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President Obama Needs to Visit Singapore Next Year

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In the midst of dramatic elections in Myanmar and ongoing tensions in the South China Sea, it is easy for the United States to take for granted one of its most reliable partners in Southeast Asia: Singapore. Over the past two decades, the city-state, which celebrated 50 years of independence in August, has been one of Washington's staunchest allies in promoting free trade, bolstering security, strengthening the regional architecture, and sponsoring a wide range of capacity-building efforts across the region.

Although President Barack Obama stopped in Singapore briefly for an economic summit in 2009, a longer and official state visit that will allow him to interact with Singapore's senior government officials, business leaders, youth, and civil society stakeholders will demonstrate the importance that Washington places on its expanding strategic partnership with Singapore. Obama has visited Myanmar and Indonesia twice during his term in office, and later this month he will stop in the Philippines and Malaysia for the second time over the past 18 months to attend two critical regional summits. He even visited Thailand in late 2013, before months of political turmoil prompted the Thai military to take control of the government.

The year 2016 presents a timely window for Obama to visit Singapore, as the two countries will celebrate the 50th anniversary of bilateral ties,

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Admiral Samuel Locklear, commander of the U.S. Pacific Command, greets Singapore minister of defense Ng Eng Hen at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, 2013. Singapore's defense minister will visit the United States in December.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Navy_Admiral_Samual_Locklear_greets_Singapore_Minister_of_Defense_Ng_Eng_Hen.jpg

which have gained more significance as Southeast Asia becomes the locus of regional geopolitics and economic trends. Regional summits next May and September will provide an ideal opportunity for the visit and give the president a chance to meet with the country's next generation of leaders, who Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said were included in the new cabinet announced following elections in September.

The list of areas in which the two countries work together is long and diverse. Singapore was a key player in pressing the United States to join the small P-4 trade grouping that morphed into the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement. Singapore recognized, even before Obama announced the rebalance to Asia, that U.S. participation in this trade pact would be critical to ensuring Washington's long-term engagement in the region.

Singapore was the first country in Asia with which Washington completed a free trade agreement (FTA) in 2004. Despite the fact that the two countries are largely free traders, the U.S.-Singapore FTA has been one of the United States' most successful trade agreements. Two-way trade, which reached \$47 billion last year, has surged by a whopping 50 percent over the past decade. This makes Singapore—which is smaller than the U.S. state of Rhode Island and has a population of only 5.5 million—the United States' 17th largest trading partner. The U.S. trade surplus with Singapore last year stood at \$14 billion.

The stock of U.S. investment in Singapore nearly topped \$180 billion last year, more than twice the level in China and six times more than in India. Singapore's investment stock in the United States reached almost \$21 billion in 2014 in such companies as offshore oil rig builder Keppel AmFELS in Texas and global agribusiness Olam International in California. More than 3,600 U.S. companies have operations in Singapore, and for many of them, the city-state serves as their regional headquarters. That's not surprising considering that Singapore consistently ranks first or second in the World Bank's annual ease-of-doing business report.

While Singapore is a strong supporter of U.S. security leadership in Asia, it is also an adept strategic player that Washington needs to keep close. Singapore's officials have often advised Washington on the importance of striking a strategic balance in its approach toward Southeast Asia, reminding U.S. policymakers that Southeast Asian countries do not want to be dragged into rivalry between the United States and China and that attempts to contain Beijing will be counterproductive.

President Obama Needs to Visit Singapore Next Year *(continued)*

Singapore has been a vital security partner for the United States in Southeast Asia since the Philippine Senate voted to push the U.S. military out of Clark Air Base and the Subic Bay naval base in 1991. The bilateral Strategic Framework Agreement, which the United States signed with Singapore in 2005, allows the U.S. military access to Singapore's facilities on a rotational basis.

The U.S. Navy also operates a logistics command unit in Singapore, which coordinates ship deployments and logistics in the region. Squadrons of U.S. fighters are rotated through Changi Naval Base for one-month stints, and Singapore has agreed to host four littoral combat ships on rotational deployments—with the first ship completing its mission in late 2013.

Singapore established the Information Fusion Center in 2009, aimed at improving maritime domain awareness and information sharing among 35 countries, including the United States. It became the first Southeast Asian country to join the U.S.-led coalition to fight the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in late 2014, and has contributed planning staff and air refueling assets to the coalition. It participates in counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, and has contributed troops to the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan.

The United States, meanwhile, is the largest arms supplier to Singapore, having provided such sophisticated equipment as F-15 and F-16 fighters. Singapore sends more than 1,000 military personnel for training in the United States each year, and several Singapore helicopter and fixed-wing detachments are stationed at U.S. Air Force bases in Arizona, Idaho, and Texas. Singapore participates in numerous bilateral and multilateral training exercises with the United States, including Cobra Gold, Forging Sabre, and the Rim of the Pacific naval exercise.

Singapore is an indispensable partner for the United States in working to strengthen ASEAN. The United States and Singapore in 2012 established a third-country training program focused on connectivity, sustainable development, and regional resilience. Since then, the two countries have organized 16 courses through which they have provided capacity building



Singapore's skyline at night. Singapore is host to 3,600 U.S. businesses and ranked number one in the World Bank's ease-of-doing business report this year. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/jerryvankrasten/8521869678/>

President Obama Needs to Visit Singapore Next Year *(continued)*



U.S. Coast Guard cutter USCGC Waesche arrives at Changi Naval Base for the 2012 Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercise. Changi Naval Base is a vital hub for the United States to resupply and repair its naval vessels, and for its maritime domain awareness and security cooperation in the region. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/compacflt/7576554970/in/photolist-qL8kCY-qoBY5R-cxvPQ7-r44XuL-qLHXU4-qLdLsK-r3DBJ4-cxvPpm-cCisPJ-cCitab-cCitiL-cCitss-cCisDq-swnSJg-cN7s3W-qv4wdj-cmqHEA-r3DBe6-q6RCZp-qoDo1T>

to officials from less developed ASEAN member countries. The two governments agreed earlier this year to expand this training initiative across the region.

As Washington revs up its engagement with Asia, it is important that the United States fully appreciates and taps into its robust ties with Singapore. Toward that end, it is critical that Obama visits Singapore on one of his swings through the region next year. ■



Polling station in Myanmar's 2015 elections. More than 30 million voters went to the polls on November 8 in Myanmar's first democratic elections in 25 years. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Myanmar_election_2015.jpg

MYANMAR

- **Myanmar holds landmark elections peacefully, as U.S., western partners keep close watch.** More than 32 million voters on November 8 cast their votes in Myanmar's first democratic elections in 25 years. Voting took place peacefully across some 40,000 polling stations, witnessed by more than 10,000 international observers. The Union Election Commission reported voting irregularities in only 40 polling stations, most of which were due to advance votes being illegally brought in after the deadline. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry commended the peaceful and historic poll, but said the elections were "far from perfect" and called for a peaceful post-election period.
- **Aung San Suu Kyi confident of sweeping NLD win; military chief and president reiterate respect for election outcomes.** Opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi on November 11 called for a meeting between her and the president, military chief, and lower house speaker, as election results show that her party, the National League for Democracy, is on track to win the majority of contested seats in the November 8 elections. Both President Thein Sein and Commander-in-Chief Gen. Min Aung Hlaing said immediately after the elections that the military and current government will respect the election outcomes and assured the public there will be a peaceful power transfer once all results are made official.
- **Lower House Speaker Shwe Mann loses parliamentary seat to NLD rival.** Lower House Speaker Shwe Mann lost his seat representing his hometown, Pyu Township, in Bago Region in the November 8 election to an opposition candidate from the National League for Democracy (NLD). Shwe Mann, who was ousted as chairman of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) in August, said shortly before the elections that he and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi will work together in the next parliament. Shwe Mann was said to be a possible presidential pick for Aung San Suu Kyi, who is constitutionally barred from the presidency, if her NLD party wins enough seats to form the next government. Myanmar's constitution does not require the president to be an elected lawmaker.
- **Rebel groups that refused to sign cease-fire deal demand new peace process at summit in Wa State.** Leaders representing 11 armed ethnic groups that last month refused to sign a nationwide cease-fire deal with the government demanded a new peace process during an ethnic summit in Pangsang, the headquarters of the powerful United Wa State Army, from



November 1 to 4. The groups said in their joint statement they will work toward a new peace process with the next government and do not intend to join the next phase of the peace process that was started under President Thein Sein. They also demanded the direct involvement of China in the new peace process to maintain stability along the Myanmar-China border.

- **China pledges support for next Myanmar government.** The Chinese government pledged to support the next Myanmar government, regardless of who emerges as the winner of the November 8 elections, at a conference in Beijing on October 26. The conference aimed to promote China's One Belt One Road economic initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Both Myanmar's ruling party and the opposition party were invited to the conference, but neither sent representatives because of the elections in Myanmar.

THAILAND

- **U.S. ambassador says military government is welcome to join TPP.** U.S. ambassador to Thailand Glyn Davies on October 31 said Thailand's current military government is welcome to join the recently concluded Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement, but that bilateral ties will return to normal only under an elected Thai government. Davies told Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha that Thailand has until 2017 to consider joining the TPP and to ensure that it can meet the standards laid out in the trade pact. Major Thai industry associations, including the Thai Bankers' Association, the Thai Chamber of Commerce, and the Federation of Thai Industries, have recently pushed for Thailand to join the TPP.
- **Anti-trafficking police chief resigns, prompting concerns about backtracking on anti-trafficking efforts.** Major General Paween Pongsirin, who heads the anti-trafficking police unit that arrested 88 human trafficking suspects in May, resigned from his post in early November and has been transferred to southern Thailand, according to a November 9 Reuters report. Meanwhile, a Thai court said on November 10 that an ongoing examination of 500 witnesses for the trial of the 88 trafficking suspects will take as long as two years, prompting concerns that Thai authorities may be backtracking on their pledge to step up anti-trafficking efforts.
- **Police suspect 50 army officers linked to lèse-majesté case; another lèse-majesté suspect dies in police custody.** Police on November 4 said they suspect 50 military generals and colonels are linked to an ongoing high-profile lèse-majesté investigation, and that more arrest warrants for lèse-majesté suspects will be issued over the next week. Of the three

individuals who were detained in late October for allegedly claiming connections to the royal family to make money, two died in police custody, one on October 24 and the second on November 9. One was a former police officer and famous fortuneteller who once worked for Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn.

- **Campaign pushes for establishing Buddhism as state religion.** The leader of the Committee to Promote Buddhism as the State Religion, Banjob Bannaruji, on November 3 suggested that the Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) should adopt Buddhism as Thailand's official religion in the draft constitution, which is expected to be completed in early 2016, to garner greater popular appeal. Banjob, whose campaign reportedly drew inspiration from the nationalist Association for the Protection of Race and Religion in Myanmar, said the group plans to collect a million signatures to submit to the CDC in the coming months. Previous attempts to make Buddhism the state religion in the 2007 constitution, written after a military coup that ousted former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, did not succeed.

- **Cabinet approves tax exemption package to encourage investments.** The Thai government on November 3 approved a tax exemption package to encourage investments amid a sluggish economy. Under the package, investment projects approved by the Board of Investment from January 2014 to June 2016 will receive tax exemptions for four years. The tax exemptions are part of the military government's economic stimulus package, which includes \$1.3 billion in loans and subsidies to rural farmers.



Buddhist novices ordaining ceremony in Thailand. A campaign known as the Committee to Promote Buddhism as the State Religion said it plans to collect a million signatures as part of its push to establish Buddhism as Thailand's state religion in the next draft constitution. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Buddhist_traditions_of_Thailand#/media/File:Buddhist_worship.jpg

INDONESIA

- **Assistant Secretary of State Rivkin visits Indonesia to boost economic cooperation.** Assistant Secretary of State for Economic and Business Affairs Charles Rivkin traveled to Indonesia from November 2 to 8 to boost U.S.-Indonesia trade and investment relations and discuss ways to help Indonesia improve its regulatory and business environment. Rivkin, who met with Indonesian government officials and business leaders, stressed the importance of protecting intellectual property rights in a creative economy. U.S. companies have invested \$65 billion in Indonesia since 2007, with an additional \$61 billion projected through 2020.

- **Jokowi faces blowback at home following announcement to join TPP during U.S. visit.** President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo announced during his meeting with President Barack Obama on October 26 that Indonesia is interested in joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement. However, his announcement was criticized by senior politicians in



Indonesia, including former president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and opposition leader Prabowo Subianto, who said that Indonesia's economy is still uncompetitive and lacks adequate infrastructure to benefit from the trade deal. The president responded on November 4 by warning that Indonesia will face strong global competition and cannot isolate itself from international trends.

- **Government releases additional economic reform packages.** President Joko Widodo unveiled two additional economic reform measures on October 22 and November 5, resulting in a small boost for the rupiah against the dollar. The packages aim to incentivize companies to revalue their fixed assets by reducing the tax on fixed asset growth to 3 percent from the previous 10 percent, provided that companies submit their revaluation proposals before the end of the year. They also included income tax discounts—ranging from 20 to 100 percent—for up to 25 years for foreign businesses that invest over \$36 million in Indonesia's special economic zones.

- **India, Indonesia agree to boost cooperation on renewable energy and defense.** Indian vice president Hamid Ansari from November 1 to 5 paid a visit to Indonesia, where he met with his counterpart, Jusuf Kalla, to discuss ways to boost bilateral trade and cooperation in defense and counterterrorism. During Ansari's visit, the two sides signed memorandums of understanding on renewable energy cooperation and cultural exchange programs. The two sides also discussed the possibility of signing an extradition treaty, but did not reach an agreement.

- **GE, Freeport, Coca-Cola to increase their investments in Indonesia.** Several U.S. companies pledged substantial investments in Indonesia during President Joko Widodo's trip to Washington from October 26 to 28. Mining giant Freeport agreed to go forward with \$18 billion worth of investments in exploration and the construction of smelters, while General Electric pledged up to \$1 billion and Coca-Cola up to \$500 million for infrastructure development projects. Google on October 28 announced it is ready to test a project to deliver wireless Internet via local cellular service providers to Indonesians in remote locations using high-altitude balloons.

- **Indonesia cracks down on ISIS supporters, seeks to establish prison for militant extremists.** Minister for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs Luhut Panjaitan on November 3 said that Indonesia plans to set up a prison specifically for convicted terrorists to prevent hardened extremists from radicalizing other inmates during their jail terms. Luhut said he has asked prison administrators to separate convicted terrorists from the general



A Project Loon research balloon meant to pilot test a Google project to provide high-speed Internet to remote areas of the world. Google said on October 28 it will test the project in Indonesia, home to over 250 million people and over 319 million mobile phones. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Project_Loon#/media/File:Google_Loon_-_Launch_Event.jpg

prison population. Indonesia also plans to send young judges to the United States for training on handling terror cases. Authorities on November 9 detained two Indonesians who were allegedly on their way to join the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

MALAYSIA

- **Malaysia defense minister and U.S. counterpart board U.S. aircraft carrier for South China Sea patrol.** Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter and his Malaysian counterpart, Hishammuddin Hussein, on November 5 toured a U.S. aircraft carrier, the USS *Theodore Roosevelt*, as it carried out a patrol mission in the South China Sea. Carter said that the ship's presence in the South China Sea was a symbol of the stabilizing presence that the United States provides to the region, and that Hishammudin's presence signals a growing demand for U.S. presence among countries in the Asia Pacific.
- **DAP seeks to remove PAS from Selangor State government.** Democratic Action Party (DAP) legislators in the state of Selangor in western Malaysia—which is governed by the opposition—on November 1 sought to remove representatives of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) from the state government and threatened to quit if their demands were not met. Relations between the two opposition parties have been strained since PAS sought to implement *hudud*, an Islamic penal code, in Kelantan State earlier this year. PAS and DAP have quarreled over the leadership of Selangor State in the past, and DAP vice president for Selangor State Teng Chang Khim warned his delegates that a walkout would not be in the interest of the party.
- **Australian regulators liquidate asset management fund with 1MDB links.** The Australian Securities and Investments Commission is liquidating the assets of Avestra Asset Management, after Australian authorities announced on September 16 that the firm put its clients' money at risk as a result of its links to the embattled 1Malaysia Development Bhd (1MDB). According to a November 3 *Wall Street Journal* report, the firm managed \$2.32 billion of 1MDB's funds, and reportedly violated Australian regulations by borrowing money on an unsecured basis and hiding its investments from regulators by routing them through an intermediary source.
- **UN says Anwar Ibrahim's imprisonment was politically motivated.** The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention said in a report released on November 2 that former opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim's imprisonment on sodomy charges was politically motivated. The report calls for Anwar's immediate release. Anwar had been previously jailed for sodomy and was

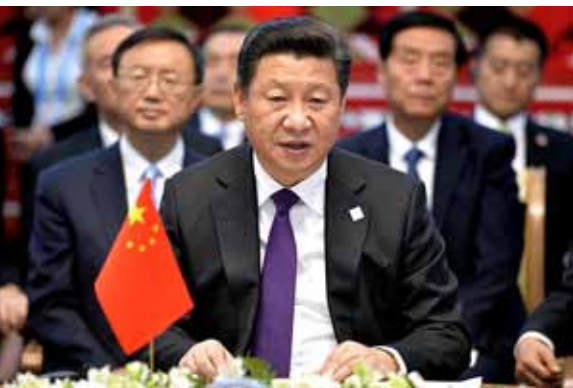


Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter and Malaysian minister of defense Hishammuddin Hussein, shortly before departing for the USS Theodore Roosevelt for a patrol in the South China Sea. The patrol comes shortly after a U.S. Navy ship conducted a freedom of navigation operation near a Chinese artificial feature in the South China Sea. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/secdef/22385802418>

later acquitted in 2004. He was accused of sodomy charges again in 2009 and was found guilty in early 2015. Anwar's wife, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, currently leads the opposition coalition.

- **Police question former prime minister Mahathir.** Malaysian police on November 6 questioned former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad at his office over potentially defamatory remarks he made at an anti-government rally on August 30, calling on Prime Minister Najib Razak to resign. Mahathir's lawyer denied knowing what the police discussed with Mahathir or whether the police intended to take further action against the former prime minister. Najib has used Malaysia's controversial Sedition Act against several media outlets and political opponents who criticized his involvement in the 1Malaysia Development Bhd scandal.

VIETNAM



Chinese president Xi Jinping speaking at the 7th BRICS Summit in Russia. Xi visited Vietnam from November 5 to 6 to smooth relations amid growing tensions over China's military buildup in the South China Sea. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Xi_Jinping,_BRICS_summit_2015_01.jpg

- **Chinese president visits Vietnam to smooth relations amid South China Sea tensions.** Chinese president Xi Jinping visited Vietnam from November 5 to 6 in an effort to smooth bilateral relations amid China's continuing assertiveness and military buildup in the South China Sea. Xi met with senior Vietnamese leaders and gave a speech hailing traditional China-Vietnam relations before the National Assembly, Vietnam's lawmaking body. Xi's two-day visit to Hanoi drew sizable anti-China protests in cities across Vietnam. Tensions between the two countries peaked last May when Beijing moved an oil rig into waters claimed by Vietnam in the South China Sea, sparking large and deadly anti-China rallies across Vietnam.
- **U.S. businesses file antidumping complaint against Vietnamese steelmakers.** U.S. companies on November 3 filed an antidumping suit with the U.S. Department of Commerce and the International Trade Commission against steel manufacturers in five countries, including Vietnam. The case represents the second time this year U.S. businesses have brought complaints against Vietnamese steelmakers. The two countries are both signatories to the recently concluded Trans-Pacific Partnership trade pact, which, if ratified, will eliminate most tariffs.
- **Japan's defense minister visits Vietnam to boost security cooperation in South China Sea.** Japanese defense minister Gen Nakatani on November 6 met with his Vietnamese counterpart, General Phung Quang Thanh, in Hanoi to discuss deepening bilateral security cooperation in the South China Sea. Vietnam reportedly agreed to invite a Japanese warship to visit Cam Ranh Bay, a deep-water port in central Vietnam and home to a large U.S. air and naval base during the Vietnam War. The two sides also agreed to hold their first-ever joint naval exercise in the near future.



- **Australian navy vessel pays port call in Danang, holds joint exercise with Vietnamese navy.** The Australian and Vietnamese navies on November 3 held a joint training exercise at sea. The Australian navy's HMAS *Sirius* called on the port of Danang in central Vietnam on October 30 for a five-day visit. The two navies also shared experiences monitoring vessels and replenishing supplies at sea, according to Tuoi Tre News.
- **Vietnam launches prosecution against 16 former bankers for causing \$450 million loss to state budget.** Vietnam's Ministry of Public Security on November 2 launched prosecutions against 16 former officials of the Vietnam Construction Joint Stock Commercial Bank for causing losses to the state budget. Authorities have banned all 16 individuals from leaving their residences. Police first arrested the chairman of the state-owned bank in July 2014. The ministry alleged that the group caused over \$448 million in financial losses to the state budget.
- **Vietnam, Cambodia hold meeting on border cooperation.** Vietnamese deputy prime minister and foreign minister Pham Binh Minh met with Cambodian deputy prime minister and minister of the interior Sar Kheng from October 27 to 28 in Ho Chi Minh City to discuss strengthening cooperation between the two countries' border provinces. The two sides agreed to speed up land border demarcation and not to impinge on each other's security. Border disputes with Vietnam are a politically charged issue in Cambodia.

PHILIPPINES

- **Supreme Court expected to rule positively on U.S. military deal before APEC.** The Philippine Supreme Court could rule soon that the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) is allowed under the Philippine constitution, according to a November 9 Reuters report. The constitutionality of the EDCA, signed by the United States and the Philippines in May 2014 to allow the U.S. military to station troops and use facilities in Philippine territory, has been challenged in court. An unnamed court source said that the court was likely to issue a ruling before President Barack Obama arrives in Manila for the APEC Leaders' Summit on November 18-19. The only opportunity for the court to do that would be at next week's November 16 session.
- **Duterte continues to tease about potential presidential run, despite end of filing period.** Davao City mayor Rodrigo Duterte continues the "will he or won't he?" drama of a possible run for president in 2016. After "definitively" saying in late October that he would not run, the popular, no-nonsense mayor mused on his television show on November 8 that he may enter



the race to represent oppressed Filipinos. Duterte could potentially enter the race after the October 15 deadline because the Partido Demokratiko Pilipino-Lakas ng Bayan party filed paperwork substituting him for a placeholder candidate.

- **Congress resumes fight over draft Bangsamoro Basic Law.** Congress returned on November 3 from its fall recess to continued pressure to pass the draft Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL). The BBL, which seeks to implement a peace deal signed between the government and the rebel Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), has faced resistance in Congress following a botched counterterrorism operation in January that killed 44 Philippine police officers. Miriam Coronel-Ferrer, chief government negotiator for the peace process, wrote a letter to congressional leaders urging swift passage of the bill. MILF members have become increasingly concerned that the bill might fail.

- **Presidential candidate Grace Poe's DNA search comes back negative.** Presidential candidate Grace Poe reported on November 4 that her search for a DNA-matching relative to bolster her citizenship claim had turned up negative. Although this does not disqualify the senator from holding office, it makes her argument that she is a natural-born Philippine citizen more difficult to substantiate. Poe faces four separate candidacy disqualification petitions over questions of her citizenship status. She was abandoned at birth and raised by popular Philippine movie star Fernando Poe, Jr. The Senate Electoral Tribunal is expected to issue its decision on November 17.

- **Bullet-planting scam shakes Philippines' tourist-friendly image.** Travelers in the Philippines have accused airport staff of a wide-ranging "bullet-planting" shakedown. The controversy, which came to a head October 31 with Senate calls for an official government probe, prompted the United Nations to warn its personnel to take extra precautions to secure their luggage. The scam involves airport staff "discovering" a prohibited item, such as a bullet, in the bags of a passenger and then demanding payment to avoid arrest.

- **Suspected Abu Sayyaf kidnappers demand \$63 million ransom for foreign hostages.** The group responsible for kidnapping four tourists off the coast of Mindanao released a second video on November 3, demanding approximately \$63 million in ransom for the three male tourists, one Norwegian and two Canadian, abducted on September 21. The kidnappers, who claimed to belong to the Islamic terrorist Abu Sayyaf Group, held bolo knives to the throats of the victims and threatened execution if payment



Ninoy Aquino International Airport, in Manila. The primary airport of the Philippines has seen a sharp increase in passengers found with bullets in their luggage, attributed by angry passengers and lawmakers to corrupt airport staff running a shakedown operation. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:NAIA_Terminal_3_2009_MC.jpg



was withheld. No ransom was mentioned for the female Filipino victim, who appeared in the video but did not speak.

SINGAPORE

- **Singapore hosts historic meeting between China's and Taiwan's top leaders.** Taiwanese president Ma Ying-Jeou and Chinese president Xi Jinping met in Singapore on November 7, marking the first time since 1945 leaders of the two countries have come together. Xi, who was on a visit to Singapore from November 7 to 8, urged China and Taiwan “not to replay the tragedies of history.” Ma expressed his desire to maintain the status quo in cross-strait relations, as the two countries discussed moving ahead with a trade in goods agreement, according to a November 8 *Wall Street Journal* report.
- **Government funds driverless cars for public transportation.** The permanent secretary of Singapore's Ministry of Transport ministry, Pang Kin Keong, said on November 4 that the Singapore government is set to fund research trials for driverless cars to serve as a means of public transportation. Private companies have submitted proposals for taking part in the project with the government.



Taiwanese president Ma Ying-Jeou. Ma met with Chinese president Xi Jinping in Singapore on November 8, the first time since 1945 that leaders of the two countries have met. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ma_Ying-jeou_from_VOA_\(2\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ma_Ying-jeou_from_VOA_(2).jpg)

TRANS-PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP

- **TPP countries release text of trade deal.** New Zealand's government on November 5 posted the text of the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement online, the first public release of the trade deal's content. The lengthy text contains provisions on tariff elimination, rules of origin, financial services, state-owned enterprises, the environment, and intellectual property. According to a November 5 *New York Times* report, Vietnam has made major concessions on organized labor, granting workers the right to strike for the first time.



The Peace Palace, home of the Permanent Court of Arbitration, in The Hague, Netherlands. The Permanent Court of Arbitration on October 29 ruled that it had jurisdiction over the Philippines' suit challenging the maritime claims of China. A final ruling will come out in 2016. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fb/International_Court_of_Justice.jpg

SOUTH CHINA SEA

- **Arbitration court agrees to hear Philippines' case against China.** The Permanent Court of Arbitration on October 29 ruled that it had jurisdiction over the Philippines' suit against China regarding claims in the South China Sea, paving the way for a ruling in 2016. While Philippine officials were pleased, their Chinese counterparts slammed Manila's continued pursuit of the case, calling it a “publicity machination” and dismissing the decision as “null and void.” The Court will next meet for an oral hearing November 24-30.



- **ASEAN defense ministers scrap joint statement at ADMM-Plus meeting over South China Sea differences.** The third ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), which comprises ASEAN and eight dialogue partners including the United States and China, held in Kuala Lumpur November 3-5, ended in discord when the ministers were unable to reach consensus on a joint statement. U.S. sources attributed the breakdown to Chinese resistance over language regarding the ongoing South China Sea disputes, while Chinese officials accused unnamed countries from outside the region of "ignoring the existing consensus" and forcing the issue.
- **Regional leaders weigh in on recent U.S. freedom of navigation operation.** Chinese officials on October 28 expressed anger with the freedom of navigation operation conducted a day earlier by the USS *Lassen* near Subi Reef in the Spratly Islands, calling the exercise "irresponsible" and warning that China would take "all necessary measures" to defend its security. Philippine and Australian officials expressed support for the operation. Malaysian defense minister Hishammuddin Hussein, while not weighing in publicly, flew to a U.S. aircraft carrier in the South China Sea with U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter eight days after the operation.
- **Experts, lawmakers seek clarity over freedom of navigation operation.** U.S. senator John McCain on November 9 sent a letter to Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter asking for clarification on the freedom of navigation operation performed by the USS *Lassen* on October 27. The letter seeks to end ongoing confusion in Washington about the exact behavior of the *Lassen* during the operation, which would determine the extent of challenge made to China's claims. Maritime law experts worried that an "innocent passage" by the *Lassen* may actually acknowledge China's claim of sovereignty.

ASEAN

- **Word Bank releases its "Ease of Doing Business" 2016 report.** The World Bank on October 27 released its "Ease of Doing Business" report. Singapore and Malaysia maintained their 1st and 18th place rankings, respectively. Thailand saw the greatest change among ASEAN countries, falling from 26th to 49th place. Vietnam moved up three notches to 90th place, the Philippines slipped six places to 103rd, while Indonesia moved up 11 slots to 109th. Also greatly improved was Myanmar, which climbed from 177th to 167th place. Timor Leste had the lowest score in the region, in 173rd place.



Marina Bay, Singapore, at night. The World Bank released its "Ease of Doing Business" report for 2016 in October. Singapore retained its place at the top of the list, while other Southeast Asian nations had mixed performances. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/65/Marina-bay-at-night-singapore-May_1_2009.jpg

- **ASEAN defense ministers agree to set up defense hotline.** ASEAN defense ministers on November 3 established a hotline that would enable them to resolve maritime disputes and communicate securely and swiftly during a crisis. The ceremony took place on the sidelines of the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) retreat outside Kuala Lumpur. ASEAN defense ministers on November 4 took part in the third ADMM-Plus meeting with their counterparts from Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea, and the United States.

CAMBODIA

- **Opposition vice-president Kem Sokha removed from assembly leadership.** Lawmakers in the Cambodian National Assembly on October 30 removed Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) leader Kem Sokha from his position as vice president of the National Assembly. The vote, which was forced through by ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) legislators and boycotted by CNRP representatives, violated the constitutional restriction stipulating that the vice president can be replaced only because of resignation or death. Sokha was named vice president of the assembly as part of a compromise with the ruling CPP, following a year of CNRP protests over an election many considered stolen.
- **Hun Sen cancels water festival in Phnom Penh amid political tensions.** Prime Minister Hun Sen on October 31 canceled this year's November water festival in Phnom Penh, allegedly due to a nationwide drought and low water levels in the Tonle Sap River. However, many critics suspect that Hun Sen canceled the festival to prevent large crowds gathering in the capital during a time of rising political tension. Festivals in other provinces suffering from the drought will still take place, lending credence to the theory.
- **Three confess to beatings of legislators; UN concerned about political climate in Cambodia.** Three Cambodian soldiers with possible links to the prime minister's bodyguard unit were charged on November 4 with the brutal October 26 beating of two Cambodia National Rescue Party lawmakers outside parliament during a protest demanding the ouster of National Assembly vice president Kem Sokha. The trio face prison terms of up to 15 years. In response to the assault, the United Nation's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on October 30 urged authorities to protect the right to assembly and freedom of expression for Cambodian citizens.



Dragon boats line up to race in the annual water festival in Phnom Penh, November 2014. Prime Minister Hun Sen canceled the water festival for 2015 in what many critics suspect was a move to prevent protests against the ruling Cambodian People's Party. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/43636154@N07/15561574739/in/photolist-pHeTku-pH891K-pHbJd5-p3MF2L-pZyTFv-pXsjEW-pHdYyN-pXsLxC-8KLQ6C-8KLQU7-9rrMEB-pH8LQM-p3PxcH-pXsw6m-pHdGeJ-pHctin-pHe9sA-9qmVh5-58ARyA-58-RB6A-58RARA-594RpV-8UN4vU-pZGdVW-p3LNJb-p3QoM4-p3MxdQ-pXsktE-pHeFFY-pHbFrd-pHcVo8-pH8s5a-pHarcD-pH99Yz-pHb63U-pZyKPD-pHeAyy-p3MqGJ-pZGdBQ-pHe59f-pXsKj5-pHeaoJ-pHbSXi-pXsPW1-p3Pjd6-p3PJG6-p3PAp4-pZGGG7-pZfV8G-p3MvRm/>



A railway station in Laos. China agreed to provide Laos with a significant loan for construction of a new railroad between Kunming and Vientiane, but Lao officials have balked at the high rate of interest attached to it. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/nareas/5811064457/in/photolist-bqMDgK-4WM92R-bgMzU6-k4PcXY-pVr1Kh-9Rve1v-aq2q7f-dHa1eW-askFUU-jy5M5j-bzvJyR-9bfH8d-9cbuJc-5aDkD6-e1Q5X6-c6RTrJ-4XuT9g-dBnBme-9gncBG-e9J24C-bPcUC6-kEhjAu-o263FU-pUB1eT-oMazTb-pU94ox-pBYLKW-dcuBMR-pTTy7t-oXa8kv-dRMGmt-dJWNCE-5dGXvH-gunjXn-sMCmuc-qz91qD-pC9p5A-peGgfv-qx7C95>

- **Cambodia receives anti-aircraft missiles from China in new military aid package.** Cambodian defense minister Tea Banh on November 6 announced that Cambodia had acquired new shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles from China. The missiles are the most recent delivery in a series of military modernization packages from China, which is also Cambodia's biggest foreign investor. The announcement came days after the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus meeting in which Cambodia supported China's refusal to include language on the South China Sea maritime disputes, resulting in failure of the meeting to issue a joint statement.

LAOS

- **Laos to negotiate better railroad loan terms with China.** Lao minister of public works and transport Bounchanh Sinthavong announced at a cabinet meeting of the Lao government on September 23-25 that Beijing agreed to provide a 20-year, \$500 million loan with a 3 percent interest rate for the controversial railroad connecting southern China's Kunming City to Vientiane, according to an October 30 *Vientiane Times* report. Lao officials worried that the loan would plunge Laos into debt, prompting the creation of a committee to negotiate a lower interest rate. The rail line's groundbreaking ceremony is scheduled for December 2.
- **Laos expected to hire more skilled foreign workers; more Lao nationals find jobs abroad.** Under the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare's 2016-2020 plan, up to 130,000 skilled foreign workers will be hired to meet the growing demands of the job market, according to a November 4 *Vientiane Times* report. In comparison, Laos hired just over 50,000 foreign workers from 2010 to 2015. In that same time frame, more than 120,000 Lao took work in neighboring countries in unskilled sectors such as agriculture, industry, and services. Laos is experiencing a mismatch between the supply of skilled workers and the demands of the expanding market.

MEKONG RIVER

- **Thai activists urge government to take stronger stance against controversial Don Sahong Dam.** Thai environmentalists have urged their government to take a stronger stance over the Don Sahong Dam project, after the Lao government announced plans to begin construction in late November without considering the ecological consequences across the region, according to a November 2 *Bangkok Post* report. Pianporn Deetes, Thailand campaign coordinator of the International Rivers organization, claimed that the Lao government had ignored previous agreements among Lower Mekong countries to do more research and consultation before moving ahead with the project.

BRUNEI



Prince Mohamed Bolkiah, younger brother of the sultan of Brunei, was removed from his position as Brunei's foreign minister on October 22 after serving in the post for 34 years. Prince Mohamed retains the position of chief minister in the royal court and continues to serve on Brunei's Privy Council. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Prince_Mohamed_Bolkiah_with_Obamas_cropped.jpg

- **Sultan's brother removed from cabinet.** Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah on October 22 announced the removal of his younger brother, Prince Mohamed Bolkiah, from his position as minister of foreign affairs. The sultan now serves as Brunei's prime minister, defense minister, finance minister, and foreign minister. Crown Prince Al-Muhtadee Billah, senior minister in the Prime Minister's Office, is now the only direct member of the royal family to hold a cabinet-level position. The cabinet reshuffle served to centralize the sultan's power, while providing senior bureaucrats more leeway in public administration.
- **Brunei, U.S. navies hold annual CARAT exercise.** The U.S. and Brunei navies on November 2 kicked off the annual Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercise in Brunei. The 10-day exercise included training and joint exercises on domain awareness, search-and-rescue operations, naval gunnery, and maritime interdiction. ■

Looking Ahead

- **U.S.-China Energy Cooperation: risks, opportunities, and challenges.** The Hudson Institute will host a day-long conference on November 16 to discuss how the United States can help China achieve greater energy independence and shape a new energy picture for Asia in the twenty-first century. The conference will feature energy policy experts from the United States and China. The event will take place from 9:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. at the Hudson Institute, 1015 15th Street, NW. [Click here](#) to RSVP.
- **The Asia-Pacific Rebalance, National Security, and Climate Change.** The Wilson Center's Environmental Change and Security Program will host the launch of *The Asia-Pacific Rebalance, National Security, and Climate Change* report on November 17, discussing how the United States can help improve the Asia-Pacific's environmental resilience and strategically adapt to the rapidly changing security environment as it reorients its foreign policy approach in the region. Featured speakers will include Ellen Laipson, distinguished fellow and president emeritus of the Henry L. Stimson Center. The event will take place from 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. at the Woodrow Wilson Center, 1300 Pennsylvania Ave., NW. [Click here](#) to RSVP.
- **Strategic Asia 2015-2016 Book Launch.** The National Bureau of Asian Research will host the launch of *Strategic Asia 2015-2016: Foundations of National Power in the Asia Pacific*, on November 18 to discuss how Asia's major powers are building their national power as geopolitical competition intensifies. The book launch will feature speakers such as Dennis C. Blair from the Sasakawa Peace Foundation and Ashley J. Tellis from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The event will take place from 8:15 a.m. to 12:15 p.m. in the Kennedy Auditorium of the John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, 1740 Massachusetts Ave., NW. [Click here](#) to RSVP.
- **Readout on the Myanmar Elections.** The CSIS Chair for Southeast Asia Studies on November 19 will host an off-the-record readout on Myanmar's November 8 election and the implications for U.S.-Myanmar relations. The event will feature experts, including Colin Willett, the State Department's senior adviser for Southeast Asia; Carolyn Leddy and Michael Schiffer of the Republican and Democratic staff on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee; and Derek Luyten, director for Asia at the International Republican Institute (IRI). It will take place from 10:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1616 Rhode Island Ave., NW. [Click here](#) to RSVP.



- **Global Witness Myanmar Roundtable.** The CSIS Chair for Southeast Asia Studies on November 19 will host the Global Witness Myanmar Roundtable to address the human rights abuses involved in Myanmar's jade trade and their implications for U.S. policy toward Myanmar. The roundtable will feature Juman Kubba, Burma expert for Global Witness, and Naw Awng, a civil society representative from Kachin State. The event will take place from 2:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1616 Rhode Island Ave., NW. To RSVP, e-mail southeastasiaprogram@csis.org. ■

SOUTHEAST ASIA FROM SCOTT CIRCLE

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