 24 sentencing of 13 women to prison terms for protesting land evictions.
- **Cambodia holds elections for local commune councils.** Cambodia held elections June 3 for local commune councils. Official results will not be released for weeks, but the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) appeared to win by a landslide, capturing 72 percent of the vote according to the CPP. The opposition Sam Rainsy party said it won 21 percent and claimed there were irregularities in the election. The executive director of the Cambodian Center for Independent Media, Pa Nguon Teang, said during an interview May 28 that opposition political parties enjoyed unequal access to the media ahead of the elections because most radio and television stations in Cambodia are under the influence of powerful businesses with ties to the ruling party.
- **Ten-year-old Cambodian girl dies from bird flu.** The World Health Organization announced May 28 that a 10-year-old Cambodian girl died from the H5N1 strain of avian influenza, which has killed 357 people



U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) in 2010. Clinton recently testified before the SFRC on the importance of U.S. accession to the Law of the Sea. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/talkradionews/3549969932/>

worldwide since 2003. China, Vietnam, and Indonesia have also reported deaths from the virus in the past year.

SINGAPORE

- **Ruling party fails to gain votes in Hougang by-election test.** Singapore's ruling People's Action Party (PAP) suffered its third electoral setback in a year, losing a May 26 parliamentary by-election in the Hougang district to the Workers' Party, 62 percent to 34 percent. Hougang has been an opposition stronghold for two decades. The by-election was seen as a test of voter preferences after a year of cautious reforms following the PAP's disappointing showing in last May's general elections. Prime Minister Lee Hsein Loong said after the by-election that there is "much more to be done" to address voter discontent on issues such as housing and transportation.



Supporters of the Workers' Party rally ahead of a by-election in Singapore's Hougang district. The Workers Party won the by-election 62 to 34 percent. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/wynnie/7252525380/>

- **Chinese foreign minister visits Singapore.** Chinese foreign minister Yang Jiechi made a two-day visit to Singapore and met with his Singaporean counterpart K. Shanmugam May 28. The two discussed their countries' bilateral relations, the building of the ASEAN Community, East Asian integration, and other regional issues. Yang also met with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean.

- **Singapore to boost investment in Myanmar's hotel and tourism sectors.** Singapore is set to ramp up investments in Myanmar's tourism and hotel industry. Discussions were held between a delegation of the International Enterprise Singapore Business Department and officials at Myanmar's Ministry of Hotels and Tourism in the second week of May. Singapore is already the largest investor in Myanmar's hotel and tourism industry, which is expected to add more than 50 hotels across the country over the next two years.

TIMOR-LESTE

- **New president sworn in, commits to deepening ties with China.** Taur Matan Ruak was sworn in as Timor-Leste's new president May 20. He met with Wang Zhizhen, a special envoy of China's president Hu Jintao, the same day to celebrate 10 years of diplomatic ties between China and Timor-Leste. Wang agreed to provide assistance to Timor-Leste, while Ruak promised that his country would adhere to the one-China policy and support China on its core interests.

- **Clinton commemorates 10 years of diplomatic ties with Timor-Leste.**

U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton released a video message May 20 commemorating 10 years of diplomatic ties with Timor-Leste. She said, “The United States and Timor-Leste are bound together by mutual respect and shared interests. We are committed to strengthening this partnership to promote democracy, freedom, and human rights in the decade to come.” The United States has provided \$350 million in direct assistance to Timor-Leste since 2000, and many U.S. agencies, including the FBI, the Drug Enforcement Agency, and the Coast Guard, are involved in the country.

LAOS

- **Congress approves \$10 million in unexploded ordinance assistance.** The U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee May 24 expressed its support for a record \$10 million to be dedicated to unexploded ordinance clearance in Laos for fiscal year 2013. The language, which was included in a draft law to fund the State Department and Foreign Operations in Fiscal Year 2013, came just after the House of Representatives Appropriations Committee announced its support for the increased funding. The funds increase is not expected to be opposed and will therefore likely be included in the final State Department/Foreign Operations Act at the end of the year.

- **Laos designates new economic zone near Lao-Thai Friendship Bridge.** The Lao government signed an agreement May 22 establishing the 2,500-acre Thakhek Special Economic Zone (SEZ) near the Lao-Thai Friendship Bridge in Khammuan province that links central Laos with Thailand. The zone will be developed with \$80 million from private companies. SEZs often accelerate growth by encouraging trade and investment while creating jobs for local communities. The government believes SEZs are key to Laos’s ambition to graduate from the UN list of least-developed nations by 2020.

- **Chinese-funded joint venture project launched in Vientiane.** Two hundred officials, diplomats, and businesspeople gathered May 21 to launch Vientiane New World, a multiphase joint venture project with Chinese state-owned company CAMC Engineering to develop property along the Mekong River. The project will include 50 villas to accommodate officials attending the Asia-Europe Meeting in November. As one of Southeast Asia’s least-developed countries, Laos hopes to attract such major investment projects to boost its growth.



Unexploded ordinance (UXO) discovered in Laos. The U.S. Congress has expressed support for dedicating a record \$10 million to UXO removal in Laos in fiscal year 2013. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/10588309@N00/287534429/>

BRUNEI DARUSSALAM



Brunei has ordered the country's numerous DVD shops to rid their inventory of pirated stock. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/cawanpink/4617784585/>

- **Crackdown on pirated media leads residents to turn to online piracy.** The government of Brunei ordered stores that carry bootleg DVDs to get rid of their inventory by May 21. The move created some bargain prices in the days before the ban went into effect. Retailers are uncertain if the latest move to discourage piracy is just for show or if the government means business. Ordinary Bruneians, meanwhile, continue to find pirated content easily available online. Brunei is one of nine countries negotiating the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, which is expected to require increased protection of intellectual property rights among member countries. ■

- **Fundraiser to benefit West Sumatran children.** MinangUSA will host the annual Minang Bazaar, or Pasar Minang, fundraiser June 10 to benefit West Sumatran children. The event will include West Sumatran (Minang) music, dance, and theatrical performances, as well as vendors selling West Sumatran foods and other goods. It will be held from 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. at the Indonesian ambassador's residence, Wisma Indonesia, 2700 Tilden St., NW. More information is available [here](#).
- **Seminar with Rizal Ramli at East-West Center.** The East-West Center in Washington will host a seminar June 12 with Indonesia's former economic coordinating minister and finance minister, Rizal Ramli. The event, titled "Indonesia's Economic Outlook and Asian Economic Integration," will take place from 2:00 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. at the East-West Center, 1819 L St., NW, Sixth Floor Conference Room. Please RSVP by June 11 [here](#).
- **Banyan Tree Leadership Forum with Hor Namhong.** Cambodian foreign minister Hor Namhong will speak at the CSIS Southeast Asia Program's prestigious Banyan Tree Leadership Forum June 12. The forum is a public, on-the-record venue for U.S. and Southeast Asian leaders to address the pressing issues facing U.S.-Asian relations. The event will take place from 3:00 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. in CSIS's B1B Conference Room, 1800 K St., NW. Please RSVP to southeastasiaprogram@csis.org.
- **"U.S. Objectives for APEC 2012" at CSIS.** The CSIS Simon Chair in Political Economy will host a talk June 13 entitled "U.S. Objectives for APEC 2012." The event will feature remarks by U.S. Senior Official for APEC Hans G. Klemm and Assistant U.S. Trade Representative for Japan, Korea, and APEC Affairs Wendy Cutler. The talk will take place from 2:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. in CSIS's B1C Conference Center, 1800 K St., NW. Please RSVP [here](#).
- **South China Sea Conference at CSIS.** The CSIS Southeast Asia Program will host its second annual South China Sea conference June 27-28. The conference, titled "The South China Sea and Asia Pacific in Transition: Exploring Options for Managing Disputes," will feature a day and a half of expert panels on every aspect of the ongoing dispute in the South China Sea. Panels will include "Recent Developments in the South China Sea," "South China Sea in ASEAN-US-China Relations," and "The Role of International Law and Norms in Resolving and Managing Disputes." For more information, please contact southeastasiaprogram@csis.org.

- **Legacies of War summer reception and celebration.** Legacies of War will host a reception and celebration June 18 to thank members of Congress and others who have supported efforts to increase U.S. funding for unexploded ordinance removal in Laos. The reception will feature Lao hors d'oeuvres and desserts and cultural performances. It will be held from 5:30 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. at Stewart Mott House, 122 Maryland Ave., NE. Please RSVP [here](#). ■

SOUTHEAST ASIA FROM THE CORNER OF 18TH & K STREETS
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