



## 10 THINGS EVERY SAILOR AND MARINE SHOULD KNOW BEFORE DEPLOYING TO SOUTHEAST ASIA: A REGIONAL PRIMER

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With a little bit of advance preparation and intellectual investment, a deployment to Southeast Asia can be a life-changing professional experience for sailors and marines. Here are 10 points, based on several decades of personal experience in Asia, that can help any service member arrive ready to accomplish the mission, represent their service well, and enjoy themselves while doing it.

### 1. Southeast Asia matters. It is not just a battlefield.

Those focused on geopolitical dynamics may regard Southeast Asia as strategic territory where

the United States must win hearts and minds now and be prepared to sink ships in a future conflict. However, the region's nations also have unique, vibrant cultures, and strong identities. Southeast Asian states are home to more than 655 million people. Their economies weigh in with a GDP of [more than \\$3 trillion](#). Ensuring strong bilateral relationships is essential to the well-being of the United States. That is why most of our regional exercises are not about fighting an enemy state but strengthening bilateral relationships.

Prevailing in the strategic competition with China is critical to US security and many Southeast Asians will be ready to discuss shared concerns, but US friendship should primarily be about the bilateral partners' diverse concerns. We won't expand the trust and confidence we need by treating Southeast Asian partners like cartological chokepoints or the spoils of a prize fight.

### 2. Southeast Asia is neither with us nor against us. It is for itself.

Southeast Asians want to benefit from their relationships with the United States and with China but there is little confidence either power would look out for Southeast Asian interests. China is ASEAN's largest trade partner, and ASEAN became [China's largest trade partner](#) in 2020. To avoid falling into Chinese orbit, Southeast Asians are generally glad for the counterbalance delivered by the US military. Balancing these competing relationships is akin to charting a course between two reefs. To cleave too closely to the United States exposes them to the risks of abandonment and the ire of China.

### 3. Southeast Asia is incredibly diverse.

Indonesia is the world's fourth-most populous country, largest Muslim-majority nation, and 10th-largest economy. It shares an island with Timor Leste, a predominantly Catholic nation with fewer people than Trinidad and Tobago. The per capita income in the city-state of Singapore is more than \$100,000 a year, one and a half times that of the United States. Twenty-six million Indonesians earn less than one dollar a day.

To represent the US Navy well in Southeast Asia, get to know the various countries you visit.

#### 4. **Southeast Asian Sailors have plenty to teach you about gray zone operations.**

Southeast Asian navies matter. So do their coast guards. In some cases, their ships are older. Some are decommissioned US vessels. Not even the most technologically advanced states possess the combat equivalent of a 96-cell US destroyer. Sensitive communications are often carried by unclassified apps such as WhatsApp, Facebook, or Line. This does not mean they are incapable. These maritime forces are engaged, day-in and day-out, in securing their nations' sovereignty. Dangerous, close encounters with Chinese forces are common. They also regularly face off with neighbors in disputes over maritime boundaries and resources.

You will quickly notice that your Southeast Asian partners will approach problems in ways foreign to you. Pay attention; listen up; absorb the good. Do not lecture.

#### 5. **Nontraditional threats are a top regional priority.**

In Southeast Asia, coast guards have become more popular in recent years but still commonly share constabulary duties with navies. Naval services across the region regularly face threats of terrorism and insurgency, as well as human and narco-trafficking. Environmental crimes and illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing cost billions and imperil livelihoods. These threats to coastal communities demand national security prioritization.

Learn how your fellow sailors in Southeast Asia deal with these issues.

#### 6. **History matters.**

When the United States arrived in Southeast Asia as the newest colonial power, our counterinsurgency operations were nothing to recall with pride. The US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty is now an important pillar of regional security, but the United States only recently returned [war trophies](#) seized from Balangiga in 1901. During the Cold War, the United States was associated with violent coups that resulted in tens of thousands of deaths in several nations.

Senior Vietnamese leaders have personal memories of the war against the United States. Washington dropped more explosives on Cambodia and Laos than the Allies dropped globally in World War II. Despite this, Vietnam welcomed two US Navy aircraft carriers.

Our past should engender a spirit of understanding and humility from US sailors in Southeast Asia.

#### 7. **ASEAN is central and not an “underdeveloped EU.”**

The European Union is about governments relaxing sovereign control to pool resources, prevent state-to-state conflict, and facilitate flows of capital and people. Put over-simply, ASEAN is aimed at enabling governments' efforts to strengthen their own states. ASEAN is built on principles of consensus and non-interference. You may hear the term “ASEAN Centrality”—it is a concept that reinforces ASEAN's credibility and legitimacy, respecting its role as the driving force behind the region's collective agenda.

Do not fall for the trap that ASEAN is destined to “mature into” something that exists elsewhere.

#### 8. **Southeast Asia does not want an Asian NATO, nor an Asian Combined Maritime Force.**

NATO functions on the basis of shared threat perceptions and common interests. Its Cold War counterpart, the [Southeast Asia Treaty Organization](#), fell apart shortly after the Vietnam War. Southeast Asian states are concerned about China's behavior, tilting the alignment of some of those states toward the United States, but fears of entrapment and abandonment dictate that no Southeast Asian state is ready to tie itself into a collective defense pact.

Other officers envision opportunities to create a Combined Maritime Force. Attempts to sell the idea in Southeast Asia have fallen flat. If geared toward China, they are non-starters. Efforts geared toward the nontraditional threats at the top of regional states' maritime priorities gain some traction. However, most of the nontraditional threats operate within domestic waters, so beyond information-sharing and

coordination, there is little desire to invite in foreign security operations.

**9. Corruption is rampant—do not let it trap you.**

According to [Transparency International](#), in ASEAN only Singapore and Malaysia rank among the world's 80 least corrupt states. Things that might be illegal or unethical in the United States are often the way the system is designed in Southeast Asia.

Understand the relevant regulations and internalize your ethics training. If your command is not giving you training, ask for it before deploying. See the bevy of high-profile cases associated with the [Fat Leonard scandal](#): Some of those Americans were filthy traitors. Others made much smaller mistakes; these individuals are free, but the ethics violations put their careers on ice.

**10. Enjoy your liberty.**

Done right, a deployment to Southeast Asia will be an experience that will stay with you. These ports offer world-class opportunities for sightseeing, shopping, and the relaxation needed for superior performance at sea.

A typical port visit is four days. Given the limited time and all the opportunities, mission success requires a plan. Planning requires information. Do as much as you can before you deploy. Shelling out a couple of bucks for a guidebook to read underway can save hours. Even if your deployment schedule is not fixed, taking along a library can be a great investment for your liberty crew. The sailor-centric non-profit [YCAPS](#) has a great list of suggestions.

A deployment to Southeast Asia is an opportunity to have a unique experience. To represent the US Navy well in Southeast Asia, get to know the countries you have the opportunity to visit. We hope these 10 suggestions will help you do just that.

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