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SOUTHEAST ASIA IN 2007

Domestic Concerns, Delicate Bilateral Relations, and Patchy Regionalism

Tim Huxley

During 2007, issues of domestic stability and internal security continued to preoccupy several Southeast Asian governments, notably in Thailand, the Philippines, Timor-Leste and Myanmar. Indonesia, however, seemed considerably more stable: not only did peace consolidate in Aceh, but both the Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist group and piracy in the Malacca Strait seemed to have been subdued. At the same time, relations between Southeast Asian states remained sensitive to domestic political conditions. Largely for this reason, progress towards closer multilateral political and security cooperation was only tentative, despite the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit adopting the ASEAN Charter in November 2007. In the light of concern over ASEAN's continuing intramural tensions, the underdeveloped nature of regional security institutions, and concern over the region's changing balance of power, Southeast Asian governments prudently cultivated their extraregional security links.

Thailand's Political Travails

In Thailand, the military regime which had held power since the armed forces ousted Thaksin Shinawatra's administration in September 2006 attempted — unsuccessfully as it turned out — to engineer a restoration of democracy that would continue excluding Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party from the corridors of power. At the same time, Bangkok continued to confront significant

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security challenges from Muslim insurgents in the south, where conflict escalated during 2007.

Though the 2006 coup had been executed peacefully, diverse groups in Thailand opposed the military's takeover. The army's political intervention severely undermined the cohesion and strength of Thaksin's TRT, but the former leader's huge political sway nevertheless meant that his supporters constituted the main source of resistance, particularly in the north and northeast where the military junta, which called itself the Council for National Security (CNS), still feared "undercurrents" of well-funded pro-Thaksin activity.¹ Despite the ex-premier's claims that he would not be a candidate in the next general election, the worst fear of the CNS was that Thaksin might return to Thailand, posing a serious dilemma: whether to allow him to mobilize support using his wealth and his extensive network of local officials and politicians; or to arrest him with the risk he might become a martyr figure akin to neighbouring Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi.

Interim Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont became increasingly beleaguered during early 2007 as he faced criticism from not only the democracy movement and activists supporting debt-ridden farmers (formerly the beneficiaries of the TRT's rural largesse) but also General Sonthi and his junta, the CNS.² Amid questions over Surayud's health, continuing pressure from the democracy movement, and increasingly public disagreement between Surayud and the CNS, there was persistent speculation that military hardliners might stage another coup.

In April, the military-appointed Constitution Drafting Council (CDC) published the draft of Thailand's proposed new Constitution, with the intention that after being debated by the 200-member Constitution Drafting Assembly it should be subjected to a referendum later in the year.³ The gist of the draft charter was that popular political participation would be curtailed. The parliamentary lower house would be reduced from 500 to 400 members, including 80 "party list" members intended to enhance representation for smaller parties and to obviate the possibility of a single party dominating parliament as Thaksin's TRT had done. The senate, previously consisting of 200 elected members, would be scaled down to 160 appointees. Prime ministers would be limited to two four-year terms in office, and would not be allowed holdings in private companies. It would also be easier to impeach prime ministers. The leaders of both main political parties, the TRT and the Democrats, roundly criticized the draft.

Demonstrations by monks demanding that Buddhism (the faith of 90–95 per cent of Thais) should be enshrined in the new constitution as the national religion further complicated the issue, among fears that such a measure could further alienate Thailand's Muslim minority, particularly in the country's south where a

revival of separatist sentiment had erupted in renewed anti-Bangkok insurgency since 2004. Critics pointed to the way that in the 1970s a similar impulse towards Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka had stimulated the rise of Tamil separatism and terrorism. In early June, though, the Constitution Drafting Council rejected the idea of instituting a Buddhist state.⁴

Thailand's protracted political crisis, combined with investment restrictions (including proposed new rules on foreign ownership of Thai companies, which would increase penalties for overseas companies using local nominees to circumvent limits on foreign shareholding) and capital controls introduced by the interim government, undermined the confidence of investors and consumers. In early May, Finance Minister Chalongphob Sussangkarn admitted that the prevailing political uncertainty had become the biggest threat to the economy, which was also suffering from increased oil prices and a cyclical slowdown.⁵

Following the 2006 coup, the military set up a Constitutional Tribunal charged with investigating allegations that the TRT and other parties, notably the opposition Democrats, had been guilty of gross malpractices in the April 2006 general election. On 30 May, the Tribunal ordered the TRT's dissolution and banned Thaksin together with 110 senior TRT officials from political participation for five years.⁶ But the judgement also absolved the opposition Democrat Party of all charges and was widely interpreted as a highly politicized ruling aimed at breaking the TRT's power and re-establishing a system of government based on coalitions of relatively weak parties, and in which the military and monarchy would have important arbitrating roles.

With its extensive social programmes the TRT nevertheless remained Thailand's most popular political party. Though the 30 May ruling temporarily removed the TRT's leading lights from politics, around 250 former TRT members of parliament remained eligible for re-election. It was widely — and correctly — anticipated that the party would reconstitute under a different name but with broadly the same populist agenda.

Following the removal in mid-July of the ban on political activity, on 19 August a popular referendum on the new constitution saw a 58 per cent turnout and a decisive 57 per cent vote in its favour.⁷ With the Constitution approved, during the four-month interval before the election announced for 23 December, TRT members regrouped as the People's Power Party (PPP), under the leadership of a veteran right-wing, populist politician, 72-year-old Samak Sundaravej, who many saw as a proxy for Thaksin.

All parties made populist promises to Thailand's rural voters during the election campaign. The Democrat Party aspired to lead the next government in

coalition with minor parties, and a PPP victory was never assumed to be inevitable. However, the Democrats were unable to make significant inroads beyond their established support bases in the south and Bangkok into the TRT's heartland constituencies in the north and northeast. There, the PPP as the TRT's successor was now the natural party of choice.

Despite the junta's efforts to interfere with the PPP's campaign (notably through a leaked "classified order" accusing the party of *lèse-majesté*), the party emerged with the largest number of House of Representatives seats. However, while the PPP gained 226 seats against the Democrats' 166, it did not hold an outright majority and could not automatically form the new administration.⁸ It was not until January 2008 that the PPP was able to agree to a coalition with five smaller parties, leaving the Democrats as the opposition. Prime Minister Samak's government, which took office in early February 2008, includes controversial political figures such as Sanan Kajornprasart (Deputy Prime Minister) and Chalerm Yoobamrung (Interior Minister), but many of its members are politically inexperienced associates of Thaksin.

While Samak Sundaravej may possess sufficient political drive to pursue his own course as prime minister, there are good reasons for thinking that Thaksin will exert considerable behind-the-scenes influence on the PPP government. Indeed, Thaksin's wife, Khunying Pojaman Shinawatra, who had left Thailand in August, returned in early January 2008. Like Thaksin she faced corruption charges; though arrested on arrival in Bangkok, she was quickly released on bail and reportedly played a significant part in deciding the Cabinet's composition. Thaksin himself denied that he planned a political comeback, but with massive resources at his disposal it seemed possible that he might return and then seek to overturn his and his former TRT colleagues' political disqualification, setting the stage for a major political showdown with Establishment political forces, led informally by Privy Councillor Prem Tinsulanond. Combined with the monarchy's unclear succession mechanism, this suggested that continuing political uncertainty was likely.

Thailand's Southern Insurgency

Early hopes that Thailand's military junta would adopt a significantly new approach to the unrest in the country's south were misplaced. The bombings, arson and shootings that continued unabated through late 2006 and into 2007 made it clear that the problem of the Muslim separatist insurgency was deep-rooted. Indeed, the conflict escalated, with more than 450 conflict-related deaths recorded during 2007 (compared with less than 300 during the previous year), bringing to 2,700

the total killed since January 2004.⁹ Though the junta had indicated initially that it might end emergency rule, which allows draconian civil rights restrictions in the three violence-wracked provinces, in the event it was repeatedly extended at three-monthly intervals during 2007.

The rebels made increasingly determined attacks on government security forces and on infrastructure including railway lines and power supplies. The insurgents, who according to the Thai authorities comprised most importantly Runda Kumpulan Kecil (RKK) operational cells directed by the Barisan Revolusi Nasional–Coordinate (National Revolutionary Front–Coordinated), continued to demonstrate tactical ingenuity. For example, they introduced new types of trigger for improvised explosive devices in response to the security forces' blocking of mobile telephone signals, the previously favoured means of exploding roadside bombs aimed at army and police patrols. There were frequent arson attacks on schools, health posts, and government offices. In mid-February, the insurgents attacked ethnic Chinese businesses: twenty-nine bombs in bars, restaurants and hotels killed three people.¹⁰

Simultaneously, there seemed to be a danger of more open communal conflict as tit-for-tat murders of Buddhists and Muslims (including Islamic teachers and students) became more frequent. Communities in worst-affected districts lost faith in Bangkok's ability to protect them, and began arming themselves. With 30,000 troops already in the three southernmost provinces, in late April it was reported that the government planned to deploy a further 15,000 personnel, particularly to protect lines of communication. At the same time, however, Bangkok relied increasingly on "army rangers", poorly trained, locally recruited militia troops who have earned a reputation in the south for killing innocent civilians and other abuses. Security force operations intensified during the second half of the year, resulting in the detention of scores of RKK operatives. But these efforts made little discernible impact on the tempo or scale of insurgent operations.

Despite the intensifying conflict in the south and the failure of their initial efforts at reconciliation there, the CNS and Surayud's administration were evidently still interested in finding a peaceful solution. In April, Sonthi reacted quickly and negatively to an offer from Major-General David Fridovich, U.S. Pacific Command's Special Operations Commander, to send U.S. troops to assist Thai forces in the south. Fearing the potentially counterproductive effects of such a deployment, Sonthi turned down the offer and emphasized that the conflict was an "internal affair".¹¹ Shortly afterwards, Surayud revealed that Bangkok was considering an amnesty for rebels who came over to the government side and during May claimed that his government was still pursuing dialogue with

the insurgents. Though there was no sign of progress in negotiations during the remainder of 2007, amidst the worsening conflict international non-government organizations (NGOs) and the Malaysian Government continued to facilitate contact between Bangkok and the rebels.

On 20 December, days before the general election, the junta's National Legislative Assembly enacted an Internal Security Act, giving the Internal Security Operations Command extensive powers to impose curfews and house arrest, and to curtail freedom of movement. It seemed unlikely that there would be any major change in policy under Samak's administration. The new government's interior minister initially indicated that it might be willing to grant a degree of autonomy to a "special administrative region" in the south, but he withdrew his suggestion after Prime Minister Samak called it "dangerous".¹²

Continuing Instability and Insecurity in the Philippines

Like Thailand, during 2007 the Philippines suffered instability at the political centre and serious security problems in the south. At the centre, where an atmosphere of political crisis had become the norm since soon after President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's election in 2004, the administration faced continuing opposition to its attempts to change the Constitution fundamentally to allow a unicameral parliamentary government, economic liberalization, decentralization of national government, and empowerment of local administrations. Political opponents continued to mount legal challenges to the President, and an inept coup attempt in November highlighted persistent rumbling discontent within the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) officer corps. In this latest military rebellion, which loyal forces quickly subdued without casualties, navy lieutenant Antonio Trillanes (who had been elected to the Senate from prison in the May 2007 elections) and other personnel on trial for their part in the 2003 "Oakwood Mutiny" broke out of court and seized control of Manila's Peninsula Hotel, calling for Arroyo's overthrow because of her alleged corruption and abuses of power.¹³

Against the backdrop of seemingly perpetual political intrigue in Manila, counter-insurgency continued to preoccupy the Philippines' security forces. Despite President Arroyo's June 2006 declaration of an "all-out assault" on the New People's Army (NPA) aimed at achieving victory within two years, it seemed unlikely that the communist insurgents could be defeated easily or quickly. During 2007, the NPA maintained its campaign of assassination, extortion, and raids on military and police posts throughout the country. The detention in the Netherlands of José Maria Sison, founder of the Communist Party of the Philippines, for

two weeks in August and September seems to have temporarily demoralized elements of the NPA, but at the end of the year the communist rebels ignored the government's declaration of a three-week "offensive ceasefire" and intensified their operations, with a 100-strong guerrilla force attacking a police station on Samar on 24 December.

However, the complex problem of separatist rebellion in the Philippines' south represented a far more serious security challenge for Manila. During 2007, government forces notched significant successes against the relatively small but nevertheless highly aggressive, criminally inclined insurgent-cum-terrorist band known as the Abu Sayyaf ("Sword of God") Group (ASG), which had been responsible for a series of kidnappings-for-ransom and bombings since 2000, and had killed an estimated 400 civilians over the previous decade and a half. By early 2007, Oplan Ultimatum, the most important offensive by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in the south since 2002–2003, had substantially weakened the ASG. Launched in August 2006 and concluded in April 2007, among its important objectives was the elimination or capture of ASG leader Khaddafy Janjalani (brother of its founder, Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani), as well as Dulmatin and Umar Patek, two Indonesian members of the regionwide terrorist group, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), who were implicated in the 2002 Bali bombings. In exchange for sanctuary, these and other JI bomb-makers had apparently trained members of Philippine terrorist groups including the ASG in their lethal craft. In January, the AFP confirmed that Khaddafy Janjalani had died in a battle the previous September.¹⁴ Also in January, the AFP also eliminated Abu Sulaiman alias Jainal Antel Sali Jr, who the Philippine authorities blamed for several terrorist bombings including the 2004 attack on SuperFerry 14 which killed more than 100 passengers.¹⁵ Overall, the AFP claimed that by late January the continuing offensive had led to the deaths of seventy-two ASG members, including six senior figures, and the capture of another twenty-eight.

The AFP's successes were due partly to the effectiveness of army and marine commanders and a change in tactics involving deployment of small special forces teams able to fight around-the-clock, denying ASG personnel their previous freedom of movement at night. But U.S. support evidently played a key role. From the beginning of Oplan Ultimatum, the Pentagon provided support and advice to the AFP through the 150-strong, forward-deployed Joint Special Operations Task Force–Philippines. The U.S. surveillance and intelligence-gathering aircraft helped track the ASG on land and at sea, where U.S. Navy advisers have assisted an AFP blockade of Jolo aimed at preventing insurgents from escaping. Nevertheless, around 350 ASG members remained at large, including five groups

totalling around 200 men in Jolo's rugged interior in the vicinity of Tubora Hill. Another 150 were on other islands in the Sulu archipelago such as Tawi-Tawi, or on Mindanao. In early February, the AFP claimed that captured ASG personnel had revealed that twelve JI members comprising Indonesians, Malaysians of Muslim Filipino parentage, and a Singaporean were embedded in the ASG contingents in the Sulu islands. One significant JI figure, known as Gufran, was killed in January in a battle at sea with Philippine Navy commandoes.¹⁶

Manila and Washington clearly needed to maintain the momentum of the U.S.-supported AFP campaign against the ASG if the group was to be defeated; in early February, AFP Chief of Staff General Hermogenes Esperon Jr. emphasized that the Sulu operation was his "chief preoccupation".¹⁷ Several days earlier an incident in which the AFP attacked and dispersed a nine-strong ASG/JI cell, apparently intent on attacking targets in Metro-Manila, highlighted the danger that the rebels still posed. The AFP focused on neutralizing the remaining ASG commanders, notably the elderly Radullan Sahiron alias Kumander Putol, but also Isnilon Hapilon, Abu Pula, and Tandah Sahibul, as well as the two leading JI figures, Dulmatin and Umar Patek. In mid-February, Manila deployed additional marines, supported by armoured vehicles and artillery, to Sulu. At the strategic level, the AFP summed up its counter-insurgency approach to the ASG as one of "clear, hold, develop". With the ASG pushed into the interior, much of Jolo was at the "hold" stage, with the AFP establishing local militias including ASG members who had been "turned". In February General Esperon warned that new terrorist leaders could emerge from the remnants of the ASG unless development projects were sustained in the south. Washington and Manila evidently recognized this, and there was large-scale U.S. support for such projects. The U.S. Agency for International Development sponsored the GEM ("Growth with Equity in Mindanao") programme, involving port and road upgrading, rural solar power, agricultural training, and school and health projects. In the combat zone on Jolo, U.S. special forces played a key role in implementing development projects. In February–March 2007, an exercise in the bilateral Balikatan series involved U.S. and Philippine forces in joint development projects in the south.¹⁸

Sustained military and development approaches to defeating the ASG, involving continuing U.S. support because of Manila's limited military and developmental resources, were clearly vital elements in resolving the security problem in the south. However, a broad political settlement of the larger-scale issue of Muslim separatism was also needed badly. Recognizing this, Manila's new Secretary for Defence, Hermogenes Ebdane Jr., speaking in February 2007 soon after his appointment, advocated a "holistic approach" aimed at addressing

socio-economic, political and religious concerns as the most effective way to end the insurgencies that have plagued the country since the 1970s. Though the AFP emphasized that combat operations would continue, Oplan Ultimatum II, launched in July, involved notably greater emphasis on civic action projects.

Meanwhile, the ASG demonstrated its resilience. In late April, it captured and beheaded seven civilian road workers on Jolo.¹⁹ During May, security forces blamed the ASG's JI associates for bombings in Tacurong, Mindanao, and Cotobato City, which they saw as intended to undermine local elections. On 10 July, the AFP suffered a major setback when insurgents on Basilan killed fourteen marines out of a larger group who were searching for an Italian priest kidnapped a month earlier, beheading ten of their corpses.²⁰ While the authorities initially implicated the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the killings, they soon blamed the ASG instead. The AFP launched a full-scale offensive in response to the killings and, between August and the end of the year, it engaged the ASG in several major clashes. In November, a bombing at the Philippine Congress attributed to the ASG killed Congressman Wahab Akbar, a former Basilan governor and one-time senior member of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF).²¹

The AFP's tactical successes against the ASG were heartening for the embattled Arroyo administration, but it seemed unlikely that Manila could defeat the rebels fully without more determined efforts to resolve the wider political issue of Moro (southern Philippine Muslim) separatism. However, there was no immediate prospect of a final settlement between the Philippine government and the MILF, which had entered into a fragile ceasefire with Manila in 2001. During 2006, successive rounds of exploratory talks between Manila and the MILF, brokered by Malaysia on behalf of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), collapsed over the issue of the extent of the Muslim Moro people's "ancestral domain", as Manila repeatedly sought extensions of deadlines for its responses to MILF proposals. In late January 2007, the MILF claimed that the peace process was "at a standstill" because of the government's prevarication. This breakdown in the peace process reinforced tension between the two sides, already running high after conflict between government-sponsored militias and the MILF earlier in the year. By now, interested external parties were growing increasingly frustrated over the slow pace of the peace process. Malaysia threatened to withdraw the International Monitoring Team (including Bruneian and Libyan as well as Malaysian military observers, and a Japanese civilian official). In mid-February, the European Union (EU) ambassador to Manila and other EU officials, civilian and military representatives of the United States, and Japanese diplomats met MILF leaders for detailed discussions. The EU offered to facilitate peace

negotiations, while Japan indicated willingness to deploy peacekeeping troops in support of a settlement.

Although the mainstream MILF command repeatedly distanced itself from the ASG and other extremist rebel groups in the south, Manila continued to allege that MILF elements were contravening the 2001 ceasefire. In early February, for example, the AFP blamed the MILF for a raid that freed forty-eight inmates including several alleged terrorists from jail in Kidapawan City in North Cotabato province.²² In mid-February, the Philippine National Police claimed that the MILF's Special Operations Group was plotting with the ASG to stage bomb attacks in Manila in a repeat of the 2005 Valentine's Day attacks that killed seven and wounded 150 in the capital. The Basilan ambush during July, and a clash between MILF and government forces in Maguindanao province in late September, hardly improved bilateral relations but neither did these incidents seriously destabilize the two sides' interest in seeking a settlement.

The success of resumed peace talks in October allowed Manila to announce that agreement had been reached on mutually acceptable boundaries for the Muslim ancestral domain on Mindanao. By the following month, it seemed possible that Manila and the MILF could achieve a comprehensive peace settlement by August 2008, with preliminary agreements being signed earlier in the year. Obstacles remained, however. The MNLF, which the OIC recognizes as the only legitimate representative of the Moro people, will need to be included in any peace settlement if it is to be credible and durable. Though a political platform shared by the MILF and the MNLF has remained elusive, in December 2007 an attempt at mediation by Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, son of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, led the two organizations to agree to attempt to resolve their differences.²³

However, the MNLF remains dissatisfied with the implementation of its 1996 Final Peace Settlement with Manila, and there seems little prospect of a wider-ranging and more inclusive settlement until outstanding concerns are satisfied. Moreover, during 2007 MNLF forces clashed with AFP troops involved in Oplan Ultimatum, against a background of suspicion that the MNLF is sheltering ASG members in its compounds which, under the terms of the 1996 agreement, government forces are not allowed to search. However, a tripartite meeting involving the Philippine government, MNLF and OIC in Jeddah in November led to agreement on a thoroughgoing review of the 1996 Settlement.

In the absence of a wider political settlement in the south, the frustration of Moro aspirations will continue providing a reservoir of support for the ASG and other extremist groups, which will benefit from the tacit connivance of elements

in both the MNLF and MILF. The AFP's tactical military victories may grab the headlines, but even when backed by well-funded development projects, they are almost certainly inadequate to resolve a conflict rooted in the frustration of the Moro quest for self-determination.

Malaysia: New Volatility?

Though usually considered one of Southeast Asia's more predictable polities, Malaysia displayed new instability during 2007, which marked the fiftieth anniversary of the country's independence from Britain in 1957. Since then, the same conservative nationalist party (the United Malays National Organization) has dominated Malaysian politics through a series of coalition administrations. The new instability reflected disillusionment with the performance of the government led by Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi. Abdullah succeeded Dr Mahathir Mohamad as prime minister in October 2003; a landslide general election victory in March 2004 gave his Barisan Nasional coalition 92 per cent of parliamentary seats, resoundingly reinforcing his legitimacy as national leader. However, while he had promised to deal with the key problems of corruption and crime, most Malaysians perceived little if any progress. At the same time, many ethnic minority Malaysians increasingly questioned the way that the Malay-dominated coalition perpetuated the Malay majority population's overwhelming economic and social advantages.

During November, two major anti-government demonstrations unnerved Abdullah's administration ahead of a general election expected in early 2008. On 10 November, as many as 40,000 Malaysians joined a rally supported by opposition parties and organized by BERSIH, the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections, with the aim of submitting to the Yang di-Pertuan Agong (King) a petition listing specific demands (the use of invisible ink, a clean-up of the registered voters' roll, the abolition of postal votes, and access to government-controlled mass media for opposition parties).²⁴ The authorities' reaction to this rally was heavy-handed, as was the case later in the month when police broke up a demonstration by tens of thousands of ethnic Indian Malaysians led by HINDRAF, the Hindu Rights Action Force, a coalition of thirty NGOs galvanized by concern over the demolition of Hindu temples and the perceived imposition of *shari'a*-based law. The police arrested HINDRAF leaders after the rally, and detained five under the Internal Security Act.²⁵

Discontent with the government and the November 2007 demonstrations formed a livelier-than-usual backdrop to the general elections expected in early 2008, a year earlier than strictly necessary, because Abdullah Badawi's administration

evidently wished to seek a renewed popular mandate before former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim (who had been imprisoned in 1999 and released in 2004) was allowed to return to politics in April 2008. Anwar has acted as “adviser” to the opposition Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR, People’s Justice Party), led by his wife Dr Wan Azizah. Another reason for early elections may be the expectation that the looming U.S. recession would impact negatively on Malaysia’s own economy.

Indonesia: Consolidating Stability

The 2005 Helsinki peace accord on Aceh, which the catastrophic impact of the 26 December 2004 tsunami on the province galvanized, represented a major triumph for President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s Indonesian government. Following the disarmament of GAM (Free Aceh Movement) insurgents and the withdrawal of non-organic Indonesian forces, in July 2006 Indonesia’s House of Representatives endorsed a governance law enshrining Aceh’s autonomous status. It also allowed for independent candidates to stand in Aceh’s provincial elections in December 2006. In these elections Irwandi Yusuf and Mohammad Nazar, both GAM members, won decisively and, consequently, became governor and vice-governor respectively. In January 2007, Irwandi Yusuf underlined his political pragmatism when he promised to oppose Aceh’s separation from Indonesia, a remarkable concession given GAM’s protracted and dogged armed resistance to Indonesian rule.

Problems remained in Aceh, however. The crucial issues of sharing political power and resource wealth between Jakarta and Aceh were still to be resolved. During April, Indonesia’s Home Affairs Ministry produced a draft document giving Jakarta the lead in thirty-one policy areas, provoking Governor Irwandi Yusuf to protest. At the same time, there was growing popular frustration over the slow pace of post-tsunami reconstruction, and activists accused the Aceh-Nias Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Agency of corruption and inefficiency. There was also anger among demobilized GAM guerillas and over delays in the payment of “reintegration funds”. In late January, more than 500 former GAM members attacked buildings and vehicles in Bireun, 140 kilometres from the provincial capital, Banda Aceh.²⁶ Finding employment for former GAM members constituted a major challenge for Irwandi Yusuf’s administration. In February, the governor went so far as to suggest that ex-insurgents were willing to serve in the Indonesian armed forces (TNI) and police. Civil unrest erupted again in late March over the results of a run-off vote in West Aceh, underlining the province’s

continuing political volatility. There was sporadic violence later in the year, but never any danger of more general conflict. There was concern in Jakarta, particularly among senior military officers, in July over the re-establishment of GAM as a political party. The movement seemed likely to constitute Aceh's most important political force. However, while it evidently still harboured long-term separatist ambitions, the successful implementation of Aceh's special status as agreed at Helsinki offered the possibility that genuine autonomy might satisfy both GAM and Aceh's people.

The settlement in Aceh left Papua, where many among the largely Melanesian population continued to resent Jakarta's rule, as the only Indonesian province with a significant active separatist campaign. Clashes between OPM (Organisasi Merdeka Papua, or Papua Freedom Movement) and Indonesian forces continued during 2007 and a settlement accommodating the aspirations of Papua's indigenous people is not a near-term prospect. In early 2007 renewed offensives led by TNI special forces in response to OPM's killing of two Indonesian officers displaced thousands of people in the central highland region of Puncak Jaya.²⁷ While the Indonesian authorities continued to suppress manifestations of Papuan nationalism, such as OPM's "Morning Star" flag, political leaders and bodies representing the indigenous Papuan people emphasized during 2007 that Jakarta's offer of "special autonomy" for Papua was unacceptable as an alternative to the full independence they still sought. Against this background of continuing discontent, in September Indonesia's Parliament approved Jakarta's plans to enlarge its already substantial garrison of 12,000 troops and 2,500 paramilitary police in Papua, reflecting concern over not only separatism but also a supposed potential for foreign intervention in the resource-rich province.

Jemaah Islamiyah on the Run

The Malino Accords of 2001–2002 largely brought under control the Muslim-Christian communal conflicts that plagued Maluku and central Sulawesi in eastern Indonesia at the beginning of the decade. However, in the district of Poso in central Sulawesi, local members of the terrorist organization Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and *mujahidin* from elsewhere in Indonesia subsequently mounted a campaign of violence against Christians, including bombings (one killing twenty-two people in Tentena market in May 2005), targeted assassinations, and in October 2005 the beheading of three teenage girls. Though this renewed violence in Poso has been geographically restricted and sporadic, it has represented a major focus for continuing activity by JI, which still comprises at least 900 members

across Indonesia despite the success of the Indonesian and other Southeast Asian security agencies, with substantial Australian and other extra-regional support, in apprehending key operatives since the 2002 Bali bombings.²⁸

A round-up of terrorist suspects in Poso in January 2007, in which fourteen militants and one police officer died, apparently resulted in the elimination of the JI unit there and a significant improvement in the security of the district. It also led the Indonesian police to mount raids in central and east Java, the JI heartland, in late March resulting in one suspect being killed and seven arrested (included members of a cell allegedly responsible for the 2004 attack on the Australian embassy in Jakarta), as well as the discovery of a large explosives and weapons cache including more than 70 kilograms of TNT, detonators, M-16 rifles, and ammunition. Captured JI members and documents revealed details of the organization and strength of the group's military wing on Java, which was organized in four districts: Surakarta, Semarang, Surabaya, and Jakarta. The Indonesian authorities claimed that this military wing had held training exercises on the Javanese volcano, Mt Sumbing, and was ready to launch attacks. Prominent among the group's plans was allegedly the assassination of key figures who opposed it, including senior police officers, state prosecutors and judges, and possibly foreign diplomats as well.

These revelations tallied with reports in 2006 of a split in JI, broadly between a minority faction led by the Malaysian Noordin Top which had been responsible for the large bombings in Jakarta and Bali since 2003 and favoured continued suicide bombings against Western targets and who styled themselves, among other titles, the Thoifah Muqatilah (Combat Unit), and a mainstream group preferred to focus on transforming Indonesia into an Islamic state. Despite the split, the mainstream organization may have protected Noordin Top's splinter group from the Indonesian security forces in return for a "no-bombing pledge". The mainstream JI's emphasis was on expanded recruitment, indoctrination, and the establishment of geographical bases rather than possibly counter-productive attacks causing indiscriminate casualties. It was the military wing of this mainstream JI organization which the authorities uncovered — but by no means neutralized — in early 2007. Some reports gave the misleading impression that the Javanese military wing and its offshoot in Poso were all that remained of JI, overlooking the fact that the organization also continued to maintain cells in other parts of Indonesia, particularly Sumatra.

In raids in Java in June, the Indonesian police counter-terrorist unit, Detachment-88, captured key JI leaders including Abu Dujana, Zarkashih, and Aris Widodo.²⁹ Their trials began in December. While the apprehension of these

important suspects almost certainly circumscribed JI's operational capacity, senior figures remained at large. Apart from Noordin Top, these included Umar Patek and Dulmatin in the southern Philippines, though unconfirmed reports suggested that the two men had been injured in a clash with the AFP in August and that Dulmatin may have died.³⁰

Maritime security had become a major concern for Southeast Asian governments and particularly Jakarta in 2004, following an upsurge in attacks by pirates in the Malacca Strait and in other Indonesian waters, which provoked anxiety among Western states over the potential for maritime terrorism in the region. Responding to user states' concerns and particularly the Pentagon's Regional Maritime Security Initiative, Indonesia and the other Malacca Strait littoral states, Malaysia and Singapore, significantly enhanced and coordinated their responses to piracy and potential maritime terrorism. However, the peace settlement in Aceh also played a major part in the dramatic decline in recorded piracy in the Malacca Strait since 2005. This decline continued during 2007. In April, U.S. Pacific Commander Admiral Timothy Keating asserted that security in the Malacca Strait had "vastly improved" over the previous five years.

Timor-Leste: Saving a Failing State

Following Timor-Leste's political upheaval of 2006, which saw an Australian-led military intervention to restore order in the wake of the collapse of Timor-Leste's security forces, 2007 was relatively calm and witnessed the victory of moderate political personalities. In February, José Ramos-Horta, the former resistance leader and Nobel laureate who had acted as Prime Minister since the resignation of Mari Alkatiri in June 2006, announced he would contest the presidential election scheduled for May as an independent candidate. Among seven other candidates, the leading contender was the Fretilin party's Francisco Guterres, a former resistance fighter. In the event, Ramos-Horta won a stunning victory with more than 70 per cent of the vote.

Meanwhile, President Xanana Gusmao, who had already said that he would not seek re-election to the largely ceremonial post he had held since 2002, announced in March that he would stand for election to Parliament in elections in June as leader of the newly formed National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (CNRT) party, positioning him to assume the much more powerful post of prime minister. The new party's choice of initials outraged leaders of the hitherto dominant Fretilin party, as it clearly represented an attempt to borrow the legitimacy associated with the original CNRT, the National Council for Timorese Resistance, which had led and

coordinated opposition to Indonesia's occupation. Fretilin won the largest number of seats in the parliamentary election, but lacked sufficient representation to form a government on its own. After weeks of wrangling, in early August President Ramos-Horta appointed Gusmao as prime minister of a coalition government comprising the CNRT and several smaller parties.

The presence of both international police under the UN Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste, and Australian and New Zealand troops forming an International Stabilization Force (outside UN control) remained vital for containing sporadic continuing violence perpetrated by criminal gangs and supporters of political factions. On 22 February, the day that the UN Security Council voted unanimously to extend the Integrated Mission's mandate for a further year and to provide more than 1,400 additional police officers for the 2007 elections, 38 UN vehicles were attacked as international police attempted to prevent gang-fighting; 117 people were arrested. In early March, Australian troops clashed with supporters of fugitive army rebel leader Alfredo Reinado, killing four rebels. Nevertheless, Ramos-Horta (then acting prime minister) subsequently announced that the government had called off the manhunt for Reinado, apparently in the hope of relaxing tensions before the elections. During and after the parliamentary elections, there was sporadic politically motivated violence. Reinado remained at large, but in August reportedly met Ramos-Horta to discuss reconciliation. However, over the following months, negotiations intended to facilitate his return to the army with the proviso that he first stand trial were fruitless.

Myanmar: ASEAN's Pariah State

During August and September 2007, an upsurge of peaceful popular protest led by Buddhist monks gripped global attention and stimulated hopes for pro-democratic regime change in Myanmar. However, the willingness of the military State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) regime led by its chairman, Senior-General Than Shwe, to use violence to suppress the opposition, combined with the likely ineffectiveness of Western sanctions in the face of continued Chinese and other Asian support for the regime, did not bode well for political change in the short-to medium-term.

The immediate trigger for the protests that began on 19 August, when 400 people led by pro-democracy activists marched in Yangon, Myanmar's largest city, was the government's unexpected decision on 15 August to reduce fuel subsidies drastically at a time when annual inflation had already reached 40 per cent.³¹ This element of a reform package supported by the International Monetary

Fund and the World Bank, aimed at reducing the government's extremely high budget deficit, had the effect of doubling petrol and diesel prices, and — even more dramatically — increased the price of compressed gas used to power buses by a factor of five. Public transport fares increased overnight and there was a knock-on effect on the price of staples such as rice and cooking oil. Despite the arrest of demonstrators, there were further protests in other towns such as Sittwe as well as Yangon. In early September, troops injured three monks and arrested others who had joined protestors in Pakokku near Mandalay. In retaliation, monks there briefly took thirteen senior officials and military officers hostage for several hours and burnt their vehicles.

With the expiry on 17 September of a deadline the Pakokku monks had set for a government apology, protests erupted in Yangon and elsewhere. Eventually, tens of thousands of monks took part in these peaceful demonstrations. The monks also effectively “excommunicated” military officers and their families by refusing to accept alms from them. Though the regime's failure to apologize for the Pakokku incident was the catalyst, the protests were also aimed at the SPDC's political repression and failure to prevent the extreme economic hardship, which characterized the lives of most Burmese. The previously unheard-of Alliance of All-Burma Buddhist Monks emerged as the coordinating body behind the protests, and on 21 September claimed that the SPDC was “the enemy of the people”. Its declared aim was to remove the regime from power. Despite the military's efforts since the early 1990s to control religious bodies, the silence of senior abbots in the face of these mass demonstrations indicated their acquiescence in the monks' revolt.

Given that 80–90 per cent of Myanmar's population is Buddhist and that the monks have played key roles at turning-points in the country's modern history, including anti-colonial protests in the 1930s and the popular uprising against dictator Ne Win's regime in 1988, the SPDC had every reason to worry that these latest protests might escalate to threaten its hold on power. On 22 September, Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD) which had decisively won elections in 1990, who had spent twelve of the previous eighteen years under house arrest, appeared outside her house to acknowledge more than 500 monks and sympathizers who had converged there. Mobile phones and digital cameras captured this event, inspiring NLD members and ordinary Burmese to respond positively to the monks' calls for them to join the protests.³²

Doubtless fearing a repeat of 1988, when large numbers of pro-democracy demonstrators came onto the streets and an ensuing army crackdown took more than 3,000 lives, the SPDC predictably acted to defend the political status quo against forces that threatened not just its own position but also — in its view

— national unity. Unlike in 1988, this time Myanmar’s security forces acted in a relatively calculated manner. The crackdown was nevertheless extremely effective. On 24 September, General Thura Myint Maung, Minister for Religious Affairs, appeared on television to threaten “action” against the monks, and army vehicles were soon deployed across Yangon to announce a curfew. Arrests of pro-democracy activists followed quickly, and on 26 September the army and police took control of Yangon’s iconic Shwedagon pagoda. Riot police attacked demonstrators with smoke bombs and canes, and troops fired live rounds over their heads. Troops raided monasteries across Yangon, beating and detaining monks. On 27 September, the army shot dead a number of demonstrators. While the regime admitted to 10 fatalities (including a Japanese journalist who was shot at point-blank range), the actual figure may have been as high as 200. The authorities apparently arrested around 3,000 monks and other demonstrators and activists at this stage, by which time the security forces’ crackdown had effectively ended the revolt.³³

Particularly because of the ubiquity of mobile telephones and the Internet, the drama in Myanmar received graphic coverage in the media worldwide, which carried images of monks who had been shot dead and of troops killing Japanese journalist Kenji Nagai. There was widespread international condemnation of the SPDC regime’s suppression of the protests and its rejection of the demonstrators’ demands. Western states’ reactions to events in Myanmar were strident. The United States, which has attempted to promote democracy in what it still calls “Burma” through the imposition of economic sanctions (notably in 2003 against the import of garments produced in Myanmar) and by funding opposition groups, announced new sanctions — including an expanded visa ban — targeted at the “leaders of the regime and their financial backers”. The First Lady, Laura Bush, took a personal interest in the Myanmar issue, calling in an op-ed piece published in early October for Myanmar’s generals to join the “peaceful transition to democracy or get out of the way”. For its part, the European Union broadened sanctions that already included visa bans and asset freezes on senior military officers, officials, and their families, and to take additional measures targeting Myanmar’s timber, metals and gemstone sectors. Its position hardened by the killing of Kenji Nagai, Japan — which still gives Myanmar development aid (US\$25 million in 2006) — announced that it would cancel plans to build a “human resources centre” in Yangon.³⁴

While these additional sanctions may impact on Myanmar’s economy and make life less comfortable for the SPDC elite, the regime’s crucial economic links with China meant that the new punitive measures were unlikely to bring it to its knees. More than 700 Chinese businesses operate in Myanmar, dominating urban property markets, as well as the forestry, gem-mining, mineral exploitation, and

construction sectors. China is the regime's main source of military equipment. Though reports that China is constructing "military bases" in Myanmar are almost certainly erroneous, there is no doubt that Beijing has important strategic interests there, particularly in terms of energy supply: as well as seeking to exploit natural gas reserves there, in mid-September Beijing approved a pipeline project which will involve transshipment of Middle East oil supplies through Myanmar, thus avoiding the Malacca Strait. Beijing is likely to be keen, ahead of the 2008 Olympic Games, to avoid international opprobrium for supporting the SPDC, and may have attempted — possibly successfully — to curb the brutality of the junta's repression. However, there was no indication that China was willing to sacrifice its economic and strategic stake in Myanmar.

India's relations with Myanmar have also grown apace since the mid-1990s, when New Delhi reversed its earlier policy of attempting to isolate the junta in order to balance China's burgeoning role, protect the security of India's northeastern provinces against ethnic minority insurgents, and develop economic ties. Significantly, in the midst of the September upheaval India's petroleum minister, Murli Deora, visited Myanmar's capital, Naypyidaw, to discuss energy cooperation. This all-round bilateral relationship with India will benefit the SPDC as it attempts to brazen out international criticism.

The United Nations attempted to assert itself in relation to the crisis in Myanmar but seemed unlikely to influence the SPDC decisively. Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon despatched a special envoy, Ibrahim Gambari, who engaged in shuttle diplomacy between the SPDC and Aung San Suu Kyi in early October. Than Shwe told Gambari that he would meet Aung San Suu Kyi if she ceased promoting "confrontation, utter devastation, economic sanctions on Myanmar, other sanctions". On 11 October, the UN Security Council issued a statement, agreed unanimously, deploring the SPDC's "use of violence against peaceful demonstrators" and calling on the regime and other parties to "work together toward a de-escalation of the situation and a peaceful solution". This represented a diluted version of an original draft by Western powers, which had called directly for democracy in Myanmar. China and Russia rejected this, arguing that the crisis was an internal matter that did not threaten regional or international security. Gambari visited Myanmar again in November, but failed to persuade the SPDC to join a trilateral meeting with himself and Aung San Suu Kyi. Nevertheless, in February 2008 the junta announced plans for a referendum on a new constitution in May 2008, and democratic multi-party elections in 2010. However, many observers expected that the military would use every resource at its disposal to ensure that its role as political arbiter endured.³⁵

Challenges for ASEAN

For the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which Myanmar joined in 1997, the SPDC's crackdown on dissent represented a flagrant breach of the norms that the grouping claims to see as key to the ASEAN Community which it aims to establish by 2015. In November 2007, a summit meeting of the Association in Singapore adopted the ASEAN Charter, which called among other things for the promotion of human rights and good governance, as well as the strengthening of democratic institutions.³⁶ But taking action to implement these principles in Myanmar's case has proved difficult for ASEAN. The Association's membership is eclectic, and there is little consensus on how to deal with the challenge that developments in Myanmar pose to its credibility as an effective regional institution. Members with democratic political systems — Indonesia and the Philippines — favour a tough stance towards the SPDC. At the other end of the spectrum, the relatively new members — Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam — share Myanmar's authoritarianism and have no interest in promoting change there. Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand have significant economic interests in Myanmar which they wish to protect and are concerned over the probably destabilizing effects on regional security of rapid democratization.

With Singapore in the chair, following the SPDC's crackdown ASEAN issued its strongest-ever condemnation of a member, calling on Myanmar's junta immediately to cease its repression, which had "appalled" fellow ASEAN states. But despite anguished calls for firm action from intellectuals in the region who wanted the Association to live up to its ideals in its fortieth anniversary year and on the eve of the crucial November summit, ASEAN's Secretary-General, Ong Keng Yong, rejected any notion of suspending Myanmar's membership. Ong argued that while there could be "no business as usual", it was important for ASEAN to use its link with the SPDC to impress on Myanmar's generals the depth of international disapproval. ASEAN would press for Aung San Suu Kyi's release from house arrest to facilitate negotiations over Myanmar's political future, he said. Given the diversity of outlooks within ASEAN it would have been difficult for the grouping to adopt a more strident posture while retaining its cohesion. Nevertheless, ASEAN's apparently ineffectual stance brought it criticism within and beyond Southeast Asia.

A combination of pragmatic collaboration on economic, political and sometimes security matters, and tensions over diverse issues (often deeply rooted in historical suspicions towards neighbours) has always characterized relations among ASEAN's diverse members. There has been tentative movement towards

formalized multilateral politico-security cooperation between ASEAN members — seen in the inauguration of ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meetings (the second of which was held in November 2007), efforts to establish an ASEAN Security Community as one of three constituent elements of the wider ASEAN Community, and the signing of the ASEAN Charter. However, the success of such multilateral efforts will probably depend in large part on whether more robust bilateral relations can over time provide the necessary foundations for trust within the grouping.

During 2007, there were signs that relations between certain key pairs of Southeast Asian neighbours were improving, tentatively boding well for closer cooperation on security matters within Southeast Asia. After severe strains in bilateral links under Thaksin because of the insurgency in Thai south, the restoration of cooperative bilateral relations with Malaysia was an important element in the interim Thai government's initiative to restore peace in the south following the military takeover in 2006. These improved relations appeared to bear fruit after Thai premier Surayud met Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi in February 2007. The two leaders agreed to manage the issue of dual nationality (which is not recognized by Malaysia) among residents on the Thai–Malaysian frontier through the sharing of biometric data. The leaders also discussed improving security along the border to control the movement of insurgents and smugglers. Subsequently, Surayud reported that Malaysia was helping Bangkok to establish contact with the insurgents as a precursor to possible dialogue.

There were also indications of warming in Malaysia's perennially complex relations with another of its immediate neighbours, Singapore. When the Malaysian and Singaporean prime ministers met for an informal summit on the Malaysian island of Langkawi in mid-May 2007, they agreed to set up a joint ministerial committee to discuss Singapore's involvement in the Iskandar Development Region (IDR) in the southern Malaysian state of Johor. The two sides recognized the potential mutual benefits of Singaporean investment and other involvement in the IDR, which some observers likened to the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone close to Hong Kong. This discussion highlighted the significant improvement in Malaysia's relations with Singapore since Abdullah Badawi replaced Mahathir Mohamad as prime minister in 2003.³⁷ However, a range of important unresolved bilateral issues — including the need for a new agreement on Malaysian water supplies for Singapore, the Singaporean air force's use of Malaysian airspace, a dispute over Malaysian railway land in Singapore, and the aborted project to build a bridge to replace the Causeway joining the two states — continued to cloud the future of bilateral relations.

Indonesia's relations with Singapore improved after Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono became president in 2004, notably with the June 2006 agreement jointly to develop the Indonesian islands of Batam, Bintan, and Karimun, immediately to the city-state's south, as a Special Economic Zone. Further close cooperation seemed in prospect in April 2007 when, after two years of negotiations, Singapore and Jakarta agreed on an extradition treaty and a new defence-cooperation pact. From Jakarta's viewpoint, the extradition pact was vital in order to fight corruption effectively; in particular, the Indonesian government hoped to use the agreement to force the return of businessmen who were believed to have hidden large amounts of stolen state funds in Singapore. The Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA), under which the Singapore Armed Forces would be allowed to resume use of Indonesian training facilities after a hiatus since 2003, was widely viewed as Singapore's *quid pro quo* for the extradition agreement.³⁸ The April 2007 agreements surprised observers who thought that recent bilateral disputes over Singapore's imports of sand from Indonesia, culminating in Jakarta's banning of sand exports in February (which caused a crisis in Singapore's construction industry as the price of concrete more than doubled), would impede closer ties. In fact, the sand export ban had probably constituted part of Indonesia's negotiating strategy. However, subsequent delay in agreeing to three sets of detailed arrangements for military training areas covered by the DCA, and the manner in which Indonesian politicians with nationalist axes to grind latched onto the issue during 2007, provided reminders that relations between Indonesia and Singapore remained sensitive and unpredictable.

There were other difficult bilateral relationships. After the 2006 coup in Bangkok, Thailand's relations with Singapore deteriorated substantially. In January 2007, a meeting between ex-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and Singaporean Deputy Prime Minister S. Jayakumar provoked outrage in Bangkok and the cancellation of a Thai invitation to Singaporean Foreign Minister George Yeo to visit Thailand. Adding to the crisis, General Sonthi claimed that the Thai military's communications were vulnerable to interception by Singapore because of Temasek's acquisition of Shin Corporation, which included Thailand's most important mobile telephone company. In February, Sonthi vowed to take control of "Thai" satellites operated by Shin Corp, provoking Singapore's Foreign Ministry to protest and request clarification.³⁹ In the same month, Bangkok's information and communication technology minister, Sittichai Pookaiudom, spoke of the possibility that his government might bring the corporation back under Thai control if it was proven that Temasek had broken Thai foreign ownership laws, an outcome that seemed likely to damage bilateral relations still further. However, possibly

after considering the likely impact on overall foreign investment in Thailand, in April Sittichai spoke merely in terms of Temasek probably needing to reduce its shareholding in the company.

As China re-emerges as a power of global significance, there are inevitably varying degrees of apprehension among Southeast Asian governments over the implications for the regional balance of power and the nature of the regional order. In this context, the complex and unreliable nature of relations among ASEAN members, often deriving in part at least from their prevailing domestic political and economic conditions and their retarding effect on the prospects for intra-ASEAN politico-security cooperation, combined with the concurrent weakness or inchoate nature of multilateral regional institutions (such as ASEAN, the ARF and the EAS) help to explain these states' continuing interest in maintaining their bilateral security relations with states outside Southeast Asia.

In some cases ASEAN members have deepened their external security relations: in November 2006, for example, Indonesia signed an Agreement on the Framework for Security Cooperation, which effectively replaced the earlier bilateral Agreement on Maintaining Security, which had lapsed in 1999 after Australia led the international military intervention in East Timor. And while there was much talk of the United States' "neglect" of Southeast Asia due to the major distractions of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. economic, diplomatic and strategic engagement remained extensive. As well as annual two-way trade between the United States and the ASEAN states of US\$140 billion in 2007, and growing U.S. support for ASEAN as an institution, the involvement of the U.S. armed forces in the region (ranging from supporting AFP operations in the southern Philippines to the staging of the major annual "Cobra Gold" exercise in Thailand and the Western Pacific Naval Symposium's Multilateral Sea Exercises) was still substantial and evolving. While one vision for the future — encapsulated in the ASEAN Political-Security Community idea — involved Southeast Asian states collectively taking much fuller responsibility for their own security — the evolving reality suggested that, with encouragement from ASEAN members, non-Southeast Asian actors were likely to continue playing highly significant strategic roles in and around Southeast Asia.

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