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Diverging Roads: 21st-century U.S.-Thai Defense Relations

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Key Points

The 175th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Commerce in 2008 was seized by both Thailand and the United States as a reason for celebrating a long and mutually beneficial treaty alliance. This alliance has been defined by the shared though not uncomplicated commitment to democracy and human rights, and the common interest in free and fair trade, all of which inform the tradition of bilateral cooperation.

For the last 50 years, Thailand supported a continuous U.S. presence in the region, offered unfettered access to port and airfield facilities to the American military, and provided unparalleled training opportunities for U.S. forces. Since the 1980s, Thailand has hosted and participated in strategically important exercise opportunities, which have given substance to a continuous Thai commitment to interoperability with the U.S. military.

Thailand's security equities paralleled evolving U.S. defense priorities as transnational threats in the 1980s and 1990s began to overwhelm the resources of all regional players. These threats also began to tax the ability of individual allies and partners outside the region to respond to burgeoning requirements for new defense and security capabilities, modernized hardware, and new strategic thinking.

The U.S.-Thai defense relationship, however, has been in a long, awkward transitional moment since at least the late 1990s. The close and friendly relationship between leaders has evolved, if only as the result of natural selection's insidious impact on both sides. The practical basis for military interoperability and the strategic thinking at the core of the relationship have also changed. All this has happened without the emergence of an effective mechanism for restructuring the practical interactions that constitute the military-to-military relationship, and without the intellectual investment necessary to infuse new strategic meaning into the relationship.

Defense Cooperation

Security issues were the core motivating force behind Washington's commitment to preserve Thailand's sovereignty and dignity at the end of World War II—even as our British and French allies sought to treat the kingdom as a belligerent that should have been occupied and compelled to pay reparations for its wartime alliance with Japan. The rationale for the postwar alliance with the United States was the common commitment to opposing and containing the threat of communism.

The Manila Treaty that created the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), and the reaffirmation of the U.S. security commitment to Thailand in the 1962 Rusk-Thanat agreement, provided the legal basis for the alliance and focused U.S. and Thai attention on responding to the security threats posed by external communist threats from China and Vietnam and the internal communist insurgency. America's involvement in the Vietnam War deepened the alliance and turned Thailand into an indispensable ally that hosted a massive U.S. presence based on U.S.-built airfields, an important deepwater port at Sattahip, and a military communications infrastructure that became a critical support and logistics base for conducting the war in Vietnam.

From the early 1950s to the end of the Vietnam War, the Royal Thai Armed Forces received U.S. military training, equipment, counterinsurgency training, arms, ammunition, assistance with road building and infrastructure development in remote areas, and vehicles that helped build Thailand's police force and its military's special operations capabilities. The relationship effectively lapsed in the face of America's diminished interest in overseas commitments at the end of the Vietnam War and in the aftermath of the Thai decision to limit U.S. military access to facilities following the unilateral American decision to respond to the seizing of the *Mayaguez* without consulting with Bangkok on the use of Utapao airbase. Thailand's importance as a logistical center for America's extended presence in the region diminished. Bangkok's reliance on Washington's commitment to defend the kingdom waivered. Thailand sought to fulfill its security requirements by negotiating a normalized relationship with China; Beijing's end to sponsorship of the Communist Party of Thailand, and China's willingness to confront Vietnam's aggressive behavior in

addition to Washington's own evolving relationship with China, changed security realities in the region.

Vietnam's 1978 invasion of Cambodia and installation of a Vietnamese-backed government led to the reinvigoration of U.S.-Thai defense relations and security cooperation.

American commitment to invigorating democracy in Southeast Asia brought with it a range of foreign and defense policy standards

The United States invested in the professionalization and modernization of Thailand's armed forces through strategic military sales and the beginning of a generation of joint and combined training exercises that had as their centerpiece the annual Cobra Gold exercise that began in 1981. Washington became enmeshed in a series of strategic agreements intended to deepen American involvement in the defense of Thailand, including an agreement to create a War Reserve Stockpile, the first U.S. stockpile outside of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and South Korea.

However, Thailand's "frontline state" role in the effort to resist Vietnam's continued occupation of Cambodia, and the prominent part played by the core members of the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in defining the basis for a peaceful resolution of the Cambodian conflict, plus China's willingness to actively provide lethal assistance to the Khmer Rouge (KR) through Thailand, changed the shape of defense realities in the region and provided the basis for a Sino-Thai alliance. In 1986, China began supplying Thailand with a wide range of military equipment including armored personnel carriers, artillery, and missiles.

Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia in 1989, the end of the war in Cambodia, the unceremonious withering away of the Soviet Union and the finale to the Cold War, and the regional activism that focused the energies of the United Nations on resolving the Cambodian problem eliminated the external security threats that had motivated the Thai-U.S. condominium of defense and security interests, and prodded Thailand to reorganize the strategic basis for its key relationships. Trade and commerce came to the fore. American commitment to invigorating democracy in Southeast Asia brought with it a range of foreign and defense policy standards. In 1991, the United States responded to a military coup by suspending economic and military assistance. In 1992, in the face of Thai military violence against peaceful protestors, the United States suspended Cobra Gold exercises. Thereafter, American laws required the cessation of economic and security assistance in response to extra-constitutional acts against duly elected governments.

During the course of the last two decades, the United States has gone from accelerating deliveries of "friendship price" ammunition to Thailand in the 1980s to underscore commitment to its security during the conflict in Cambodia, to enforcing elaborate policies in the 1990s aimed at preventing the introduction of new defense technologies into Southeast Asia in a fashion that required Washington to explain why the Thai could not purchase certain military technologies from the United States, such as vertical launch capabilities or beyond-visual-range missile innovations. The United States has gone from scrambling to respond positively to mid-1980 requests for replacement F–16s from Thailand, to managing failed sales of next-generation fighter jets, the F/A–18, in the mid-1990s. And the United States has gone from special arrangements to provide tailored assistance requested by Thai army chiefs (such as heavy engineering equipment support for General Chawalit Yongchaiyut's Greening of Isarn program) to efforts in the late 1990s and early 2000s aimed at shoehorning Thailand into legislatively funded global capability-building programs in such areas as peacekeeping capabilities, disaster response preparation, and counterterrorism training.

The presumptive alternatives to U.S. largess (diminished as it may have been) offered far less satisfactory packages, minimal followup support, inferior training, and equipment that the Thai military was not at all prepared to embrace as a substitute for American-made military hardware. In spite of this fact, Thailand became less willing to depend exclusively on an identity of security and defense visions with the United States The tipping point in the relationship came in the mid-1990s. At that juncture, Thailand began to feel that it had as much to give to the relationship as the United States could bring to the table. Sometime between the first Persian Gulf War and the late 1990s, Thailand's interests in defense and security terms had grown complex enough so that the U.S. relationship was but one variable in Thailand's calculations of its interests.

In that context, a string of increasingly intractable bilateral conflicts over strategic judgments, bilateral trade and commercial relations, regional commitments, and global policy issues entered into the calculus of U.S.-Thai relations in a fashion that undermined Thai confidence in the American security umbrella and spurred recognition in Washington and Bangkok of the need to define a means of responding to new security challenges and transnational threats. The U.S.-Thai relationship has been tested by a number of legislatively mandated reactions to Thai military coups against elected governments, by decisions taken in Washington that suggested to Thailand a lack of gratitude for Bangkok's side of the alliance relationship, a failure to appreciate the historical depth of the relationship, and a reluctance to act in honor of the friendship instead of in response to economic calculations and policy interests. Serious issues in the relationship have chipped away at the friendship:

- The 1992–1993 accusations that Thailand was surreptitiously supporting KR efforts to thwart regional peacekeeping initiatives probably prolonged and extended KR reach into Cambodia and provoked U.S. legislative initiatives that threatened the cutoff of

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U.S. military assistance if Thailand persisted in trading with the KR at a rate and volume that, according to the legislation, provided the money guerrillas needed to buy arms on the open market and thereby enabled the KR to thwart the United Nations effort to disarm the competing Cambodian factions.

- The long-dwindling support for sustained levels of foreign military assistance, including International Military Education and Training funding levels, eroded Thai military confidence in the alliance with Washington.
- Congressional challenges to Thailand's record regarding trafficking in people, human rights, and support for democracy soured Thailand's enthusiasm for the bilateral relationship.
- The Clinton administration decision to refrain from decisive steps in the aftermath of the economic crisis of 1997 represented a real blow to the Thai government.
- Legislatively mandated cessations of economic and security assistance in the wake of acts against duly elected Thai governments have cut into the vigor with which U.S. defense and security initiatives are embraced by Thailand, and diminished the Thai military's willingness to rely on such assistance as its unique source of hardware and support.

Three Benchmark Issues

Three major benchmark issues in U.S.-Thai defense relations in the last 15 years have indicated the limits of cooperation, defined Thailand's expectations, and shaped Bangkok's thinking about the parameters of defense cooperation with Washington.

First, the 1994 U.S. proposal to preposition military equipment in Thai territorial waters, and Thailand's rejection of that initiative, underscored the shifts in balance of dividends that had powered the relationship forward for decades, and provides a perspective on growing divergence in what had long been an unquestioned common strategic starting point.[1]

Second, the 1997 failure of the F/A–18 sale impacted on the way the United States conducted defense sales with Thailand for many years. A U.S. Government letter of offer and acceptance (LOA) for eight F/A–18 aircraft was offered to Thailand on April 2, 1996. In September-October, the Thai government trimmed the military's budget and ordered a review of procurement plans. By that time, the Thai air force plan for a second-generation fighter had run into serious financing problems. In October 1997, in the face of the baht devaluation, the Royal Thai Armed Forces submitted a revised payment schedule for the LOA and asked the Defense Security Assistance Agency to consider ways to restructure the program without impacting on the delivery schedule. On December 19, 1997, Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai wrote to President Clinton asking for U.S. Government agreement to a rollover of payments for the arms procurement program of the Thai armed forces until the economy stabilized. Within months, the sale would fail, the United States would buy back the eight aircraft, and the issue of sunk costs invested in the production line would become a major sticking point in the bilateral relationship.

Third, the legislatively mandated cessation of security and economic assistance caused further erosion of the relationship. On September 19, 2006, Thailand's army seized control of the government and declared martial law. Coup leaders suspended the constitution and most branches of the government. Section 508 of the U.S. Foreign Operations Appropriations Act prohibited obligating or expending funds for a foreign government deposed by decree or military coup. U.S. Government displeasure with the coup, Washington's vocal concern over the coup group's willingness to invoke emergency powers to quash public demonstrations of support for the deposed prime minister, and Washington's public criticism of the interim government's unwillingness or inability to drive forward more rapidly with plans for drafting a new constitution, holding a referendum, and conducting a new election began a serious downward spiral in the relationship as the senior Thai military officials and foreign policy managers wondered why they were coming in for inordinate negative attention from a treaty ally.

In each of these issues, on the U.S. side, a Presidential decision was required to approve the Department of Defense proposed course of action:

- Following the 1996 and the 2006 coups, American law required Presidential certification to Congress that a democratically elected government had taken office in Thailand before U.S. assistance under the Foreign Operations Appropriations Act could be resumed.
- Presidential intervention was required once the Thai government put the decision regarding the U.S. proposal to position stocks of equipment in the Adaman Sea to their prime minister.
- Presidential authority had to be sought in the instance of the 1998 decision to eliminate Thai liability for the F/A–18 contract, as well as the Defense Department's plan to purchase the aircraft for foreign military sales (FMS) purposes, largely because of the administration's obligation to ask Congress for the necessary authority for the $250 million price tag for the eight aircraft.

In all three issues, each side walked away with less than they hoped to get out of their treaty ally, meaning that the weight of the Presidency and the prime minister's power were not sufficient to move the issues to a mutually satisfactory decision. The individual equities of the two countries were, on these matters, far apart, the differences hard to breech, and the stakes for each country significant enough that policy positions were not easily modified, even with the involvement of the highest levels.

In each of these issues, significant financial stakes were involved, and complex legislation constrained the U.S. Government maneuverability, underscoring Washington's limited ability to tailor responses in a fashion that would redound to Thailand's favor. In each instance, the Thai military and government came to look at the U.S. response as a litmus test of the bilateral defense relationship. In all three instances, massively different departmental level equities were at stake within the U.S. Government. By the time the government arrived at a decision point and devised a strategy for each issue, it was already necessary to deploy serious measures to counter the impact of these issues on the relationship.

In each of these three cases, the Thai side balked at a one-size-fits-all approach to the relationship and riled at the end of the era of friendship prices and special treatment. The

Thai policy bureaucracies responded to these issues in diffuse ways, with no center of decisionmaking gravity emerging. Various ministerial level authorities eschewed a voice in what many expected would ultimately become a National Assembly issue, or a prime ministerial–level decision; Thailand's governments could not reshape these issues in a way that might have avoided the potential collision course with U.S. interests.

The U.S.-Thai relationship leveled off in 1998 at a low ebb as a result of Thai perceptions of Washington inaction in the face of serious economic times for Bangkok. Though the tone of the relationship remained formal, proper, and friendly, public opinion and the views expressed by outspoken and influential Thai commentators and legislators suggested that the reservoir of goodwill had dropped precipitously. Throughout the first half of 1999, senior Thai generals, journalists, and academics remained perplexed as to what it was that Thailand had done to anger Washington enough that it would stand by and allow Thailand to feel so much economic pain without stepping in to help. The Thai military felt the economic pinch, and its concerns escalated to a fever pitch over shortfalls in accounts dedicated to managing FMS.

Probably the most painful and bilaterally sensitive of these three benchmark issues was Prime Minister Chuan's effort to terminate the F/A–18 sale. In his view, the contract to purchase the fighter was an irrational one. Indeed, Chuan's decision to press for a termination of the F/A–18 sale was part of his commitment to scrub the military budget and reverse what he saw as unnecessary weapons acquisitions. Even after the Presidential decision to release Thailand from further financial obligations in this contract, bad feelings remained within the Thai officer corps about the lengthy, excessively legalistic deliberations and the manner in which financial determinations overrode friendship and the spirit of alliance cooperation—feelings evidenced by audible Thai complaints about U.S. reliability as a treaty ally.

In this atmosphere, bilateral issues that would have been otherwise manageable were viewed as crisis points in the relationship. Issues such as the late March 1999 discovery of a chemical spill at Hua Hin airport traced to authorized U.S. use of that facility during the 1960s as a staging area for pretests of defoliants that were ultimately deployed to Vietnam ignited a frenzy of press speculation, National Assembly interventions, and government debate over culpability, liability, and environmental and health impacts that loomed as a problem for the whole relationship. In early 1999, nothing rankled Bangkok more than Washington's support of the Canadian candidate for the presidency of the World Trade Organization (WTO), thus freezing out the Thai candidate, Suphachai Phanitchaphak, the deputy minister for economic affairs and minister of commerce. Beginning in April 1999, Thailand was increasingly inclined to publicly vent its extreme disappointment with how the United States handled the WTO process of selecting a candidate for the next presidency. Suphachai's candidacy was viewed in Bangkok as an opportunity for Thailand to step out onto the world stage. Thailand rejected the explanation that U.S. positions were based on trade policy interests, and as such should not negatively affect the bilateral relationship. Thai officials were increasingly convinced that the United States was the only hard line opposition to Suphachai. It was not until the middle of the year that an acceptable alternative emerged, according to which Suphachai would succeed the Canadian candidate for the WTO presidency with a 2-year term of his own. But even after the issue was at least nominally put to rest, there was still a distinct aftertaste that impacted the bilateral relationship.

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Evolving Relationship

In the first years of the 21st century, the U.S.-Thai relationship remained proper and positive, though it had clearly begun to evolve away from the enthusiastic and vigorous pro-American views that characterized Thailand's link with the United States during the Vietnam War, and had begun to shift away from the identity of views on regional issues that sustained the coherence of the relationship in the post–Vietnam War decades. U.S.-Thai relations transitioned in the context of a changing region where ever more sophisticated multilateral interactions fulfilled immediate defense and security needs.

The strains in bilateral economic relations resulting from trade and intellectual property rights issues were paralleled by growing difficulties in the security relationship. Some of the elements of this evolution included the "graduation" of Thailand from status as an FMS recipient, the suspension of security and economic assistance following coups against elected governments, and the U.S. inability to satisfy Thai requests for military hardware at friendship prices. These and other variables, including changing regional alignments and the reality of active efforts by a rising China to influence Southeast Asia, have driven Bangkok to search for alternative sources of military hardware, to question some elements of the security relationship with the United States, to contemplate procurement arrangements that did not necessarily accord with U.S. interests, to be publicly more critical of elements of American policy in the region, and to search for balance between independence and "proximity" to any single country.

Importantly, these growing pains have not yet undermined bilateral security cooperation or had a negative impact on U.S. access to critical facilities or the ability to conduct joint exercises. The Thai value the security relationship with the United States, but believe that Thailand's security is increasingly of marginal interest to Washington. They understand that the lion's share of dividends (access and training opportunities) go to the United States and believe that Washington has tended to take the relationship for granted. In instances where Washington and Bangkok do not have a commonality of interest, or where Thailand does not see its defense equities as being at stake, it has indeed become harder to get Thailand to support U.S. positions. The increasing complexity of regional relations, and growing political sophistication of the members of ASEAN in diplomacy, have combined to yield a Thailand that does not feel the compunction to automatically support U.S. positions on regional and global challenges, to make contributions to

international peacekeeping efforts at the level the United States feels is appropriate, to support U.S. positions on regional arms procurement issues, or to accommodate U.S. access and prepositioning requirements.

Senior Thai officials had recognized that with the end of the Cold War, and the emergence of a range of regional issues and transnational challenges that had seized the attention of the United States, Thailand in particular and Southeast Asia more generally had receded in Washington's ranking of foreign and defense policy priorities. Thai officials believed that the United States had been slow to recognize the importance of Southeast Asia in the face of the rapid emergence of India in South Asia and the rise of China, and remiss at identifying the strategic relevance, increasing importance, and adaptability of ASEAN, which in some Asian minds was well placed to serve as a bridge between and among the emerging powers in the region and a link between the two oceans.[2]

Moreover, Bangkok's vigorous commitment to the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Dialogue, and the fact that former Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan, a distinguished Thai diplomat, had assumed the position of ASEAN Secretary General in early 2008, suggested to many Thai officials that Bangkok is a "natural partner" for a reinvigorated U.S. relationship with the region. Thailand's willingness to adapt the showcase military exercise with the United States to reflect the evolving nature of relations in the region by adding more countries to the mix each year (including Japan and China), and incorporating peacekeeping and disaster relief scenarios, coupled with Thailand's readiness to serve as an anchor for regional responses to natural disaster demonstrated during the 2004 tsunami, placed Thailand in a particularly strategic position to accomplish critical American goals, including coping with the perceived tide of anti-American sentiment in the Muslim countries of Southeast Asia, as former Ambassador to Washington Krit Garnjana-Goonchorn has pointed out.[3] Finally, the one critical point that Thai officials stressed during 2007–2008 was that though the relationship with the United States was vigorous and would thrive in the face of a renewed commitment by Washington to reengage fully with Thailand, it would no longer necessarily stand as the first among equal relationships cultivated by Thailand. In Ambassador Krit's words:

[A]*s a country caught up in a fast-changing geopolitical landscape, Thailand, as has historically always been the case, must remain open to engagement and interaction with a spectrum of countries. Where the United States fits in that spectrum depends on its own actions. These actions should, however, not merely be a gesture of goodwill, but they must come from the realization or indeed, cold strategic calculation of the United States' own interests in Thailand and Southeast Asia.*[4]

Attempts to restore normal U.S.-Thai defense and security relations, deepen the strategic relationship, and sustain attention to capability development took place in the context of diminished vigor in bilateral defense relations, Thai distress over Washington's inattentiveness, and the growing Thai sense that its own strategic interests would be better served by foreign and defense relations with a range of countries beyond the United States. Senior U.S. defense policy officials have told Thai military interlocutors that the goal is to "renew" bilateral military interactions, emphasize multilateral cooperation in maritime security, continue counterterrorism cooperation, support Thai military transformation, and enhance Thailand's humanitarian assistance and disaster response capabilities.

To the Thai side, however, this sounds like little more than returning to the status quo ante. While that would be welcome in Thailand in terms of the resources, financial commitments, practical programs, military sales, and real training that this would entail, it does not key into the perspective that Thailand is not merely an old treaty ally and a convenient port of call. Thailand believes that it is a significant player with which the United States could do much to achieve strategically meaningful advantages in the region. The Thai have attempted to make clear that they have something to bring to the table and that they welcome U.S. assistance and packaged "capacity building" initiatives. But Thailand needs to be seen as a regionally significant country poised to make real contributions to the vision of a peaceful, integrated, economically vibrant Southeast Asia that is increasingly capable of managing new defense and security challenges.

New Roles

One way of looking at what Thailand might mean by this is to review what Bangkok may have in mind regarding Burma. The Thai were one of the first responders to cyclone Nargis, which crippled Burma in 2008. They moved a C–130 into Rangoon early in the aftermath of the cyclone's deadly foray through the Irrawaddy Delta. Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej lent his voice to the international effort to nudge the Burmese military leadership to begin issuing visas to international aid experts, and to allow aircraft into Burma with specialists who could facilitate the distribution of relief commodities. The Burmese rebuffed the international community, insisted that they could handle the consequences of the cyclone, and continued to allow only select relief flights by the United Nations and, beginning on May 9, the United States. Prime Minister Samak, initially snubbed by the junta, visited Burma on May 14. He was instrumental in getting an agreement in principal from the Burmese to receive an ASEAN disaster assessment team. Thailand worked closely with Singapore in organizing the ASEAN effort to press the Burmese toward flexibility on relief flights and access for regional assessment teams and disaster response experts. Thailand provided a staging area at Utapao for the U.S. Pacific Command joint task force and accommodated the presence of the U.S. Agency for International Development Disaster Assistance Response Team. Moreover, in late May, the Thai hosted the 27th annual Cobra Gold exercise, with a significant humanitarian disaster response component to its command post dimension.

The Thai have long felt that they had something to offer the United States in terms of perspectives regarding, and access to, the leadership of Burma. The Thai have urged flexibility, understanding, a certain amount of accommodation, and real recognition that the equation of power in Burma suggests that the military will be in a leadership role for a long time. From the days of General Suchinda Kraprayoon's close and friendly relations with the original State Law and Order Restoration Council leadership, the United States has rebuffed those views, which

struck a succession of U.S. administrations as deriving from individual relations between the Thai military and their Burmese counterparts. That Thai perspective, to Washington's way of thinking, placed a primacy on using these channels of communication to establish peace and quiet rather than determining ways to press the Burmese toward the vision of a democratic state capable of conducting free and fair elections, willing to achieve peace with the ethnic groups seeking independence, and prepared to allow the population to engage in trade and commerce.

It is not clear that the current Thai government is in a position to add more to the mix now, but it is clear that the Thai have grown closer to the Singaporean view of how Burma should be managed in the ASEAN context[5] than to Washington's perspective over the last 15 years that placed a primacy on achieving the junta's eventual replacement by a coalition of some sort that integrates a wide range of players into the formula for a national government in Burma. The Thai appear confident in the perspective, increasingly shared as the ASEAN point of view, that places a primacy on sustaining lines of communication with the junta because it is the only source of power in the country. Importantly, Thailand and other ASEAN friends have ceased efforts to justify Burma's domestic policies.

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Another area where the Thai believe that they have something to offer is in overall regional relations, and especially the U.S. relationship with ASEAN. The Thai, perhaps more than any other Southeast Asian country, believed that the U.S. refusal to lend help during the 1997 Asian financial crisis was a serious strategic error in judgment, and demonstrated Washington's "too little, too late" relationship with ASEAN. The Thai took the position that the United States, rather than Japan, should have formed the monetary fund to stabilize the region. Senior Thai officials pointed out that China, Japan, and Korea had all played a galvanizing role in meetings with the region, but there has been no U.S.–ASEAN summit in the 30-year life span of the organization, and the first glimmer of the idea for such a meeting derived from the ASEAN–U.S. Enhanced Partnership, not the United States. Similarly, from the Thai perspective, one shared by many ASEAN observers, the U.S. Enterprise for ASEAN Initiative (EAI) and the ASEAN Cooperation Plan both derived their primary inspiration from the 2002 meeting of the Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting. ASEAN, as Surin Pitsuwan puts it, is an afterthought to APEC.

Thailand and other regional countries viewed the U.S.–ASEAN relationship as a perfunctory expression of commitment to Southeast Asia and shared their confusion about why the United States remained the only ASEAN dialogue partner that had not yet announced intentions to accede to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia through late 2008, only edging toward this decision under the new administration of President Barack Obama. To paraphrase former Foreign Minister Surin, if the United States is intent on maintaining the momentum and trajectory of its relationship with Thailand, it cannot continue to view things through the prism of Thailand of the past; mere military and other assistance are not enough to allow the United States to maintain its presence in the region.[6]

Over time, it has grown more difficult to manage issues in the defense relationship and to persuasively articulate the core goals and values of the alliance without bumping up against the misunderstandings that have dotted the landscape of the relationship for the last two decades. None of this means that Thailand is any less important to the United States or that the bilateral relationship has grown cold and irrelevant. Thailand remains a good friend, deserving its status as a major non-NATO Ally, clearly willing to make sacrifices to support continued U.S. presence in the region and to team up with the United States and others in prosecuting the war on terror. Indeed, two Thai troops made the ultimate sacrifice in Iraq while deployed as part of the coalition, a serious reminder of Thailand's continuing commitment to shared goals. However, while the relationship is sound and stable, there is a dimension to it that bears ill-concealed scars from some tough moments and difficult-to-manage issues that grow harder to heal with age.

Thailand's preoccupation since the coup of September 2006 with the complex issues of national governance, political power, social justice, stability, and the viability of democratic institutions has diverted Bangkok's attention from the effective management of foreign policy without dulling the strategic value of the U.S.-Thai alliance, and without devaluing the strong economic partnership that makes bilateral trade and commerce so important to both Bangkok and Washington. It is not clear how the fundamental institutes of democracy and the Thai monarchy will emerge from the bewildering contests between domestic political forces that were vying chaotically for influence and power through mid 2009. It does appear that the military will remain a key, strong, and powerful institution; that the Thai defense establishment and foreign policy leadership will value its relationship with the United States; and that the cumulative conflicts and issues that have shaped bilateral defense and security issues will have to be managed cleverly by both sides in order to engineer sustained commitment to common goals in a changing regional and global strategic context. The future of bilateral defense and security cooperation will be shaped by how effectively Thailand and the United States manage the treaty relationship in the face of diverging strategic interests.

What Is to Be Done?

It is not clear how much energy each side is prepared to invest in bridging the gap between the legacy of strong and historically meaningful defense ties and the trend toward separate and unequal strategic goals in the region.

Thailand is preoccupied with domestic political issues and internal contests for power, and is experiencing a transition that has begun to yield new roles in the political system for a wider range of interest groups, a continuing generational change in leadership, and new rules for conducting politics

in this evolving environment. The military has eschewed its traditional and practiced "defense of the Kingdom" rationalization for strong, reactive behavior in the face of large public displays of political activism. The defense establishment and the foreign policy making apparatus are weighing new security options, agreeing to increased proximity to China through specialized naval and military joint training and operations, and looking for a central role in the emergence of a new regional architecture, an increasingly active, strategically meaningful ASEAN.

The United States continues to emphasize the strength, resilience, and adaptability of the original relationship focusing on interoperability, facility access, and joint and combined training, though the two countries have come to the shared realization of the need to multilateralize Cobra Gold, shift resources to address regional threats and nontraditional challenges such as avian flu and humanitarian disasters, and take into account new requirements deriving from competing maritime claims and China's growing naval capabilities. The challenge will be to identify elements of the bilateral relationship that can offer an effective basis for both continued bilateral cooperation and growing regional security and defense mindedness.

What kinds of initiatives could press bilateral defense cooperation beyond current constraints and define a trajectory for defense and security engagement that could be embraced by both sides? Thailand and the United States should build on the record of success in several areas:

- Specific, technical-level defense consultations on issues such as strategic plans for system acquisition, defense procurement budgeting, and rationalizing acquisition plans across services dating from the late 1990s.
- Cooperation on broad spectrum reform in areas such as the management of security assistance that could conceivably be the model on which larger bilateral defense reform projects are formulated.
- Assistance in the form of advice and guidance for the military in its efforts to define an effective, appropriate, constitutionally correct role against threats to sovereignty and stability of Thailand posed by both indigenous forces and groups with external support, focusing on efficient unit structure, force management, and development of effective doctrine and codes of conduct supporting laws, orders, and regulations.
- Joint work in the area of military education, both in terms of pursuing long-term training opportunities for Thai officers and modernizing the national military education system.

There is a natural basis for sustained cooperation in these areas and clear ways to reflect the need for a new responsiveness to complex strategic equities with impacts beyond the narrow bilateral stakes for Thailand and the United States. For example, the United States and Thailand need to move ahead with plans for Phase Two of the Defense Resources Management System (DRMS) program aimed at offering Thailand the professional guidance on management practices, methods for enhancing transparency and accountability, means of acquiring new capabilities, and steps that could be taken to deepen bilateral staff and senior level military exchanges.[7] The Thai have, during the course of the last 5 to 7 years, recognized the need to do more effective work in the area of retaining trained officers and specialists, especially as the economy began to offer highly trained technicians a much more lucrative alternative. The DRMS program is a mechanism for focusing on such issues.

The Thai have evinced long-term interest in developing counterterrorism capabilities and maritime security resources. During his June 2008 visit to Bangkok, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates promised continued U.S. help with Thailand's installation of a new coastal radar network. However, the issue of strengthening Thailand's coastal defense capabilities should not revolve around U.S. ability to procure maritime radars. Priority attention needs to shift to the development of Thailand's blue water naval capabilities, capacity to conduct operations that transcend local patrols, and willingness to contribute in constructive ways to multinational maritime operations.

Joining MALSINDO (the Trilateral Coordinated Patrols) patrols and "Eyes in the Sky" in the Strait of Malacca in 2008 was a good start. However, Thailand needs to put its efforts into readying the Royal Thai Navy to pull its weight in coastal patrols alongside of contributing ASEAN neighbors. Thailand also needs to focus on developing the naval wherewithal to support the Proliferation Security Initiative, rather than fixing its attention on procuring one discrete defense system (the coastal radars). Continued work with the DRMS project should help raise Thailand's vision from military hardware-focused solutions to narrow problems to more effective ways of factoring strategic variables and policy priorities into procurement choices. The United States needs to follow up on that promise for specific systems such as the coastal radar, but the acquisition needs to be wedded to strategic goals, and in this environment of fiscal caution and overall diminishing resources as well as the shifting of attention to the threats in the triborder area, the coastal radar system is not nearly as relevant as an investment in blue water capabilities, and not nearly as pressing as the need to develop a nimble way to make strategic decisions relevant to Thailand's status as a maritime power.

Thai resources need to be leveraged in a way that could bring both new bilateral relevance to training and exercise cooperation, and increased vigor to the multilateral aspect of joint and combined training exercises such as Cobra Gold. The Thai are clearly concerned about their capacity to conduct effective logistics in the context of contemporary multinational planning efforts, disaster relief efforts, and peacekeeping operations. That area holds promise as a fertile field for expanded cooperation. In 2008, the United States and Thailand agreed to expand the field training exercise and to extend full partnership to other countries. Inviting the participation of capable navies of friends and allies such as South Korea would be a positive step in the direction of continuing to invent ways of making Cobra Gold regionally relevant and strategically important.

The Philippines is enmeshed in a process aimed at reforming the defense establishment, and invigorating the defense ministry, in the form of the Philippine Defense Reform. Indonesia and the United States continue to discuss the potential for a formal plan aimed at uniting defense resources, talent, and capabilities with the goal of streamlining, modernizing, and professionalizing the Indonesian military. There has never

been a parallel attempt to work with the Thai to rationalize a swath of defense establishment practices or to conduct a large-scale review of the operating environment, ministerial organization and management practices, or procurement processes. Parochial service equities have militated against broad defense reform cooperation with Thailand, and legislatively mandated cessations of security and economic assistance may have cooled political support for anything so ambitious. Nevertheless, Thailand needs to ask itself whether the synergies and resources that the United States can bring would be sufficient incentive to sit down at a planning table with some tailored version of this kind of defense reform enterprise in mind.

The current problems in southern Thailand represent a special case, far different than the Cold War efforts to meet the challenges posed by insurgencies, with a decidedly regional dimension to the problem that has been lost in efforts to localize and minimize the impact of southern Thailand on broader ASEAN strategic equities. The Thai have been sensitive to introducing foreign military resources and personnel into the fray in a manner that could escalate the issue beyond its current parameters. However, without challenging those assumptions, or trespassing against the Thai policy decisions regarding the way to manage the southern unpleasantness, the United States could do more than current train and equip work with specific Thai armed forces units. Systematic assessments of the etiology of conflict beyond technical targeting and intelligence-sharing, organized scrutiny of the situation by strategic critics, more systematic efforts to draw conclusions about the nature of the fight in the south, and attempts to discern the utility in lessons learned regarding building basic security, inculcating the habits of good governance and economic development, and working directly with local populations through provincial reconstruction teams are necessary parts of any equation aimed at addressing an insurgency. In view of this, the application of the kind of historic recordkeeping that has made lessons learned efforts more lucrative for the U.S. Army in Iraq and Afghanistan might add meaningfully to Thai efforts to determine the shape and trajectory of the southern problem.

There is a long, historical basis for U.S. defense cooperation with Thailand in the area of military education. The Thai have recognized the need for some "modernization" of their national military education system. In June 2008, Secretary Gates told then–Prime Minister Samak that the United States would be strongly interested in helping with efforts to professionalize the country's military officer corps through the Thai National Defense College (NDC). Senior Thai military officers have expressed interest in future partnerships regarding military education. In late 2008, Supreme Commander General Boonsrang Niumpradit articulated his willingness to explore collaboration between the NDC and the U.S. National Defense University. Thailand's Strategic Research Institute, established as the think tank for the Royal Thai Armed Forces National Defence College in 2007, was designed to be the equivalent of the NDU Institute for National Strategic Studies. That connection needs to be energized. A concerted effort to cooperate on developing this institution as the basis for a sustained strategic dialogue would serve the interests of the relationship and should be a priority focus for the United States.

Finally, there is a recognized commonality of interests regarding the ASEAN architectural design and ARF role as a contributing factor to strengthen local cooperation on defense and security issues that matter to the neighborhood. The United States should support Thailand's efforts to take a more prominent role in the region through the activities and mechanisms of the regional association, possibly by co-hosting a future voluntary demonstration of response humanitarian assistance and disaster relief exercise that would be a positive step following the inaugural demonstration in May 2009 in the Philippines. Both the United States and Thailand should focus on finding the strategic commonalities that have informed bilateral relations for decades and building on the record of success that has characterized the practical dimensions of defense engagement between the two. They should look to past successes in developing training and exercise regimens and traditions, the shared commitment to modernizing and professionalizing the Thai armed forces, and close familiarity with procurement processes and the innate sense of how to improve acquisition processes. Both countries should work to shape those achievements in ways that begin to serve more complex strategic requirements in a fiscally challenging moment.

This work needs to be accomplished in a fashion that infuses the bilateral relationship with greater strategic depth and acknowledges the increasing responsibilities that Thailand is capable of assuming in regional defense and security cooperation regarding efforts to counter piracy and terrorism, cope with and prepare for humanitarian disasters and pandemic threats, and deal with weapons proliferation and other unanticipated threats to regional stability and prosperity.

Notes

[1] The role of Royal Thai Army Commander in Chief General Wimon Wongwanit in thwarting this U.S. initiative was hailed, and the episode was regarded by critics of the alliance as a Thai foreign policy Declaration of Independence from Washington.

[2] Krit Garnjana-Goonchorn, "Thai-U.S. Relations in the Regional Context," *Southeast Asia Bulletin*, March 2008, 1–2.

[3] Krit, 2.

[4] Ibid.

[5] K. Kesavanpany, "Myanmar, ASEAN's Albatross," *Southeast Asia Bulletin*, July 2008, 1–2.

[6] Surin Pitsuwan, "U.S.-ASEAN Cooperation," *Southeast Asia Bulletin*, February 2008, 1–2.

[7] Thai Embassy Update, April 2008, available at <www.thaiembdc.org/Ann_Doc/ThailandUpdate4_08.pdf>.

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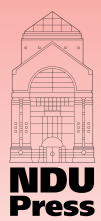

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