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Unsteady Thailand

Despite the unifying power of the monarchy, Thailand remains bedeviled by political tensions and ethnic unrest. These may eventually determine the country's relations with the United States and China.

By Sonia Rothwell for ISN

The United States' decision in late 2011 to increase the pace of its strategic "refocus" towards Asia-Pacific means that for the first time since the end of the Cold War, Southeast Asia will become a theater in which an existing and rising power vie for regional hegemony. From the outset, the Obama presidency has signaled its intention to renew [the United States' ties with its allies in Asia-Pacific](#). The switch follows decades of focus upon Europe, the Middle East and South Asia. Indeed, the continued draw-down of troops in Iraq and Afghanistan means that Washington's new Asia-Pacific policies can now take material shape. They will build on groundwork carried out since the final years of the Clinton presidency, where attempts were made to strengthen ties via regional military exercises, logistical support and intelligence sharing. Depending on whether or not the US is seen as a threat to the region or as a benevolent presence, we may see states there balance against one or other of the powers. We may even see them opt to [bandwagon and join one or other of the rising powers](#) of China, India and Indonesia.

One of the countries faced with this choice is Thailand - a close ally of China (it has a small but well-integrated Chinese minority), but also a nation which has cordial and well-established relations with the United States. Broadly, there are three main potential directions for Thailand's foreign policy: it could continue to enhance ties with China, rejuvenate close relations with the US, or it could court neither and attempt to create regional strategic alliances without committing itself in the long term. At the moment, it appears that Thailand is leaning towards China as a patron, for reasons which will be outlined later in this article.

Domestically, Thailand must also address and contain the growing threats to its internal security, not least that posed by the potential impact of the death of its long-serving octogenarian king, a unifying presence in an otherwise politically fractious country. Over the last decade, Thailand has faced a [wide variety of threats](#) from political (an estimated 18 coups since the end of the absolute monarchy and an increasingly agitated and politicized rural working class) to environmental (the devastating floods of 2011) as well as a lengthy insurgency in its ethnic-Malay Muslim southern states.

Red shirt protests

Politically, much of the recent instability stems from the rule of former Prime Minister Thaksin

Shinawatra who, during his premiership, empowered Thailand's impoverished rural classes by - among other things - introducing universal health care and reducing rural poverty. However, he also suppressed the developing Thai media and was repeatedly the focus of corruption allegations. His overthrow by urban elites in 2006 caused anger among his impoverished core voters who felt their political voice was being rejected. Protests against Thaksin's removal continued sporadically until in 2009 a group of his supporters (known as 'red shirts') descended on Bangkok protesting against the military government which had replaced him. The ensuing political violence in turn led to the cancellation of an ASEAN summit.

These events point to serious class-based tensions between urban and rural, as well as rich and poor Thais. Thailand (formerly Siam) was an absolute monarchy until the 1930s since when it has transitioned stutteringly towards democracy. Demonstrations by the middle classes in the early 1990s, followed by the intervention of the king, removed the 30-year old military regime and replaced it with a civilian government. Indeed, the monarchy still holds significant power within Thailand. Tightly-enforced lese-majesty laws ensure that it remains a central, respected part of political life. Recently, however, there has been criticism that such laws are being applied over-zealously, leading to complaints by international NGOs such as [Human Rights Watch](#), as well as calls for the relaxation of such legislation.

Such developments are important for two reasons. First, the new government of Yingluck Shinawatra (sister to the exiled Thaksin) is at pains to prove its loyalty to the monarchy following criticism from royalists that the Thaksin administration was insufficiently loyal. Secondly, the current king, Bhumibol, is 84 years old and there are fears for the future influence of the monarchy given that the crown prince is said not to share his father's popularity. Bhumibol has been on the Thai throne for 66 years so his death has the potential to seriously impact on the stability of the country, especially considering the recent upsurge in political confidence among poorer Thais and persistent rumors of the return of Thaksin. Accordingly, encouragement of popular commitment to the monarchy may make the transition to a new ruler run more smoothly.

Ultimately, the gradual political awakening of Thais (the middle classes in the 1990s and the working classes in the 2000s), the final years of a long-serving and unifying monarch, disenfranchisement of a geographically-distant ethnic minority population and weak state institutions are bringing Thailand to a critical point in its recent history. Adding to the political tensions in the north is continued violence in an insurgency in the four most southerly provinces that threatens Thailand's unity as a state. One could argue that what is happening is an internal re-balance of power against the traditional elites, with the result that what was once a promising democracy may instead face a period of prolonged internal instability. The [grievances of the majority ethnic-Malays in the south](#) stem not from religious sectarianism but from cultural, economic and geographical remoteness from the Thai government. Prime Minister Yingluck has made tentative moves to find ways of damping down the insurgency. Nevertheless, a [resolution](#) that cracks the unity of Thailand (semi-autonomy for the states of the former sultanate) is not being wholly discounted, at least officially.

Regional geopolitical shift

If Thailand's internal dynamics are in flux, around it regional geopolitical plates are also moving. Recently, Myanmar's political and social reforms have led to rapprochement with the international community. They have attracted the attention of the European Union and the United States which has restored [diplomatic ties](#) with the former pariah state and has encouraged investment by US companies. The impact of such moves on Myanmar's relations with China is yet to be fully realized. Also yet to be realized is the impact of the recent flows of refugees from Burma into both China and Bangladesh.

Since the 1970s, Thai-Chinese relations have improved considerably. At the moment, Thailand appears to have better relations with its regional cohort than the United States. Prime Minister Yingluck [visited Beijing in spring 2012](#) where she met outgoing Chinese leader Hu Jintao during what appeared to be a highly cordial trip. The two states affirmed their existing ties and signed agreements to boost bilateral trade. Ms Yingluck and Mr Hu promised to reinforce bilateral ties over regional security and environmental issues. The Thai delegation also promised to boost relations between China and ASEAN. Both countries pledged to work together and do more to ensure regional peace, stability and development.

Contrastingly, a recent high-level tour by the United States primarily focused on countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam and India. Although the US is Thailand's third largest single country export market, Washington appears to be concentrating its efforts on countries where its relations are less secure.

At the recent Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore, US Defense Secretary Leon Pannetta announced that by 2020, "the [US] navy will re-posture its forces from today's roughly 50/50 per cent split between the Pacific and the Atlantic to about a 60/40 split between those oceans." The move is a clear attempt to balance the increasing military confidence of traditionally non-interventionist China. It also appears to contradict comments made by President Obama in the early days of his presidency in 2009 where he told an [audience in Tokyo](#):

"In the 21st century... power does not need to be a zero-sum game, and nations need not fear the success of another. Cultivating spheres of cooperation - not competing spheres of influence - will lead to progress in the Asia Pacific."

But while Thailand is effectively balancing its self-interest by maintaining and strengthening ties with China, Bangkok nevertheless continues to work with its Western and regional partners. Through its participation in exercises such as [Cobra Gold](#), Thailand retains strong military ties with the US. It and the US are also currently in talks to enhance soft power links through the development of a regional disaster relief center at U-Tapao airport in Rayong province. Moreover, Thailand's economic well-being also remains dependent on US investments.

As Washington's plans for re-engagement with Asia-Pacific develop, we will see more clearly whether this relationship will continue along the same trajectory, or if Thailand may bandwagon with either of the main powers. However, ongoing domestic political uncertainty (which could be exacerbated should Ms Yingluck's brother Thaksin return to Thailand later in 2012) or a change of resident in the White House may affect the current dynamics of Thailand's relationship with the United States. Indeed, should things take a major turn for the worse in Thailand this will inevitably test the mettle of both the US and China.

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Sonia Rothwell is a multimedia journalist who has previously worked for the BBC and ITN. She holds an MSc in International Security and Global Governance from the University of London.

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ISN, Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich, Switzerland