

WORKSHOP REPORT

The United States-Thailand Alliance: Reinvigorating the Partnership



Thailand is the United States' oldest treaty partner in Asia, dating back to the bilateral Treaty of Amity and Commerce of 1833. The modern-day U.S.-Thailand security alliance is nearly 50 years old, based in the 1954 Manila Pact between the United States and its Southeast Asian Cold War allies. Thailand is a critical connecting point in U.S. regional and global military operations and plans, and a preferred point of entry for U.S. businesses into the Southeast Asian market. Among Southeast Asian countries, Thailand is one of China's strongest partners and serves as a logistical turnstile for mainland Southeast Asia.

This dynamic interplay of factors places new pressures and creates new opportunities for an aging alliance. Entering a new decade, the alliance must be sturdy enough to navigate new regional power dynamics as it continues to support mutual interests of Thailand and the United States. At the same time, the U.S.-Thailand security relationship has a lower profile than any other U.S. treaty alliance in Asia, particularly in contrast to Northeast Asia. Whether or not this quiet obscurity aids or hampers the transition to a 21st century alliance is a matter of debate and concern.

To this end, on April 28, 2010 the National Bureau of Asian Research and the Thai Studies Program of

Georgetown University organized a one-day workshop to examine American views of the U.S.-Thailand alliance. Participants included representatives from several U.S. Government foreign

PANEL DISCUSSIONS

- **The State of the Alliance: U.S. Views**

Is there strategic coherence in the alliance? What are the objectives and how have they changed? Can we discern differences in U.S. and Thai perspectives and objectives?

- **Changing Regional Dynamics and the U.S.-Thai Alliance**

How do developments in the region influence the alliance, both positively and negatively? What are the primary challenges in the region that directly impact the alliance? What are the primary opportunities?

- **The Alliance Moving Forward**

What issues should be considered in the alliance relationship moving forward?



policy agencies, think tanks, universities, American businesses, and non-governmental organizations. Discussion was conducted under Chatham House rules, and participants acted in their individual capacities. As a result, the views represented in this summary report should not be attributed to specific individuals, their organizations, or the host institutions.

Conference organizers noted that the ongoing political situation in Thailand gave added impetus to an examination of the U.S.-Thailand alliance, but also made it more difficult. In recent months, Thai leaders have focused primarily on domestic affairs, and this has contributed to strategic drift in the U.S.-Thailand alliance. However, even at this time it is worthwhile to look ahead to medium- and long-term dynamics in the relationship to help keep the framework as strong as possible.

The scale and intensity of the bilateral relationship diminished with the end of the Vietnam War. In the 1980s trade tensions between the United States and Thailand signaled a new phase, in which the constituent elements of the relationship were becoming more distinct from one another and even conflicted on occasion. Nevertheless, the alliance has endured. Thailand was the first Asian nation to send troops to Iraq and Afghanistan, and currently plans to support the UN mission in the Sudan. In 2004, the United States used the Utapao base in Thailand as a regional hub

for disaster relief. The United States and Thailand continue to host the annual Cobra Gold exercises, which bring together forces and observers from 22 countries in a single exercise in Thailand and represents the Pacific Command's largest regional joint military exercise. In maritime security, participants noted the cooperative relationship between the Thai military and American business in protecting oil shipments and container traffic on their entry into the Straits of Malacca.

In recent decades, however, both countries have noted some dilution and disengagement in the relationship. This is due in some part to underlying trends in U.S. global security policy, which de-emphasized Southeast Asia with the end of the Vietnam War. The rise of regional powers, especially China, has also contributed to this trend. In the 1990s Thailand "graduated" from U.S. economic assistance. At the same time, the United States closed some consulates and cultural centers in Thailand. The malaise in relations at this time came to a head in the 1997 financial crisis, when many Thais were unhappy that the United States did not immediately offer bilateral assistance to help ease the impact of the baht's sudden drop.

The post-September 11 U.S.-led war against terrorism placed new emphasis on counterterrorism in the U.S.-Thailand alliance and signaled U.S. re-engagement in Southeast Asia to some degree. In 2002, the Bush administration designated Thailand as a major non-NATO ally. The following year Thailand and the United States



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cooperated to apprehend a key figure in the Jemmah Islamiyah. However, the 2006 coup, which deposed Prime Minister Thaksin

Shinawatra, brought a short-term chill to the bilateral relationship and had an impact on the alliance, since U.S. law required the temporary suspension of security assistance. Although the relationship has been affected by Thai domestic political events since 2006, the alliance has regained its footing. The Obama administration's Lower Mekong Initiative includes Thailand in sub-regional projects related to the management of water resources and other environmental issues on mainland Southeast Asia.

Thailand in the Regional and Global Environment

An essential but often difficult task was that of placing the U.S.-Thailand alliance in the context of power dynamics in the Asia-Pacific region and U.S. regional and global security policy. The present U.S. strategy is to remain engaged in Southeast Asia, shaping favorable conditions for business, political, and security relationships. As a part of that strategy, the United States seeks to strengthen its participation in regional organizations, ASEAN being one of the most prominent, and to promote discussion on Asian regional architecture. Some U.S. policymakers continue to view ASEAN as less than the sum of its parts, but Washington's engagement with the regional group has intensified in recent years. Although there is no established leader among the ASEAN states, Indonesia's size; Vietnam's economic dynamism; and Thailand's central position have at times given these three countries an edge in regional relations. Of the three, only Thailand is a treaty ally of the United States. However, Thailand's leadership potential has diminished with its domestic political crisis and with Indonesia's reinvigorated regional and international role in recent years.

The U.S. security calculus in Southeast Asia is focused less on dynamics among the ASEAN states and more on their interactions with rising powers, particularly China. While competing conference viewpoints recognized the spectrum from competition to cooperation, it is obvious that both the United States and China have strategic interests in Thailand and seek to expand influence there. Likewise, Thailand attempts to engage both Washington and Beijing to maintain balance and stability in its foreign relations.

Conference participants recognized Thailand as a major and natural point of engagement for the expansion of Chinese influence in Southeast Asia. The U.S. departure from Vietnam left a strategic window for engagement between the Thai and Chinese governments. Thai-Chinese relations improved as Thailand sought to curb Chinese external support of the Communist Party of Thailand and China sought to curb regional expansion by Vietnam. These roots from the 1970s have only strengthened over the last thirty years. Recently, China has sought to strengthen military ties with Thailand through naval engagements, requests for large joint exercises, and multiple high level exchanges between defense officials. These are still on a small scale compared to U.S.-Thailand military exercises and exchanges, but they nevertheless merit observation.

China maintains a professional, respected diplomatic corps in Thailand, and joint capital ventures support developmental projects throughout the region. Moreover, China's soft power influence has grown considerably with the establishment of Confucian centers, cultural centers, and a large influx of educational dollars into the Thai educational system. Another "soft power" factor is the assimilation of ethnic Chinese in Thailand as a part of the social fabric, and the participation of Sino-Thais in all levels of government. Some participants

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believed that the aggregate impact of these increased interactions between China and Thailand is a new tendency for younger generation Thais to look to China rather than the United States for education and training.

Consideration of the impact of a rising China led participants to consider the triangular dynamic among Thailand, China and the United States. Some saw Thailand as a potential conduit between the United States and China on some regional issues. While it was difficult to substantiate this concept in concrete terms, several participants noted past Thai willingness and involvement in communicating messages from the U.S. to China. This concept may merit more exploration for its potential diplomatic value, while current U.S. military cooperation with Thailand does provide at minimum one point of interaction with the PLA as Cobra Gold observers.

Counterterrorism and Nonproliferation

U.S.-Thailand cooperation on counterterrorism has operated fairly successfully on a regional plane. As noted above, through intelligence sharing and related cooperation, the two countries were successful in arresting Hambali, a key Jemmah Islamiyah operative, in 2003. However, the nature of the communal violence in Thailand's deep South presents a different set of issues and limits the scale of cooperation. Thailand does not seek direct U.S. involvement in the South, and there appears to be no open, substantive connection between southern Thai insurgents and regional or global terrorist groups. More indirect cooperation may be beneficial, however, particularly if it addresses root causes of the conflict. In comparison to the U.S.-Philippine alliance, which operates joint training and humanitarian relief exercises in Mindanao, the

situation in southern Thailand requires a modicum of restraint. Beyond cooperation to help stem terrorist threats beyond its borders, Thailand has increased its participation in regional maritime security exercises.

Nonproliferation is of increasing concern. The North Korea-Burma relationship has drawn Southeast Asia directly into this issue. Thailand has demonstrated commitment in this area, interdicting a North Korean plane and seizing 36 tons of illegal weapons from North Korea.

Present and Future Challenges

A constant theme throughout the discussion was that of drift in the current U.S.-Thailand alliance. Without a strong strategic footing, it is difficult to manage a widening array of cooperative initiatives and agreements. Participants identified a number of issues that merit examination. It is significant that many of these issues are conceptual in nature. This suggests that an early and important step in strengthening the U.S.-Thailand alliance would be bilateral dialogue, not only between the two security communities but along a broader spectrum of government and societal representatives from both countries.

1. Finding a rationale for an alliance over a less formal security relationship. One participant questioned whether an alliance was necessary, and wondered if it was possible to disaggregate cooperation from the actual alliance structure and what would be the potential impact of that alternate reality. While several participants agreed that cooperation would likely continue, the alliance gives the legal and relational foundation to ensure access to key facilities, intelligence sharing in counterterrorism, and to bolster responses to a host of other

non-traditional security threats. Others believed that the alliance is also a definitive legal point of engagement and U.S. commitment in mainland Southeast Asia.

2. Determining an appropriate profile for the U.S.-Thailand alliance. A dichotomy emerged in the discussion in this regard. Some participants maintained that the alliance lacks strategic coherence at this point, with a weakened sense of purpose as a result. Some felt that the quiet nature of the current U.S.-Thailand alliance obscures its role in U.S. regional engagement and even U.S. global military operations. Over the last several years, the United States military has used Thailand's facilities as a vital transportation link, transiting thousands of military flights per year through Thailand's bases. Thai air space is also critical in transiting from the Pacific Ocean into the Indian Ocean for military capabilities. However, several conference participants viewed this low profile as beneficial, in that it provides maximum flexibility and freedom of cooperation.

3. Defining Thai national interests in the alliance. Although the benefits of the alliance to the United States are fairly obvious, ascertaining Thai national interests proved a more difficult challenge. However, several participants speculated on some possible benefits. Geostrategically, the alliance communicates continued U.S. involvement in both the region, and specifically in Thailand. This guards against hegemony of any one power, particularly in critical sea lanes. More broadly, in a changing security environment the alliance helps ensure that strategic issues are viewed as international concerns, rather than just regional ones. The alliance also serves as a support for continued U.S. economic engagement with Southeast Asia. Thai markets continue to attract overseas investment, but the reality

of China's growing economic strength paradoxically could make the alliance more important in stimulating U.S.-Thailand trade than it has in the past.

In military-to-military relations, Thailand continues to receive the benefits of military training through IMET, Cobra Gold, and smaller training exchanges. The Thai military still utilizes U.S. military doctrine and structures as the foundation of their military organization. While some participants noted the problems with this arrangement for Thai forces conducting counterinsurgency operations in the South, the Thais still show a desire for acquiring U.S. lessons learned in counterinsurgency warfare.

On the subject of weapons acquisitions, participants disagreed over the implications and origins of the overall trend of Thailand's diversification in arms purchases. Some participants saw this as symptomatic of the strategic drift in U.S.-Thai relations, while others viewed it as aligning specific military needs to affordable capabilities. While there was general agreement over a loss of interoperability, the impact of this loss is generally limited without a specific conventional threat in Southeast Asia.

4. Holding fast during a tumultuous domestic time in Thailand. While the conference did not focus on the current domestic political challenges in Thailand, numerous participants discussed the paramount importance of the United States remaining steady in the bilateral relationship with Thailand. This steadiness requires a long-term commitment to Thailand as it perseveres, not only through current domestic turmoil, but also through future transitions in its domestic institutions. At the same time, participants pointed out that this commitment must be faithful to the mandates of



U.S. law with respect to peaceful transitions of power.

5. Reinvigorating U.S. soft power influence. This theme emerged as a significant factor in balancing the overall influence and bilateral relationship with Thailand. If security concerns predominate, then the United States will only have impact on a narrow patch of the Thai population. With shifts in civil-military relations in Thailand in the past two decades, the United States must reinvigorate its capacity to engage the Thai community broadly and substantially on the purpose and value of the alliance. While nostalgia makes a poor foundation for a future relationship, history has shown that Peace Corps volunteers, English language initiatives, educational support, and cultural centers have all had a positive impact on the U.S. image in Thailand.

6. Expanding the definition of security within the alliance. If Thailand – and Southeast Asia in general – have received less attention from the United States in recent decades, it is partly because the region is a victim of its own success. Notwithstanding the threat posed by radical Islamist groups in Southeast Asia, it is not difficult to comprehend why Northeast Asia and U.S. alliances in that region receive greater attention.






However, Southeast Asia does have a substantial array

of nontraditional security threats. In that regard, Thailand’s geo-strategic position and the long history of U.S.-Thai cooperation could be

considerable assets in addressing these threats. One participant maintained that Thailand would be a natural base for a regional center to address many of these threats, and as a training site for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Beyond the surface value of this proposition, it would bolster Thailand’s status as a regional leader on critical security issues, while demonstrating the benefits of U.S. involvement in capacity building for the region.

7. Placing the U.S.-Thailand alliance in the context of rising power dynamics in Asia. Although Thai diplomatic history is one of balancing external powers, some U.S. policymakers are inclined to view China and the United States as competitors in Southeast Asia. Maintaining and strengthening the U.S.-Thailand alliance will require considering the growing number of challenges and opportunities presented by China’s growing regional and global power.

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