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After Obama's Visit: The US-Thailand Alliance and China

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This has been another remarkable year for the US-Thailand relationship. On November 18, the oldest US ally in Asia hosted President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for a high-profile visit, but beyond the public glare it was Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta's visit three days earlier, on November 15, that led to the most significant outcome, the adoption of a new joint vision statement for the Thai-US Defense Alliance. While this reflects Washington's priority in reviving governmental security ties, the United States must not forget to also secure the support of a Thai public opinion that is increasingly attracted by Chinese soft power.

Sasiwan Chingchit, Non-Resident WSD-Handa Fellow at Pacific Forum CSIS, explains that "Washington cannot simply rely on this feel-good moment and must invest considerable resources to assuage Thai concerns about the United States seeking to manipulate Thailand against China and increase regional conflict."

The US "rebalance" towards the Asia-Pacific has been met with some skepticism from the Thai media which expressed concerns that this new US-Thai security agreement could spoil Thailand's strong ties with China. The strongest reaction came from anti-Thaksin Yellow Shirts' media outlets. They tried to frame US reengagement in the Asia-Pacific as an attempt to contain and provoke China, which in turn would eventually have negative implications for Thailand and the region as a whole. Despite repeated affirmations from the US ambassador to Thailand, Christie Kenney, that the United States has no intention of creating polarity in the region, Thais remain worried about the potential cost concerning Thailand's middle position between China and the United States.

Last June, this same mistrust stirred by the opposition Democrat Party and Yellow Shirts, resulted in Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's government delaying its approval of NASA's request to use the U-Tapao airbase for atmospheric studies in Southeast Asia. Unfortunately, this civilian research project got mixed up with US-Thai agreement to explore possibilities of using the same airbase as a possible logistical center for US Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HA/DR) operations throughout the region. There were widespread Thai suspicions of military operations behind the NASA project and a grave concern that the United States would utilize the airbase to spy upon China. The Thai government handled this entire episode poorly leading many analysts to present Thailand as being unreceptive to cooperating with the United States, even in purely civilian related matters.

Once again this was another incident when Thai domestic politics complicated its foreign affairs, a point that should not be overlooked by the United States. Clearly, Thailand's turbulent domestic situation has the potential to disrupt closer US-Thai military-to-military collaboration at a time when the United States is seeking to deepen its relationship with allies throughout the region. More importantly, the traditionally positive image of the United States is declining and facing the challenge of China's increasing presence in Thailand.



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Public support for the Thailand-China relationship is very strong, even when taking into consideration that it is Japan, and not China, which is Thailand’s largest trading partner, foreign direct investor, and partner for development assistance. Furthermore, Thailand has a large trade deficit with both China and Japan, while it enjoys a significant surplus with the United States, its third largest trading partner.

When Thailand announced its intention, in 2010, to become a “strategic partner” of China, there were few, if any, public concerns expressed how this relationship could potentially damage its relationship with the United States, Japan, South Korea and other ASEAN members, especially those ASEAN members who are claimants in territorial disputes with China over the South China Sea. Apart from revealing Thai public ignorance of regional affairs, this also gives an insight into the success of Chinese public diplomacy in Thailand.

Within a short span of 37 years since Thailand reestablished diplomatic relations with China, ties between the two countries has gone from strength to strength, partially as a result of China’s growing economy, its rising global status and historical links to Thailand. Twelve million Thais—20 percent of the total population—are of Sino-Thai heritage. This minority is very active in the economy and plays an important role in business relations with China. In addition, the two countries frequently exchange high-level visits, and China employs a pragmatic and non-interventionist diplomatic approach despite Thailand’s domestic political instability. On the contrary, US-Thai relations suffered after the 2006 anti-Thaksin military coup when Washington applied sanctions resulting in three years of cuts in developmental assistance.

The old saying that “A friend in need is a friend indeed” resonates in Thailand. China won the hearts of many Thais when amidst the crippling 1997 economic crisis it refused to devalue its currency and, through the IMF, offered financial support. This was again apparent to Thais when, following the 2011 floods that devastated much of their country, China immediately responded with US\$16 million of assistance, seventeen times more than the amount of the first American relief package.

This stands in stark contrast with the Cold War period, when Thailand was a main beneficiary of US assistance and adopted many American economic, infrastructural and educational models. But these past ties seem to no longer resonate with many Thais today and the country is increasingly oblivious of the benefits, that for more than 60 years, Thailand received from American contributions to democratic and human capital development projects.

These perceptual shifts in Thai public opinion are vital as Thailand reassumes a central position in the US new geopolitical strategy in the Asia Pacific. Thailand’s flexible and multi-aligned foreign policy approach may lead the country to act as a mediator for interregional cooperation and conflict amelioration. The fact that Thailand cultivates friendly relations with both the United States and China could facilitate improved relations between the two powers in Asia and help other Southeast Asian states to avoid having to make sharp choices.

Public opinion polls during Obama’s recent visit demonstrate that the Thai people see the United States as a role model of democracy and transparency and greatly admire President Obama’s leadership and charisma. However, Washington cannot simply rely on this feel-good moment and must invest considerable resources to assuage Thai concerns about the United States seeking to manipulate Thailand against China and increase regional conflict. The United States also needs to increase efforts in strengthening US-Thai people-to-people relations if it wants Thailand to remain a strong ally.