

# Southeast Asia from Scott Circle

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## Washington Needs a New Approach to the Lower Mekong—"the Next South China Sea"

PHUONG NGUYEN

*Phuong Nguyen is a research associate with the Sumitro Chair for Southeast Asia Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.*

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President Barack Obama's administration has touted the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) as a hallmark of growing U.S. engagement with ASEAN, particularly mainland Southeast Asia. For the past five years, government agencies, led by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), have made inroads toward developing the LMI as the centerpiece of U.S. engagement along the Mekong River. Yet efforts on this front, along with broader U.S. economic and strategic interests in the region, could be undermined if Washington and its partners stand by while environmentally destructive dams are constructed on the mainstream of the Mekong, especially by Laos.

Secretary of State John Kerry, during last July's [LMI Ministerial Meeting](#) and again during a December [trip](#) to Vietnam, emphasized that decisions related to dam building in the region "have to be made carefully, deliberately, and transparently." Then-secretary of state Hillary Clinton had obtained assurances from Laos in 2012 that it would suspend work on the controversial Thai-financed Xayaburi Dam until a more comprehensive environmental assessment could be completed. Yet as the United States continues to support capacity building, healthcare, education, and connectivity in the Lower Mekong region, its calls for transparency and sustainable development have been largely ignored by the Lao government.

U.S. strategic interests in mainland Southeast Asia depend in large part on the autonomy, stability, and prosperity of countries along the Lower

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## Washington Needs a New Approach to the Lower Mekong—“the Next South China Sea” *(continued)*



*The construction site of the Xayaburi Dam in Laos, seen in 2011. Laos has forged ahead with work at the site since late 2012, despite objections from neighboring countries and environmental groups, and the dam is now about 30 percent completed. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/internationalrivers/6003765352>*

Mekong, home to approximately 240 million people. A stronger Lower Mekong region is critical for narrowing development gaps within ASEAN, and a strong and integrated ASEAN is necessary for the consolidation of U.S. staying power in Southeast Asia.

At the core of the controversy surrounding dams on the Mekong River is China's role in supporting and financing the construction of dams in Cambodia and Laos. China plans to build a total of 19 large dams on the Mekong. Five are already operational in China's Yunnan province. Nine of the planned dams will be built in Laos and two in Cambodia. The dams' environmental effects, including damage to fish production and increased risk of natural calamities,

will be felt most strongly along the Lower Mekong—in Cambodia, Vietnam, and, to a lesser extent, Laos.

Seventy million people depend on the Mekong for their livelihoods, and two of the world's largest rice exporters, Thailand and Vietnam, are located in the Lower Mekong region. The Lower Mekong basin is one of the world's largest inland fisheries. Future environmental degradation could devastate local and national economies, severely weakening an important part of Southeast Asia that, with the exception of Thailand, has only just begun to enjoy the fruits of stability and prosperity.

Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam in 1995 signed a treaty that requires the four countries to hold intergovernmental consultations before building dams on the mainstream of the Mekong. The Lao government, however, is intent on becoming the “battery of Southeast Asia” and, with financial backing from China and Thailand, has repeatedly reneged on this pledge. The massive Xayaburi Dam is about 30 percent completed, and Laos plans to launch construction on a second dam, the Don Sahong, on the mainstream of the Mekong later this year. Most of the electricity from both dams will be exported to Thailand.

The failure of regional leaders at an April 4 Mekong River Commission summit to convince Laos to take its neighbors' long-term interests into account signals that it is time for the United States and its regional partners to adopt a different strategic approach to the Lower Mekong.

## Washington Needs a New Approach to the Lower Mekong—“the Next South China Sea” *(continued)*

U.S. initiatives to help improve infrastructure, health, and education have not translated into substantial influence in Laos. Neither have efforts to assist with the trade reforms that allowed Laos to join the World Trade Organization last year. As is increasingly common, China’s no-strings-attached aid and loans have reduced Laos’s incentives to heed U.S. and regional calls for cooperation and transparency.

China’s record elsewhere indicates that if left to its own devices, it will pursue more aggressive tactics to expand its political influence in the Lower Mekong and propagate patterns of disregard for international rules and norms. For this reason, some diplomats and officials in the region have quietly begun to describe the Mekong River as “the next South China Sea,” which is fraught with tensions and risks because of competing and overlapping claims between China and four Southeast Asian countries. In the long run, greater economic interdependence between China, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and, to some extent, Thailand could result in even more leeway for Beijing to exercise its will along the Mekong.

There are two important steps the United States should take to address these issues. First, Washington needs to refocus its policy toward Laos. Vientiane’s determination to build a series of large dams on the Mekong is based primarily on its need to generate income through the sale of hydropower; Laos’s gross domestic product is a mere \$5 billion. Japan, which has been pursuing its own engagement efforts along the Mekong, has grasped this economic rationale better than the United States has.

Japan’s efforts to boost the Lao economy through investment and regional connectivity on top of its [assistance](#) programs for the Lower Mekong in general, from which Laos also benefits, are steps in the right direction and could be examples for Washington. The United States and Japan should consider joining hands in reinforcing each other’s policies toward the Lower Mekong region. With the right incentives, Lao authorities could be convinced to pursue more sustainable and constructive development strategies.

Second, the United States needs to start a serious dialogue with Thailand and Vietnam about what course development in the region and along the Mekong should take. Both rely on the Mekong, yet both (especially Thailand) continue to finance and construct dams along its mainstream and tributaries.



*Secretary of State Hillary Clinton meets with Lao prime minister Thongsing Thammavong in Vientiane in July 2012. Clinton’s trip to Laos was historic, but it is now time for Washington to engage more comprehensively with the country.*  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/66271936@N02/7587443178/in/set-72157630612846558>



## Washington Needs a New Approach to the Lower Mekong—“the Next South China Sea” *(continued)*



*Children in a village in the Mekong Delta in southern Vietnam. Livelihoods throughout the delta could be decimated by upstream dams on the mainstream Mekong River. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/usaidthai/9150351512/in/set-72157634351372939>*

Vietnam has always been vocal about the dangers of recklessly exploiting the Mekong River. Its rice basket, the Mekong Delta, could be wiped out in the coming decades by the combined effects of rising sea levels and upstream damming. But it cannot name and shame its neighbors while seeking to benefit from dams itself. The United States, through USAID and its private sector, has been working with the Vietnamese government to help develop renewable energy capacity and reduce the effects of rising sea levels in the Mekong Delta. But these efforts and resources will come to naught if problems upstream are not addressed properly.

In Thailand, civil society organizations have long raised concerns about the need to protect the Mekong River, but energy needs have prompted the government and private companies to finance dams in

and purchase hydropower from its neighbors. Ensuring its energy security and developing a more integrated regional energy market will be critical for Thailand in the years to come, and the United States should seek to help with these efforts.

The U.S. and Thai governments should work with their private sectors to promote energy sustainability in Thailand and throughout the Lower Mekong region. General Electric's success in building a wind farm in the Mekong Delta, with support from the U.S. Export-Import Bank, proves that both Washington and its regional partners have much to gain from working together on this issue.

The LMI added an important pillar to U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia and is proof that the rebalance includes economic and soft-power components. However, transforming the LMI into real, sustained U.S. influence will require looking deeper into the heartland of mainland Southeast Asia, especially in increasingly strategic Laos. ■



*A Jakarta voter shows a finger dipped in ink after voting in 2009. Indonesia on April 9 completed one of the world's most complicated single-day elections. [http://www.flickr.com/photos/isa\\_e/3701025650](http://www.flickr.com/photos/isa_e/3701025650)*

## INDONESIA

- **Indonesia holds parliamentary elections.** More than 100 million voters across Indonesia cast ballots on April 9 for seats in national, provincial, and district-level parliaments. Unofficial tallies show the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) garnered the most seats with 19 percent of votes, followed by Golkar and Gerindra with about 14 percent and 12 percent, respectively. Official results will be announced on May 7. Parties must now form coalitions to reach the threshold to nominate candidates for July's presidential elections—20 percent of seats in the national parliament or 25 percent of the popular vote.
- **Southeast Asia's largest counterterrorism training center opens in Java.** President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono commissioned the Indonesia Peace and Security Center on April 7 in Sentul, West Java. The almost 650-acre compound cost \$145 million and is the largest training center for counterterrorism and peacekeeping in Southeast Asia. The center is part of Yudhoyono's plan to increase the number of Indonesian troops deployed for UN peacekeeping missions from 2,000 to 4,000.
- **Indonesia to build \$1.8 billion coal plant in Jakarta.** State-Owned Enterprises Minister Dahlan Iskan on April 8 announced plans to build a \$1.8 billion coal-fired power plant in north Jakarta. The plant is part of Indonesia's plan to add 60 gigawatts of electricity generating capacity by 2022 in order to keep pace with increasing demand. An aging power supply and decades of underinvestment in electricity make blackouts common on the dense island of Java. The coal plant is a joint venture with a Chinese consortium and is slated to come on line in 2019.
- **Freeport, government reach deal on mineral exports.** R. Sukhyar, an official with Indonesia's Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources, announced on April 7 that U.S. mining giant Freeport McMoran has reached a deal with the Indonesian government regarding mineral exports. The company has agreed to reduce its mining concession area in the eastern province of Papua and domestically refine all of its copper for export by 2017 in return for a sizeable tax reprieve. Freeport froze all its copper exports from Indonesia in January after Jakarta imposed a tax on exports of copper concentrate.
- **Indonesia to overtake Thailand as top automaker.** Indonesia is set to overtake Thailand as Southeast Asia's largest automaker in 2014, according to data released by the Association of Indonesian Automotive Industries.

Domestic auto sales in Indonesia are up 17.8 percent year-on-year, and big international investors including Toyota, Daihatsu, Mitsubishi, and Nissan are looking to diversify away from Thailand, where political instability is hurting sales. Indonesia is expecting investment in the auto industry to reach \$1.8 billion over the next two years.

#### MYANMAR

- **Military issues six demands for peace.** Representatives of Myanmar's army submitted a list of six preconditions for a nationwide cease-fire to the National Ceasefire Coordination Team, which represents 16 ethnic armed groups, during a meeting that ended April 7. The list repeated earlier demands that all ethnic armies fall under central military control and that all parties respect the 2008 military-drafted constitution. The first demand has been a nonstarter for ethnic groups, and the military's demands appeared to further complicate the peace process, though negotiators remained optimistic that they can resume discussions in mid-May.
- **Opinion poll shows strong support for democracy, optimism in future.** Myanmar's citizens strongly support democracy and believe that the country is moving in the right direction, according to a public opinion poll released by the International Republican Institute and the National Endowment for Democracy on April 3. The poll also showed higher-than-expected support for President Thein Sein, his government, and the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party. Some activists were critical of the poll results, saying they do not reflect the reality on the ground.
- **Newspapers protest tightening media environment.** Major newspapers across Myanmar printed black banners on their front pages on April 11 to protest the perceived tightening of the country's media climate. The protest was prompted by the April 9 sentencing of Democratic Voice of Burma journalist Zaw Pe to a year in prison for trespassing and obstructing an official on duty during an attempt to interview the official. Journalists were also harassed by plainclothes police while attempting to cover a March 31 protest in Yangon against electricity price hikes.
- **Census wraps up despite problems in Kachin, Rakhine states.** Myanmar's first census in more than three decades has ended, with government officials saying that 10 million of the country's estimated 11 million households had been surveyed by April 8. The government ordered enumerators not to survey anyone claiming to be Rohingya, an unrecognized Muslim minority in the western state of Rakhine. Citizens elsewhere reported that census takers skipped questions and refused to



*A newspaper stand in Yangon. Many of the major newspapers in Myanmar printed black banners on their front pages on April 11 to protest rising pressure on the media. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/isriya/8281191650>*



register Muslims. The census also sparked clashes between the military and the Kachin Independence Army in northern Myanmar, which refused to grant enumerators access to its territory.

- **Assistant Secretary of State Russel raises Rakhine concerns, press freedom during visit.** Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel met with President Thein Sein in Yangon on April 10 to discuss U.S. concerns about the continued limitations on international nongovernmental organizations operating in western Myanmar's Rakhine state. He emphasized the United States' humanitarian concerns and desire to see the violence against Muslims and foreigners in Rakhine addressed with transparency and accountability. Russel also noted U.S. willingness to assist the government in adjusting to a more open media environment.

#### THAILAND

- **Thailand's south rocked by bomb attacks.** Four bombs exploded in southern Thailand's Yala province on April 6, killing 2 and injuring 23. The bombs are believed to have been planted by Malay separatists and caused \$5 million in damage, prompting the governor of Yala to increase security efforts leading up to Thai New Year, which ran from April 13 to 15. Thailand's southernmost provinces of Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat, and parts of Songkhla have struggled with persistent separatist violence since 2004.
- **Government supporters rally outside Bangkok.** Tens of thousands of supporters of caretaker prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra, commonly known as "red shirts," rallied outside Bangkok on April 5 as part of a three day demonstration to counter anti-government protesters. Leaders of the pro-government demonstration insisted they did not intend to clash with the anti-government movement, who held a rally outside of their own office in downtown Bangkok. Many red shirt demonstrators came equipped to camp out at the rally site for up to a week.
- **No opposition marches during holidays; civil servants warned not to speak with yellow shirts.** Suthep Thaugsuban, leader of the anti-government People's Democratic Reform Committee, commonly known as "yellow shirts," agreed to not stage marches during the Thai New Year holiday from April 13 to 15. Suthep made the announcement after speaking with Ministry of Defense permanent secretary Nipat Thonglek, who said he was concerned about having enough troops to maintain peace during the holidays. Meanwhile, the government's Centre for the Administration of Peace and Order on April 9 ordered civil servants not to talk to anti-government protesters during rallies.



*Thai soldiers administer first aid in the aftermath of a 2006 bombing in southern Thailand. Four bombs exploded in Yala province on April 6, killing 2 and injuring 23. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/36711366@N06/3382543011>*

- **Assistant Secretary of State Russel warns against coup.** Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel met with caretaker prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra and caretaker foreign minister Surapong Tovichakchaikul during an April 8 visit to Bangkok and delivered a letter from Secretary of State John Kerry warning against a coup. Kerry's letter urged the Thai government to use negotiations to resolve the country's political gridlock and to avoid the use of violence.

- **Planned rubber sales drive down global prices.** Prices of rubber have dropped 6 percent since Thailand's agriculture minister Yukol Limlaemthong announced on April 2 that the government could sell up to 200,000 tons of rubber from national stocks. The market reacted amid fears that there will be a rubber surplus and a significant drop in prices after Bangkok sells some of its stockpile, though some buyers indicated that they could absorb part of the supply, given that it is not currently the peak production season.



*Philippine soldiers and U.S. marines engage in training in the Philippines in 2013 as part of annual bilateral exercises. President Barack Obama is expected to sign an agreement in late April to allow greater rotational deployments of U.S. troops in the Philippines. [http://www.flickr.com/photos/marine\\_corps/8637920760](http://www.flickr.com/photos/marine_corps/8637920760)*

#### PHILIPPINES

- **U.S.-Philippines reach consensus on basing agreement.** The Philippines and the United States on April 11 reached consensus on the major points of a new security deal allowing U.S. military forces to share Philippine bases on a rotational basis, largely for maritime and humanitarian operations, said Philippine undersecretary of defense Pio Lorenzo Batino. The agreement will likely be signed during President Barack Obama's April 28-29 visit to Manila. Negotiations had stalled earlier over who would control facilities being used by U.S. personnel.

- **Supreme Court upholds most of controversial reproductive health law.** The Supreme Court of the Philippines on April 8 upheld the constitutionality of the bulk of the controversial Reproductive Health Law passed in December 2012. The core of the law, requiring the state to deliver the full range of family planning services to the public, was upheld even though the court limited the scope of its coverage. The court ruling clears the way for implementation of the law, which has been on hold since its passage amid ongoing pressure from the Catholic church.

- **Philippines receives new Chinese ambassador amid maritime dispute.** President Benigno Aquino welcomed China's new envoy to the Philippines, Zhao Jianhua, on April 8, despite ongoing tensions over Manila's pursuit of a UN arbitration case against China's claims in the South China Sea. Zhao asked the Philippine government to consider bilateral talks to resolve the disputes, according to an April 8 report by GMA News. China maintains that it will not participate in the arbitral proceedings.



- **Philippine army kills Abu Sayyaf, MILF fighters.** Philippine forces launched an attack against Abu Sayyaf extremists on the southern Philippine island of Basilan on April 11, leaving at least 18 militants dead and 20 soldiers wounded. Four of those killed were members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), with which Manila signed a final peace accord in late March. Philippine troops reportedly coordinated with the MILF to pass through its territory, as required by the peace deal, but the deaths of the four MILF members prompted criticism from the organization's vice chairman, Ghadzali Jaafar. The operation was unrelated to the ongoing search for suspected Abu Sayyaf gunmen who abducted two women from a Malaysian resort on April 2.

#### VIETNAM

- **United States, Vietnam hold joint naval exercises.** Two U.S. Navy ships and 400 U.S. Navy personnel on April 8 launched six days of noncombat exercises with their Vietnamese counterparts in the South China Sea amid growing tensions between China and its Southeast Asian neighbors. The exercises focused on search and rescue, shipboard damage control, and military medicine. They were accompanied by classroom training on maritime security at the University of Danang. The United States and Vietnam have increased military cooperation as maritime disputes in the South China Sea deepen.
- **Four prominent dissidents released; one dies after lack of medical treatment in prison.** High-profile Vietnamese dissidents Nguyen Tien Trung and Vi Duc Hoi were granted an early release from prison on April 12-13 in what a government spokesman called "a policy of leniency." Their release comes a few weeks after two other prominent dissenters, Cu Huy Ha Vu and Dinh Dang Dinh, were released from prison. Dinh, a former teacher and respected rights leader, died on April 3 from stomach cancer, which reportedly went untreated while he was imprisoned. Vu promptly left for the United States after his release, arriving on April 8.
- **Vietnam to receive two more *Gepard* frigates in 2017.** The Vietnamese navy is scheduled to take delivery of two more Russian-built *Gepard*-class frigates in 2017, according to an April 1 IHS Jane's report. Vietnam took delivery in 2011 of two such frigates, which are reported to have antisubmarine warfare capabilities. The frigates are part of a larger deal signed with Russia in 2006 to expand Vietnam's navy.
- **State-owned airline and mobile phone provider set to offer IPOs.** The Vietnam deputy minister of transportation announced on April 2 that state-owned Vietnam Airlines is set for an initial public offering (IPO)



*A Russian Gepard-class frigate fires a rocket. Vietnam is scheduled to take delivery of two more Gepard-class frigates by 2017. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/94141246@N05/8647406683>*



in September. The government on April 7 also asked the Ministry of Information and Communications to prepare state-run Vietnam Mobile Telecom Service, commonly known as MobiFone, for an IPO later in 2014. The two offerings are part of a plan to reform Vietnam's state-owned sector.

#### MALAYSIA

- **Gunmen kidnap two women from resort.** Gunmen on April 2 kidnapped a 28-year-old Chinese woman and a 40-year-old Filipino woman from a resort in Sabah state on Borneo. Prime Minister Najib Razak announced April 10 that the gunmen, who are believed to be members of the southern Philippine extremist group Abu Sayyaf, demanded a ransom of \$11.3 million for the release of the Chinese tourist. Philippine authorities believe the women were taken to Tawi-Tawi, the southernmost province of the Philippines, which is just a boat ride away from Sabah.
- **Teachers transferred due to affiliation with opposition.** Lawmakers with the opposition coalition Pakatan Rakyat alleged on April 8 that authorities in northern Malaysia's rural Kelantan state either have transferred or plan to transfer 88 teachers from their schools in Bachok district because of their political affiliations with the opposition. One of the teachers is the wife of Husam Musa, a member of the central committee of the opposition Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party. The opposition called on Education Minister Muhyiddin Yassin to investigate the transfers.
- **Malaysia's PACC Offshore Services to raise \$334 million in Singapore IPO.** Malaysian billionaire Robert Kuok aims to raise as much as \$334 million in an initial public offering (IPO) in Singapore of his company PACC Offshore Services Holdings. If successful, the IPO would be the largest so far this year in Singapore, according to an April 7 *Wall Street Journal* report. At 90, Kuok remains influential in his family-run businesses in commodities, shipping, and property.
- **Petronas approves \$27 billion petrochemical complex plan.** Malaysia's state oil firm Petronas said April 10 that it has approved a plan to build a \$27 billion refinery and petrochemical complex in Malaysia. The 300,000-barrels-a-day refinery will be operational by 2019, while the petrochemical complex will be capable of producing 7.7 million tons of specialty chemical products per year. The project, known as Rapid, has been hailed as Malaysia's single largest investment, according to an April 3 report in the *Wall Street Journal*.



*The Petronas Twin Towers, a landmark of Kuala Lumpur. State-owned Petronas plans to build a \$27 billion refinery and petrochemical complex in Malaysia.*  
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/katiegail/3105726615/>

## CAMBODIA

- **Agreement between ruling party and opposition may be near.** Prime Minister Hun Sen announced on April 10 that he and Sam Rainsy, leader of the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), had reached an agreement on electoral reform and agreed in principle to hold the next national elections early in February 2018. Rainsy has denied he agreed to that election date and said he could not sign an agreement with the prime minister until CNRP deputy leader Kem Sokha returns from an official trip to the United States. The proposed deal would end the CNRP's nine-month boycott of the parliament.
- **Cambodia and Australia discuss asylum seeker deal.** Australian immigration minister Scott Morrison on April 3 met with Cambodian interior minister Sar Kheng in Phnom Penh to discuss resettling in Cambodia asylum seekers seeking to settle in Australia. Australian officials have yet to announce details of the agreement, but it could involve up to 100 asylum seekers and \$13 million in aid for Cambodia. Opposition political parties in Australia and human rights organizations have criticized the move, citing concerns about Cambodia's political climate and poor human rights record.
- **Court sentences 13 for attempting to overthrow government.** A Phnom Penh court on April 11 convicted 13 people of plotting to overthrow the government and sentenced them to prison terms of five to nine years. The 13 are linked to a Denmark-based group, the Khmer National Liberation Front (KNLF), which allegedly set up a base in neighboring Thailand, distributed anti-government propaganda, and planned bombings from across the border between 2009 and 2011. Human rights organizations question the court's accusation that the KNLF promotes violence.
- **Draft cyber law draws criticism.** Rights groups have criticized an anti-cybercrime law drafted by the Cambodian government, according to an April 10 article in the *Wall Street Journal*. London-based rights group Article 19 obtained a copy of the draft legislation and particularly criticized a vague clause that would prohibit online content that promotes insecurity and instability, undermines government agencies, and damages moral and cultural values. The law has been introduced as Internet use is growing in Cambodia, with an estimated 5 percent of the population having access in 2012.

## LAOS

- **Government plans for possible bird flu outbreak.** Government officials convened a three-day meeting on April 3 to establish response measures



*Cambodia's prime minister, Hun Sen, said on April 10 he and opposition leader Sam Rainsy have reached agreement on electoral reform and possibly an early election. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/worldeconomicforum/4674308266>*



for a possible outbreak of bird flu following an outbreak in northwest Laos in late March. The outbreak in Xayaburi province and surrounding area was the first in Laos in more than five years, according to an April 3 report by the *Vientiane Times*. The government has banned poultry imported from neighboring countries as part of its prevention efforts.

- **Experts renew quake fears over Xayaburi dam.** Earthquake experts have renewed concerns about the potential seismic dangers of the massive Xayaburi dam, which straddles the Mekong River in an earthquake-prone area of Laos, according to an April 8 report by the *South China Morning Post*. There have been a series of earthquakes in recent years along active faults next to the site, according to geologist Punya Charusiri of Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok.
- **Talks under way for China-Laos high-speed rail.** The long delayed rail link between Laos and China will be revived after a pledge from Prime Minister Thongsing Thammavong and Chinese premier Li Keqiang on April 8. The two met during Thongsing's five-day visit to China in April, during which he also met with Chinese president Xi Jinping. The rail project was supposed to be completed in 2015, but a Chinese firm backed out. The 260-mile railway will run from China's Yunnan province to Vientiane and connect with other networks to continue to Singapore.

#### SINGAPORE

- **Singapore proposes regional crisis center.** Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen on April 14 proposed the establishment of a regional crisis center in Singapore to coordinate humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts across Southeast Asia. Ng said the center would provide better coordination between militaries, a need highlighted by the ongoing search for missing Malaysia Airlines flight 370. The Asia-Pacific region is home to 70 percent of the world's natural calamities, according to an April 15 *Wall Street Journal* article.
- **Eleven Chinese and Bangladeshi foreign workers charged for brawling.** Four Chinese and seven Bangladeshi nationals were charged on April 8 with rioting and unlawful assembly. The 11 men were involved in a fight that broke out on April 6 at a construction site in Choa Cu Kang. This is the second case within two weeks of migrant-worker violence in the city-state. If convicted, the men face caning and a maximum penalty of seven years in prison.
- **Government to issue 41 percent more certificates for car ownership.** The Singapore Land Transportation Authority announced on April 11 that it



will issue 2,240 certificates of entitlement for car ownership from May to July—a 41 percent increase of the agency’s monthly quota. Singapore uses a cap-and-bid process for certificates to control the number of cars on the road. During the same three-month period, the agency will issue 5 percent fewer certificates for motorcycles.

- **Authorities investigating three firms for possible securities law breaches.**

Singapore’s central bank announced on April 2 that it is working with police to investigate possible trading irregularities by three companies involved in a 2013 penny-stock crash. During the crash Blumont Group, LionGold, and Asiasons lost \$6 billion in market value on the Singapore Exchange in just two days. The firms are being investigated for possible breaches of the city-state’s securities act.

#### SOUTH CHINA SEA

- **China releases position paper on sea disputes.** The Chinese Embassy in Manila released a position paper on April 3 covering its territorial and maritime disputes with the Philippines in the South China Sea. China reaffirmed its stance that Manila’s arbitration case before a UN tribunal does not have legal merit and argued that the Philippines is using unnecessary provocation as a cover for infringement on Chinese territory. But the paper also used a softer tone to urge consensus and emphasize that the disputes must be resolved through bilateral negotiations.

#### ASEAN

- **Najib proposes fourth ASEAN pillar; announces theme of 2015 chairmanship.** Malaysia’s prime minister Najib Razak suggested during an April 8 speech that ASEAN should add a fourth pillar, on community and cross-sector issues, to its current political-security, economic, and sociocultural focuses. Najib also announced that the theme of Malaysia’s 2015 chairmanship of the group would be “People-Centered ASEAN,” with a focus on engaging all sectors of society. He emphasized the need for ASEAN agencies to be more effective and responsive to the people. Najib suggested adjusting the organization’s limited funding system to meet those goals.
- **ASEAN holds first feed and rice symposium.** More than 100 industry professionals and government officials attended ASEAN’s first Feed and Rice Symposium on April 9 to discuss regional challenges for rice production. ASEAN launched the symposium amid an increasing regional focus on food security. Topics of discussion included increasing competition for feed between people, animals, and biofuels; increasing



*A traffic jam in downtown Singapore. The city-state will increase the number of certificates it issues each month for car ownership by 41 percent starting in May. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/lynac/4211864434>*



*A farmer tills a rice paddy in Myanmar. The recent ASEAN Feed and Rice Symposium discussed rising competition for feed between people and livestock and the necessity of increasing food production amid rising water scarcity. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/worldbank/8879421315>*

water scarcity; and the need for greater productivity to match expected population growth.

#### TRANS-PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP

- **Wyden plans to draft new TPA bill.** Senate Finance Committee chairman Ron Wyden said on April 9 that he plans to consult with colleagues and other stakeholders to draft a new trade promotion authority (TPA), or “fast-track” bill. Wyden said the new bill would focus on increasing the role of Congress in trade negotiations and would boost transparency, calling on the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative to provide more information to the public. A new TPA bill would have important implications for finalizing the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement.

#### TIMOR-LESTE



*President Xanana Gusmão, who met with China's premier, Li Keqiang, on April 9 to discuss cooperation on agriculture, energy, and trade. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/unisgeneva/4887622966>*

- **China, Timor-Leste pledge closer cooperation on trade, energy, and agriculture.** Timor-Leste president Xanana Gusmão and Chinese premier Li Keqiang met on April 9 ahead of the Boao Forum in southern China's Hainan province and announced closer cooperation on agriculture, energy, and developing a maritime “Silk Road” for trade. Gusmão and Li discussed boosting bilateral trade and investment within the context of China's increasing cooperation with Portuguese-speaking countries. Li also pledged assistance to Timor-Leste in its pursuit of stability and growth.

#### BRUNEI

- **Dengue cases up 30 percent.** Health Minister Adanan Yusof revealed on April 8 that the number of recorded cases of dengue in Brunei reached 414 in 2013, a 30 percent increase from the year before. In response the Ministry of Health is implementing a mosquito eradication program. There were no reported deaths linked with dengue in 2013. Brunei also recorded its first case of Japanese encephalitis that year.

#### MEKONG RIVER

- **Governments fail to push back against dam development during summit.** Environmentalists were dismayed at the outcome of the second Mekong River Commission summit, hosted in Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh City on April 4–5. Leaders from Vietnam and Cambodia failed to push back forcefully against the construction of Laos's two planned dams on the lower Mekong River, according to an April 6 report by the *Bangkok Post*. The loudest voices against the Lao dams came from nongovernmental organizations such as U.S.-based International Rivers, which called for an immediate halt to construction. ■

# Looking Ahead

- **Book launch and discussion on Asia's involvement in Washington.** The East-West Center in Washington will host Kent Calder on April 23 for a launch of his book *Asia in Washington*. Calder will discuss the ways that China, India, South Korea, Japan, and ASEAN nations use their presence in Washington to affect U.S. policy. The event will take place from 12:00 p.m. to 1:30 p.m. at 1819 L St., NW, Sixth Floor Conference Room. To RSVP, please [click here](#).
- **Discussion on ethnic and religious tolerance in Myanmar.** The Stimson Center will host a discussion on ethnic and religious tensions and tolerance in Myanmar on April 24. Speakers will include former U.S. chargé d'affaires in Myanmar Priscilla Clapp, the Myanmar Development Resource Institute's Win Min, and the U.S. Institute of Peace's Susan Hayward. The event will take place from 2:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. at 1111 19th St., NW. For more information and to RSVP, please [click here](#).
- **Australia and New Zealand Army Corps Day.** The Embassy of Australia will host a dawn service, "gunfire breakfast," and church memorial service on April 25 in honor of Australia and New Zealand Army Corps Day. The dawn service will take place from 5:45 a.m. to 6:15 a.m. at the Korean Veterans War Memorial, 900 Ohio Dr., SW. The "gunfire breakfast," an ANZAC Day tradition that consists of coffee with rum, will be served from 7:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. at the Embassy of Australia, 1601 Massachusetts Ave., NW. The church service will be held from 10:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. at Washington National Cathedral, 3101 Wisconsin Ave., NW. Please [click here](#) for more information.
- **Forum with Philippine vice president Jejomar Binay.** The CSIS Sumitro Chair for Southeast Asia Studies will host a Banyan Tree Leadership Forum with Philippine vice president Jejomar Binay on May 1. His remarks will come just two days after President Barack Obama's April 28-29 visit to the Philippines. The event will take place from 3:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. in the CSIS 2nd Floor Conference Room, 1616 Rhode Island Ave., NW. Please [RSVP here](#).
- **Discussion on the challenges and opportunities for media in Vietnam.** Radio Free Asia will host a discussion on May 1 about Vietnam's media environment to mark World Press Freedom Day. Vietnam-based bloggers will join Washington-based press freedom advocates, corporate leaders, and government officials to discuss censorship and its impacts on the



business community in Vietnam. The event will take place from 12:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. at 2025 M St., NW, Suite 300. For more information please e-mail [Angelina Huynh](mailto:Angelina.Huynh).

- **Philippines benefit concert.** The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts will host “After the Storm: A Benefit Concert for the Philippines” on June 15. Performers will include Lou Diamond Phillips, the Black Eyed Peas’ apl.de.ap, Christine Rocas, Rodell Rosel, and Lea Salonga. The concert will begin at 8:00 p.m. Tickets went on sale April 4 and can be bought online [here](#). ■



## SOUTHEAST ASIA FROM SCOTT CIRCLE

CSIS Sumitro Chair for Southeast Asia Studies contributors:

Ernest Z. Bower, Senior Adviser and Chair  
Murray Hiebert, Senior Fellow and Deputy Director  
Gregory Poling, Fellow  
Phuong Nguyen, Research Associate  
Brian Kraft, Researcher  
Kyle Springer, Researcher  
Kathryn Tinker, Researcher  
Courtney Weatherby, Researcher

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