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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WSJ.com

ASIA NEWS | JULY 21, 2009, 1:14 P.M. ET

Clinton Signals Revival of U.S. Interest in Southeast Asia

By JAMES HOOKWAY

BANGKOK -- U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is due to attend a Southeast Asia-based security summit on the Thai island of Phuket Wednesday in what diplomats are describing as a revival of U.S. interest in a vibrant region comprising several major exporters, the world's most populous Muslim nation and 570 million people.

But discussions on strengthening Washington's trade and security ties with the ten-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or Asean, will likely be overshadowed by two long-running themes in the region: How to deal with a nuclearized North Korea, and how to convince Myanmar's military junta to allow a degree of democratic change in the reclusive nation.

The United States has longstanding ties to several Southeast Asian nations. U.S. troops are on the ground in the Philippines helping train local soldiers as they attempt to root out al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorist groups. Similarly, the U.S. has helped train and equip Indonesia's counter-terrorism forces, which are now hunting for the masterminds behind the bombings which killed nine people -- including two suicide bombers -- at two luxury hotels in Jakarta on Friday.

Total trade between the U.S. and Asean exceeded \$178 billion in 2008, and, in an opinion piece Mrs. Clinton wrote and was published in Bangkok newspapers Tuesday, she said "there is no doubt that our economies' fortunes and our nations' futures are more intertwined than ever before."

Some regional diplomats see the Asean grouping as the kernel of a broader free trade bloc spanning the Pacific and also encompassing China, Japan, South Korea. Mrs. Clinton is scheduled to sign a non-aggression pact with Asean in Phuket, as China did in 2003, which analysts say could enable the U.S. to later enmesh itself within the so-called East Asia Summit group, which includes the ten Asean members plus trade partners China, India, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand and Australia.

"America is shaping itself to be a real player in the region again," says Thitinan Pongsudhirak, director of the Institute of Security and International Studies at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University. "This is the first time since the Bush administration that we've seen the United States engage with East Asia as a region rather than as a series of bilateral agreements."

To reinforce the point, senior U.S. administration officials in Bangkok said Tuesday the U.S. plans to open a new diplomatic mission to the Asean secretariat at its headquarters in Jakarta, Indonesia.

Former secretary of state Condoleezza Rice skipped the annual Asean Regional Forum, as it's known, two times in three years during the second term of President George W. Bush, partly because of other pressing matters. But now, one senior administration officials said, the U.S. is "trying to step up its game" in Southeast Asia, a resource-rich part of the world where China is also trying to assert its diplomatic and commercial power.

The region's many political and security problems frequently crowd out trade and economic discussions, however - particularly the question of how to deal with North Korea.

Besides the U.S. and Asean, representatives from China, the European Union, Japan, Russia and South Korea will attend, along with a host of ministers from other countries. Usually, North Korea's foreign minister attends, but this year Pyongyang sent a roving ambassador in his place amid growing international criticism for its weapons tests and an increasingly hard-line, militaristic stance after North Korean leader Kim Jong Il fell ill earlier this year.

At a news conference in Bangkok on Tuesday, Mrs. Clinton said the Obama administration was concerned that North Korea may have military ties to Myanmar, although she didn't specify that the concern was related to North Korea's nuclear capabilities.

"It would be destabilizing for the region," she told reporters.

A senior administration official, requesting anonymity because of the sensitivity of the matter, said the U.S. was concerned about the possibility that North Korea could be assisting Myanmar on nuclear weapons program. But he added that the U.S.'s intelligence on any suspected transfer of nuclear technology from North Korea to Myanmar was incomplete.

Mrs. Clinton suggested, however, that North Korea could still be tempted back to talks on rolling back its nuclearization policy. "But they have to be willing to change their behavior and agree to de-nuclearize North Korea... and we stand ready to respond if we get any signal that there would be a serious commitment to doing that," she said.

Myanmar, meanwhile, is a source of constant embarrassment to Asean. Regional analysts have said Asean's unwillingness to expel or take other harsh measures against the military-run, resource rich country could affect the grouping's ability to secure wider trade pacts with some of its biggest trading partners.

Several Southeast Asian nations, notably democracies Indonesia and the Philippines, have been pushing the grouping to take a stronger stance against the military leaders in Myanmar, which is also known as Burma. Indonesian Foreign Minister Hassan Wirayuda told the Associated Press on Tuesday that elections which the Myanmar junta is planning for 2010 must include opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Ms. Suu Kyi, a Nobel Peace laureate, is currently on trial and faces up to five years in prison on charges of violating the terms of her house arrest by allowing an uninvited American guest to stay at her home.

"We should see whether from now until 2010 (Myanmar) develops a credible process leading to truly democratic elections acceptable to the international community," Mr. Wirayuda said.

Separately, Australia's Foreign Minister Stephen Smith said Tuesday he is hoping to use the Phuket forum to talk with his Chinese counterpart, Yang Jiechi, about the detention of Rio Tinto PLC employee and Australian citizen, Stern Hu. Mr. Hu and three other Rio employees have been detained since July 5. China has alleged they used bribery to obtain state secrets.

Australian officials, including Mr. Smith and Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, have argued that China's handling of the issue will be watched and judged by governments and corporations around the world.

—Rachel Pannett contributed to this article.

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