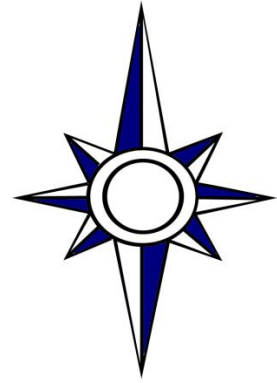


Comparative Connections

A Triannual E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations



US-Southeast Asia Relations: Courting Partners*

Sheldon Simon
Arizona State University

Senior State and Defense Department officials made several visits to Southeast Asia over the past four months, assuring their hosts that the US remained committed to a robust air and naval presence in the region, and assisting the littoral countries of the South China Sea in developing maritime security capacity. Washington is particularly focused on providing a rotational military force presence in Southeast Asia. On the South China Sea territorial disputes, US officials emphasized the need for peaceful approaches to conflict settlement among the claimants, pointing to arbitration and negotiation based on the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Washington has also accentuated the importance of security partners for burden-sharing, noting the potential for an enhanced role for Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force in South China Sea patrols. Efforts to involve Southeast Asian states in negotiating the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) has elicited candidates from only four of the 10 ASEAN states – Malaysia, Vietnam, Singapore, and Brunei. Others have problems meeting several requirements associated with the partnership.

US presence in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asian governments are generally convinced that the United States is committed to maintaining a significant naval and air presence in the region. However, they are less certain that the Obama administration has the ability to sustain its strategic focus on Asia. Leaders in the region are concerned that Washington is distracted by the conflicts in Middle East and South Asia as well as Eastern European appeals for a greater US presence to counter Russian actions in Ukraine. Added to these distractions is the fiscal sequester in the US defense budget that has constrained resources available for deployments and military assistance. To alleviate these concerns, officials have been reassuring ASEAN states that the US plans to enhance its presence and military assistance.

Over the past several months, a number of Defense and State Department luminaries have specifically stated that US deployments in the Asia-Pacific will ignore China's reclaimed shoals and reefs in the South China Sea as extensions of the PRC's territorial boundaries. In a keynote address on May 27 in Hawaii, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter averred, "The United States will fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows, as we do all around the world.... We

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will remain the principal security power in the Asia-Pacific for decades to come.” Carter also noted that China’s disrespect for international norms is counterproductive because it is leading other nations in the Pacific to turn toward the US as an alternative. These nations are “increasing [their] demand for American engagement....”

Secretary Carter went on to point out that over the past year Washington has initialed new security agreements with India, Australia, Japan, and the Philippines while also enhancing its security relationship with Vietnam. These partnerships focus on maritime security. Singapore is cited as a particularly important military partner that will host four US littoral combat ships (small frigates) by 2018 – the first permanent presence of US naval vessels in the South China Sea since the closing of Philippine bases in the early 1990s. Long-term plans include joint maritime patrols, more joint training, and the provision of compatible communication systems so that these partners will be able to interact not only with the US but also each other. Carter repeated these points at the annual Singapore Shangri-La Dialogue in early June.

Complementing Secretary Carter’s statements, Assistant Secretary of State for Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel emphasized ASEAN’s importance for a rules-based system in Southeast Asia at the July 21 CSIS Conference on the South China Sea, noting that US support for institutions such as ASEAN were backed by “our system of alliances and partnerships.” Russel cited the importance of revising “the spirit of cooperation embodied in the 2002 Declaration of Conduct” under which ASEAN and China had agreed not to disrupt the status quo in the South China Sea as they moved forward to negotiate a code of conduct (COC). These latter negotiations have stalled, according to Russel, because China has violated the 2002 DOC by building new islets with reclaimed land. Finally, the assistant secretary reminded his audience that there are two “peaceful paths available to claimants” to deal with the South China Sea conflicts: “negotiation and arbitration” and that progress on either path depends on all claimants “clarify[ing] the scope of their claims in the South China Sea in accordance with the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention.”

The Pentagon has also unveiled a new Asia-Pacific maritime security strategy that promises up to \$425 million for partner capacity building, though US sequestration limits may limit implementation. The Pentagon has suggested that US ships and aircraft may sail and fly within 12 miles of China’s reclaimed land features in the South China Sea (though as far as this author knows that has not yet occurred). Philippine Armed Forces chief Gen. Gregorio Pio Catapang, in a May 14 interview said his country would welcome US military ships and aircraft around the disputed islands to assert freedom of navigation. Vietnam has been more circumspect about US activity around the disputed islands. One ex-official was quoted by Hanoi’s *Tuoite-news* on May 15 saying that any deployments of US ships and aircraft moving through this area would become “a rather sensitive and very complicated issue....” The US should behave “prudently and responsibly for the sake of Southeast Asia and the world in general.”

Canberra backed Washington at the Shangri-La Dialogue when Defense Minister Kevin Andrews stated that Australia had a strong interest in peace, stability, respect for international law, and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. As a middle power Australian security depends on a rules-based international order.

The Philippines is the strongest Southeast Asian supporter of a robust US military role in the region, although critics in the Philippine Congress say that Washington has not done enough to build the country's defense capacity. Rolio Golez, chairman of the National Defense Committee in the Philippine House of Representatives, complained in mid-May that US military aid so far has been "mere scrap" – two Vietnam War-era coast guard cutters. Golez said Washington possesses mothballed fast frigates and multi-role fighter aircraft, which, if turned over to the Philippines, would "give us a modest defense upgrade overnight." US observers say, however, that the Philippines lacks the ability to maintain more modern ships and aircraft.

Both the Aquino administration and the US are awaiting a Philippine Supreme Court decision on the constitutionality of a 10-year defense agreement signed in April 2014 – the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). EDCA would provide access to at least eight Philippine bases for US forces, including one on Palawan Island adjacent to the Spratlys and another at Subic Bay. The agreement would also permit the US to build facilities on these bases to store fuel and equipment for maritime security. The supplies could be shared with Philippine forces. The Philippine Supreme Court is expected to issue a ruling before President Obama's scheduled visit in November. The Aquino administration and the US government define EDCA as an executive agreement that does not require approval by the Philippine Congress. Critics counter that EDCA is a treaty, requiring legislative approval.

If EDCA is approved, Sen. John McCain, chair of the US Senate Armed Services Committee, has asked that most of the Pentagon's \$425 million appropriation for Southeast Asia's security buildup be earmarked for the Philippines. To complement these US plans, in mid-July, the Philippine armed forces stated that new fighter jets and its two frigates would also be stationed at Subic Bay. The new combat jets would include two *FA-50* light attack aircraft made by ROK's Korea Aerospace Industries. Manila has ordered a dozen of these jets.

Proposed solutions in the South China Sea

State and Defense Department officials have emphasized the need for rules and standards based on international law to ensure freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea. In Congressional testimony on May 13, Assistant Secretary Russel noted the importance of negotiations as a way of resolving maritime territorial disputes, citing the successful negotiation between Indonesia and the Philippines over the boundary between their exclusive economic zones (EEZs). He also suggested the possibility of postponing resolution of the boundary disputes and agreeing on joint development of maritime resources. Such an understanding could be an important step toward the creation of a COC on the South China Sea. Russel urged all claimants to cease reclamation activities on the South China Sea features they occupy as these activities have harmed fragile ecosystems. He noted that while Southeast Asian claimants have built on their occupied islets, "the scale of China's reclamation vastly outstrips that of any other claimant.... China has dredged and now occupies nearly four times the total area of the other five claimants combined." Moreover, ASEAN claimants have stated that their South China Sea territorial claims derive from land claims consonant with the 1982 Law of the Sea, while Beijing "has yet to provide the international community with such a clarification...."

Senior US military officers have urged Southeast Asian countries to jointly patrol the waters around the Spratly Islands where conflicting claims exist. Coordinated patrols have existed for over a decade in the Straits of Malacca among Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand (aircraft only for Bangkok). Although the US has not included China in its proposal, both Indonesian and Malaysian officials have said joint patrols are worth considering and that China's inclusion is "not an impossibility." This suggestion was first publicly broached at the Shangri-La Dialogue at the end of May.

US officials insist that China's creation of artificial islands does not constitute a legitimate claim to sovereignty. However, there may be some disagreement inside the US government on how best to demonstrate disagreement. At the end of July, *The Nelson Report* noted that the US National Security Council and the State Department may disagree with the Defense Department and Pacific Command over how best to demonstrate freedom of navigation and conduct aerial surveillance in these disputed waters. The US Navy proposes sailing its ships within 12 miles of the artificial islands, while the White House and State Department are reticent because of other important issues in US-China relations. DoD believes that if the US does not openly challenge China's claims for the new islets, Washington will be tacitly accepting China's *fait accompli*.

Enhanced relations with Vietnam

Over the past two years, the US and Vietnam have strengthened their ties: a comprehensive partnership in 2013, followed by a partial lifting of the US arms embargo in 2014, and in 2015, the signing of a [Joint Vision Statement](#). Currently, Raytheon is working on a radar project that would enhance Vietnam's maritime domain awareness. In a July 7 speech at CSIS, Nguyen Phu Trong, general secretary of Vietnam's Communist Party, said his country's military needs are "huge" and that this could lead to an expanded military partnership with the US. With 3,000 km of sea coast, Vietnam must increase its ability "to defend and safeguard our sovereignty and territorial integrity." Toward this end, Secretary Carter in early June offered \$18 million for fast patrol boats for Vietnam's Coast Guard.

Two-way trade in 2014 exceeded \$36 billion, and 16,500 Vietnamese students are now studying in the US. Nevertheless, a senior Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs official acknowledged in a [July 29 PacNet](#) that "frictions and disagreements continue in some areas, mainly in the field of democracy, human rights, and freedom of religion..." He urged that dialogue can "enhance mutual understanding and narrow differences" on the issues.

Public opinion in Vietnam supports closer relations with the United States. The Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences conducted a survey of over 300 people in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and Danang. Over 90 percent of those surveyed had a favorable view of the US and indicated they desired closer relations. The June Pew Global Attitudes survey corroborated these views with 78 percent of those polled also expressing a favorable view.

Human rights, however, remains the major sticking point in advancing relations to a new level. According to Carl Thayer's [July 6 article](#) in *The Diplomat*, Vietnam's defense minister called for a complete end to the US arms embargo and a decoupling of arms sales from human rights when Secretary Carter visited Hanoi. The prospect of this happening, however, is slim. A

bipartisan group of US congressmen wrote to President Obama in July asking him to send “a clear message to Hanoi authorities that respect for human rights is essential for a closer economic and security relationship.” The letter went on to call the human rights situation in Vietnam “deplorable.” In early August, in an address to business leaders and Vietnamese officials in Hanoi, Secretary of State John Kerry reiterated that human rights improvements would lead to deeper ties. Unsurprisingly, hardliners within Vietnam’s leadership oppose these demands, seeing them as thinly disguised efforts at regime change and reforms that would dilute the communist party’s political monopoly.

Japan raises its Southeast Asian profile

When the US speaks of the importance of partnerships for Asia-Pacific security, Japan is at the top of the list. Prime Minister Abe Shinzo has been trying to insert his country’s armed forces into regional exercises going back to his first administration in 2007 with the *Malabar* exercise of that year in the Indian Ocean involving the US, Japan, India, Australia, and Singapore. Subsequently, Tokyo has also provided the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia with equipment to enhance their maritime defense capabilities. In February 2015, Japan’s Defense Minister Nakatani Gen spoke of the future possibility of Japanese ships joining US naval patrols in the South China Sea. In practice, however, Japan has made only modest contributions of a small number of patrol ships to Southeast Asian states under Tokyo’s Official Development Assistance (ODA) program.

While Prime Minister Abe has managed to push two controversial security bills through Japan’s Lower House of the Diet that would increase Japan’s ability to send troops overseas for “collective self-defense,” the public reaction to this legislation has been overwhelmingly negative. Commentators have claimed that the bills violate Japan’s pacifist constitution and that implementation could involve the country in distant US-led wars. At the Shangri-La Dialogue Abe tried to reassure his audience that Tokyo was primarily involved in building capacity of partner countries. Sailing with the US Navy in the South China Sea constituted “joint training” that emphasized domain awareness and the prevention of accidents at sea. Nevertheless, Japan’s top military commander in a July 16 speech in Washington reiterated that Japan was considering additional patrols in the South China Sea to balance a more assertive China in those waters. Thus, later this year, Japan will undertake joint drills with the US and Australia and will also participate once again in this year’s India-initiated *Malabar* exercise.

Of all Southeast Asian countries, Japan’s security relations with the Philippines are the most advanced. Because it is a close ally of the US, Japan is seen by Manila as an important security partner. Visiting Tokyo in June, President Benigno Aquino signed a contract to acquire 10 patrol vessels to be funded by the Japan International Cooperation System. In a joint declaration concluding Aquino’s visit, Japan condemned China’s land reclamation activity in the South China Sea. The Philippine president also announced that the two countries would start talks on a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) that could allow Japanese armed forces access to Philippine bases – the only country beside the US that might have such an arrangement, though there is also talk about a SOFA with Australia.

Under the agreement, Japan could also refuel ships and aircraft. A visiting forces agreement would give the Philippines access to training from Japan's highly developed maritime forces, repair services for the Philippine Navy and Coast Guard, and maritime reconnaissance data. All these become more important as the Philippines acquires additional Japanese equipment. In May and June, the Philippine and Japanese navies and coast guards conducted joint exercises in the South China Sea – the naval maneuvers were the first between the two since World War II.

Some Philippine legislators – both supporting and opposing the proposed visiting forces agreement – have called on President Aquino to submit any VFA with Japan to the Congress, arguing that any arrangement with Tokyo is comparable to the EDCA with Washington. Moreover, unlike the US, the Philippines has no mutual defense treaty with Japan – all the more reason for Congress to be consulted for its approval. Tokyo is increasing its security relations with other Southeast Asian countries as well. It signed a defense agreement with Indonesia in March, conducted joint naval exercises with Vietnam in April, and initialed a defense technology transfer agreement with Malaysia in late May. The latter agreement included the elevation of security ties to a “strategic partnership.”

Malaysia: strategic interests vs human rights

Generally regarded by Washington as an admirable example of a country that practices a moderate version of Islam, there is also a dark side to Malaysia's reputation – its involvement in human trafficking – more particularly, the thousands of Rohingya Muslims from Rakhine State in Myanmar that have been held in bondage in Malaysian jungle camps until they come up with enough money to pay traffickers who promised them jobs in Malaysia. In 2014, the US downgraded Malaysia to Tier 3, the lowest ranking in the US State Department's *Trafficking in Persons Report* because of poor anti-human trafficking practices, specifically apprehension and conviction rates of the traffickers. Human trafficking is not the only US complaint on human rights in Malaysia. Another is the March 2015 reconviction of Malaysian opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim, on what are generally believed to be bogus sodomy charges. The White House has criticized the conviction as a setback to the country's democratic progress.

The low rating created a problem for the Obama administration with respect to the negotiations on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Agreement – see below. In June, the US Congress passed a trade bill that stipulated fast-track trade deals, including the TPP, cannot be concluded with countries that have the worst rating in the human trafficking report. Soon thereafter Malaysia was upgraded to tier two based on the finding that the country has clamped down on illegal sites on Malaysia's northern border with Thailand. Malaysia's elevation to tier two removed the obstacle to its membership in the TPP agreement. The State Department decision has drawn sharp criticism from international human rights groups as well as public voices in the US and Malaysia. Malaysia has an estimated 2 million illegal migrant workers, many of whom labor in virtual slave-like conditions. Phil Robertson, deputy director of Human Rights Watch Asia, said he was “stunned” by the State Department upgrade. He urged the US Congress “to look long and hard” at this decision. Indeed, a bipartisan group of US congressmen on July 17 sent a letter to Secretary Kerry stating that there is “no reason – that would justify moving Malaysia” back to tier two. An Aug. 3 *Reuters* report on the upgrade noted that the government

office responsible for preparing the trafficking report recommended that Malaysia remain in tier three. It was overruled by the State Department leadership.

Over the past several decades, despite testy political relations between Kuala Lumpur and Washington, economic and military cooperation quietly improved based on Malaysia's belief that it was important to keep the US involved in Southeast Asia to balance China. In 2014, President Obama and Prime Minister Najib Razak upgraded bilateral ties to a comprehensive partnership. In May of this year, the marines of both countries engaged in a joint exercise.

Southeast Asian obstacles for the TPP

The US rebalance to Asia consists of three components: (1) the repositioning of 60 percent of US naval and air force deployments by 2020; (2) an emphasis on multilateral political cooperation through ASEAN-based institutions such as the ARF, ASEAN+, ADMM+, and the EAS; and (3) a new trade and investment arrangement that will bring together 40 percent of the world's economic activity – the TPP. This third component is experiencing a difficult birth, especially for its Southeast Asia members, many of which have protected production sectors such as automobiles in Malaysia or poor human and labor rights practices in Malaysia and Vietnam. These obstacles were not removed by the July meeting in Hawaii which was supposed to come up with a final document. The most innovative feature of the TPP is not cutting tariffs (most of them are already low after years of trade liberalization) but the setting of new rules for the global political economy. Putative rules in the TPP that allow investors to sue states if the latter violate the agreement and that protect intellectual property are welcomed by most economists but resisted in Southeast Asia as threatening local interests.

For some close partners of the US, bringing the TPP into operation is a vital interest. In mid-June Singapore's foreign minister feared that a failed TPP would remove US economic leadership from Asia, leaving only its military superiority. The US has stated that the TPP is open to expansion for other Asian states that are not a part of the original negotiations. As Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a June 15 address to the US-ASEAN Business Council, "[T]his partnership is not, in any way, an attempt to isolate China.... This is not a zero-sum game." He went on to claim that the TPP and China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) "can be complementary ... and we'll look for opportunities for collaboration while continuing to champion high standards for multilateral financing."

Among the projected winners if the TPP is successfully concluded is Vietnam. The country is already Southeast Asia's largest exporter to the US, and that trade is expected to significantly accelerate with TPP. Nevertheless, in Vietnam, an obstacle to the agreement is Hanoi's refusal to provide for free and democratic labor unions. Another problem involves rule of origin for production. To be eligible for preferential treatment, a country's products may only use components from other TPP states. Vietnamese companies, however, frequently have parts that come from China, Laos, and Cambodia, none of which is currently a TPP candidate.

An alternative to TPP is the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) led by China and ASEAN. Unlike TPP which involves only four ASEAN states – Brunei, Singapore, Vietnam, and Malaysia –RCEP includes all 10 ASEAN members. Indonesia has stated that

RCEPs advantage over TPP is that the former ensures ASEAN centrality, which better supports the new ASEAN Economic Community scheduled to take effect at the end of 2015. Moreover, unlike the TPP, which insists on equal treatment for all members, the RCEP acknowledges that participating economies are at different stages of development and may require special treatment and even exceptions to some RCEP rules.

Thailand

Although Thailand maintains close relations with China, its armed forces have worked with their US counterparts for decades. The two conduct up to 50 joint exercises per year, including *Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT)* exercises for the navies and *COBRA GOLD*, the largest annual multilateral, multi-service exercise in Asia. In May, the Thai military government agreed to allow the US to use U-Tapao and Phuket airports as bases for US aircraft to monitor and rescue Rohingya refugees stranded in the Andaman Sea.

The Thai and US armed forces have reached a *modus operandi*; senior official defense dialogues have occurred since October 2012. A new joint vision statement was signed a month later, the first since the Rusk-Thanat agreement of 1962. Nevertheless, after the May 2014 coup, which brought the Thai military government into office, political relations between Washington and Bangkok have been strained. By US law, Washington has imposed sanctions on the Thai military government, while the latter insists that the armed forces are the legitimate guardian of Thai sovereignty and social stability.

In June, when the annual human rights report was issued by the State Department, arbitrary arrest and detention were criticized, and Thailand remained at the lowest level for human rights – tier three. The junta has banned public gatherings of more than five people, regularly cancels political and academic meetings, blocks websites, pulls satellite TV stations off the air, and has replaced many civilian courts with military tribunals – all in the name of national security. Thailand is the only ASEAN state to remain at tier three.

Myanmar

Washington is pleased that plans and procedures for Myanmar's forthcoming national election later this year appear to be on track and promise to offer the country's freest polls since 1990. Nevertheless, the Rohingya crisis over the past several months has created tensions in bilateral relations. Fleeing on the Andaman Sea in unseaworthy craft bound for Malaysia and Indonesia, thousands of Rohingya refugees are escaping a *de facto* pogrom. With US mediation among Myanmar, Indonesian, and Malaysia authorities in May, Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur announced they would temporarily provide a year's shelter for up to 8,000 migrants until they are either resettled in third countries or repatriated. Myanmar authorities do not recognize the Rohingya as citizens even though some have lived in the country's Rakhine State for generations. Rather, they are seen as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh by Myanmar's majority Buddhists. Thailand hosted a May 29 meeting in Bangkok to help resolve the problem. There, Washington offered to help finance international humanitarian aid for the refugees and indicated that the US is willing to accept some for permanent resettlement in addition to aiding other countries willing to accept Rohingya refugees.

The government of Myanmar, however, rejects UN assertions that the migration crisis is a result of Yangon's treatment, insisting that its treatment of the Rohingya is a domestic matter. More than 100,000 Rohingya are living in government-controlled camps, having been forced from their homes by mobs over the past three years. Those who have fled by boats to Malaysia, according to Kuala Lumpur, now number almost 150,000 registered asylum seekers.

Indonesia

Although not among the claimants to any of the disputed Spratly Islands, Indonesia is increasingly anxious about China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, which seem to include Natuna Islands and the Riau Archipelago. In July, Jakarta announced a plan to construct a new military base to guard these areas. The Indonesian Navy has also shown interest in more interoperability with the US Navy. In a mid-August *CARAT* exercise, for the first time an Indonesian Navy helicopter landed on an US littoral combat ship near Surabaya.

Looking ahead

For Southeast Asia, the US armed forces are promoting opportunities and locations for greater rotation of US military forces, more joint exercises, and the prepositioning of equipment and fuel. If the Philippine Supreme Court validates the EDCA later this year, an important link in the US rotation policy will be added that is particularly close to the disputed land features in the South China Sea. Troop rotation arrangements at this point exist with Australia, Singapore, and the Philippines. Additionally, the US Navy also exercises with Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, and Brunei through *CARAT* exercises. These activities are designed to demonstrate that the US presence in Southeast Asia remains robust and that Washington has no intention of abandoning the region's security despite US defense budget constraints and the demands of Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia for US attention.

Chronology of US - Southeast Asian Relations May – August 2015

May 1, 2015: US rejects a tentative offer by a senior Chinese Navy officer to allow US forces to use South China Sea land features occupied by China for rescue and relief operations.

May 13, 2015: Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs David Shear in testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee says US bomber and surveillance aircraft would be deployed to Australia.

May 14, 2015: Philippine Foreign Secretary Alberto Del Rosario in Washington asks the US for more help in resisting China's land reclamation efforts in the South China Sea.

May 15, 2015: Senior officials from all 10 ASEAN states meet senior US officials at the White House to discuss maritime security and China's reclamation activities in the Spratly Islands.

May 15, 2015: President Barack Obama notifies Congress he is renewing his authority to maintain sanctions against Myanmar for another year because of human rights abuses and ill treatment of the Rohingya minority in Rakhine state.

May 16, 2015: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi meets visiting Secretary of State John Kerry and says China has no intention of scaling back island expansion activities in the Spratly Islands.

May 16-19, 2015: Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken visits Vietnam in advance of a visit to Washington by General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam Nguyen Phu Trong.

May 20, 2015: US Navy *P-8 Poseidon* surveillance aircraft flies over the region of the Spratly Islands. Chinese Navy repeatedly warns the aircraft to depart the airspace.

May 21, 2015: Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy and Human Rights Tom Malonowski says the US still has active sanctions against Myanmar for persecution of Muslim Rohingya.

May 21, 2015: Assistant Secretary of State for Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel, referring to a US P-8A *Poseidon* flight near Spratly islets that China, says that all countries have freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea.

May 21-22, 2015: Deputy Secretary of State Blinken in Myanmar discusses the Rohingya boat exodus with President Thein Sein. US Embassy in Yangon issues a statement urging Myanmar to work with regional partners to deal with the crisis.

May 27, 2015: US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter meets Philippine Secretary of National Defense Voltaire Gazmin in Hawaii, discussing security issues in the South China Sea and agreeing to hold a 2-plus-2 assistant secretary-level meeting as soon as possible.

May 30, 2015: At the annual Singapore Shangri-La dialogue, Defense Secretary Carter criticizes China's land reclamation in the Spratly Islands, particularly "the prospect of further militarization." He also announces the Southeast Asian Maritime Security Initiative to provide equipment and training to South China Sea littoral states.

May 31, 2015: Vietnam and the US sign a joint vision statement during Secretary Carter's visit to Hanoi.

June 1-2, 2015: Defense Secretary Carter meets Vietnamese Navy and Coast Guard officials in Hanoi and pledges \$18 million for Vietnam's purchase of US patrol craft to safeguard territorial waters. On June 2, the two countries sign a defense agreement.

June 3, 2015: In Jakarta, Anne Richards, assistant secretary of state for refugees, speaks on US contributions to relieve the plight of Rohingya boat people from Myanmar. She also praises the rescue efforts from Indonesia and Malaysia.

June 6-13, 2015: Assistant Secretary of State Russel visits Singapore and Malaysia in preparation for the upcoming ASEAN Regional Forum.

June 18-30, 2015: US and Philippines conduct their 21st annual *Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) Philippines* military exercise.

June 22-26, 2015: Philippine and Japanese navy ships exercise together in the South China Sea, focusing on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

June 25, 2015: State Department's annual human rights report criticizes Thailand, Vietnam, and Myanmar.

July 2, 2015: ASEAN Secretariat announces during a meeting in Kuala Lumpur that the group will create a fund to aid regional countries that host the victims of human trafficking. US State Department and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees also participate in the meeting.

July 6-10 2015: Vietnam's Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong visits the US and meets President Obama. Their main topic of discussion is the Trans Pacific Partnership.

July 13-24, 2015: Singapore and US navies conduct bilateral *CARAT* exercise involving 1,400 personnel and several combat vessels.

July 16, 2015: In a Washington speech, Japan's top military commander Adm. Kawano Katsubashi states his country may conduct surveillance patrols in the South China Sea.

July 27-31, 2015: US and Vietnam conduct a joint peacekeeping workshop in Hanoi to help Vietnam establish a national peacekeeping center. Peacekeeping cooperation was agreed upon during the July visit General Secretary Ngyuen Phu Trong to Washington.

July 27, 2015: Annual State Department Human Trafficking Report places Thailand in the bottom tier because of child slavery in the fishing industry; Malaysia is promoted to the next highest category although human rights critics say there is no justification for its elevation.

Aug. 1-5, 2015: ASEAN-related foreign minister and post-ministerial meetings (48th ASEAN, 16th ASEAN+3, and fifth East Asia Summit) are held in Kuala Lumpur.

Aug. 4, 2015 Secretary of State Kerry speaks at the Singapore Management University acknowledging obstacles that led to the stalemate in the TPP negotiations in Maui but expressing the hope that they will be overcome in future meetings.

Aug. 4-10, 2015: US and Indonesia conduct *CARAT Indonesia 2015* exercise with over 1,000 US personnel.

Aug. 6, 2015: ASEAN Regional Forum is held in Kuala Lumpur. Secretary Kerry attends and announces a \$4.3 million contribution to the Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center for the creation of a system to document and trace illegal fishing in the region.

Aug. 8, 2015: In Vietnam to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the restoration of diplomatic relations, Secretary Kerry states that deeper ties depend on Hanoi's greater commitment to human rights and democratic values.

Aug. 17-21, 2015: US and Malaysia conduct *CARAT Malaysia 2015*, a joint military exercise.