

## **Clinton Lauds Singapore's ASEAN Leadership in Conflict Resolution**

Scott Stearns - Posted September 24th, 2012 at 9:28 pm

---

Comfortable with Indonesian mediation over rival territorial claims in the South China Sea, the United States is working to broaden Singapore's role in resolving the dispute.

On his way to New York for the U.N. General Assembly, Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa stopped in Washington to meet with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to discuss "the kind of efforts Indonesia is trying to make to create an environment in our region that is peaceful and stable and therefore prosperous as well."

Thanking him for "personal leadership that has helped lay the groundwork for diplomacy between ASEAN and China as it relates to the South China Sea," Clinton reaffirmed the Obama administration's support for a leading role for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to "reduce tensions and pave the way for a comprehensive code of conduct for addressing disputes without threats, coercion, or use of force."

Over the past few decades, China has increasingly asserted its claim of sovereignty over most of the South China Sea, and scores of tiny, mostly uninhabited islands and reefs. Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei also claim parts of the sea.

Clinton and Natalegawa have worked well together on the South China Sea issue, says a senior State Department official, as "the supporting states around Indonesia, encouraging Indonesia, explaining what are the necessary components of sort of advancing the ball in the South China Sea [and how it] would include Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei."

“Each of them play a very careful and quiet role,” says the official. “None of them enjoy being in the spotlight. All of them would prefer progress be made, but don’t want to expose themselves to unnecessary scrutiny or criticism.”

### **A changing relationship**

U.S. Council on Foreign Relations analyst Joshua Kurlantzick says Washington is “definitely walking a fine balance with some of these countries, like Singapore, where our ties are increasingly close. They are the best in the region.”

“Singapore, I think, is walking farther away from the role it has historically played, which is really close to the U.S., but it sort of publicly didn’t talk about it and still tried to be a balancer,” he says. “I think we are moving with them closer to a more traditional alliance.”

But Washington-based Cato Institute analyst Justin Logan offers a different perspective. While he agrees that Singapore is moving closer to the United States, especially on the South China Sea, he says it may not result in such a traditional alliance.

“The United States likes to have very, very enthusiastic allies,” Logan says. “And I think that the Singaporeans tend to have a more reserved, more calculated, careful approach. So it is certainly true that relations between the United States and Singapore have gotten better. They are getting more attention in Washington. But I do not think that you are going to have this extraordinarily tight, sometimes ebullient-style relationship that the United States has enjoyed in the past.”

### **A geopolitically strategic position**

Singapore, home to a small U.S. military base of mainly naval personnel that act primarily as logistical support for ships and aircraft passing through the region, understands well its position at the nexus of South China Sea claims.

“Everybody wants to sit down and talk with the Singaporeans,” he says. “And they realize that everybody wants to be friendly with the Singaporeans. Given their strategic positioning in this, they have played, I think, a very adept diplomatic game in trying to be friendly with everyone because everyone wants to be friendly with them.”

State Department officials point to Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s speech in Beijing ahead of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in which he said the Chinese government and people are determined to overcome “various

challenges” but stressed that ASEAN must take a position “which is neutral, forward-looking and encourages the peaceful resolution of issues,” because to do otherwise “would severely damage its credibility.”

“We should never underestimate the U.S. capacity to reinvigorate and reinvent itself,” Lee told Communist Party leaders. “The U.S. is an enormously resilient and creative society, which attracts and absorbs talent from all over the world, including many from China and the rest of Asia.”

Lee’s speech, say State Department officials, appeared to be aimed at both Chinese leaders and ASEAN colleagues.

“I think what Singapore is trying to do is create more space for dialogue and discussion, and has made very clear that the approach that we have articulated has found some common cause among ASEAN leaders,” a senior official says.

### **Brunei’s emerging role**

One of those is leaders is Brunei’s Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, with whom Secretary Clinton visited as part of her APEC trip.

“They’re low-key, but concerned about how ASEAN has managed the situation today,” a senior State Department official says of Brunei’s role in the South China Sea. “They tried very hard to work behind the scenes toward consensus in advance of the East Asia Summit in November.”

Like many ASEAN countries, they want very much to have a good relationship with the United States and China, says the official.

“They don’t want to have to choose. But at the same time, they are very committed to defending their sovereignty and feel very strongly that issues associated with the South China Sea have to be resolved in a conciliatory, diplomatic manner, and are worried about coercion generally.”

“They do most of their business behind the scenes, not out in the open,” the State Department official adds. “But I think they’re somewhat nervous about next year when they’re going to host the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Regional Forum, largely because they would like to avoid the kinds of public tensions that we witnessed when we were in Cambodia.”