

The Dilemma Confronting the U.S.-Thailand Relationship

BY *Pavin Chachavalpongpun*

Sarah Sewall, the U.S. under secretary of state for civilian security, democracy, and human rights, visited Thailand in late March. Her visit coincided with an ongoing debate on the country's controversial military-drafted constitution. Thailand, a treaty ally of the United States, has been in the custody of the army since a coup in May 2014 overthrew the elected government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. The military junta promised to hold elections in 2017, but with a critical royal transition on the horizon, many Thais doubt that the military will step down before the royal succession takes place.

Since the coup, people's liberties have been successively stripped, political parties have ceased to function, and the media has faced intense censorship. The "roadmap to democracy" introduced by the military appears to be just rhetoric; the junta seems more interested in preserving its political interests than enacting reforms.

Under these circumstances, the United States faces a dilemma. In the Cold War era, it worked intimately with the Thai military and monarchy in transforming Thailand into a pro-U.S. and anti-Communist state. These actions, however, enabled a series of largely authoritarian regimes. The United States has continued to follow these previous paradigms for engagement, despite Thailand's significantly changed political landscape, and its close relations with the elites who still wield power have not positively contributed toward greater democratization.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

In the aftermath of the 2014 coup, the United States penalized the Thai junta for its intervention. The Obama government suspended \$4.7 million in financial assistance to Thailand, while halting joint programs for Thai police training, including instruction on handling firearms and travel to the United States for senior officers.

Thailand was also excluded from the 2014 Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise—the largest maritime military exercise in the world—in response to human rights abuses in the wake of the coup. In addition to sanctions, the United States adopted several punitive measures to punish the Thai junta. In 2014 and 2015, Washington announced that, owing to the ongoing allegations of human trafficking, the Trafficking in Persons Report would relegate Thailand to the lowest rank, alongside countries such as Syria, Iran, and North Korea. Meanwhile, Cobra Gold, the largest military exercise between the two countries in the Asia-Pacific, was downgraded.

Advocates of democratic reform, however, have criticized these measures as "soft" and "lenient," and some have even called for the United States to suspend Cobra Gold altogether until a democratic government returns to Thailand. They have charged the United States with being more concerned with protecting its own short-term strategic interests than with promoting democracy.

International politics have directly dictated U.S. strategic interests in Southeast Asia. After the coup, Thailand diversified its foreign policy options to lessen the impacts of the Western sanctions. As a result, the military government strengthened ties with China and sought to gain an endorsement from the Chinese leadership of its legitimacy. The Thai request was met with a favorable response from China, which seeks to deepen its trade relations with Thailand while using the country to counterbalance U.S. influence in the region. In the aftermath of the coup, Thai military

leaders have made several trips to Beijing, inviting China to invest in megaprojects such as a high-speed train project within Thailand.

This closer relationship between Thailand and China poses a dilemma for the United States: Washington can hold onto its traditional ties with the military and the monarchy, thus compromising its stance on democratic reforms; or it can work with new alternative forces in the Thai political scene and continue to impose sanctions until a new democratic government is installed. Whereas the latter option could drive the current Thai regime further into the Chinese orbit, the first option might maintain the status quo at the expense of Thai democratization.

THE PATH AHEAD

A key question here is what long-term goal the United States should set for its relationship with Thailand. If the U.S. government wishes to maintain lasting influence in the region in the face of a rising China, it is critical that Washington encourage democratic reforms in Thailand, even if this policy means that Thailand under the junta grows closer to China in the short term. Allowing an authoritarian regime to take root in Thailand opens the door for a possible coalition of anti-democratic regimes in the region to challenge good governance, which in turn would jeopardize U.S. interests. Ultimately, the United States needs Thailand as a partner in tackling a range of important issues, from combatting terrorism to ensuring freedom of navigation in Southeast Asian waters.

Given this context, the United States should pursue the following objectives during the ASEAN Defence Senior Officials' Meeting-Plus on April 23–25 and in future diplomatic interactions:

Reaching out to new political players in Thailand. Washington should allow greater contact between the U.S. diplomatic mission in Bangkok and

the pro-democracy “red shirt” movement and communities, particularly in remote regions. In the past, the United States focused mostly on relationships with traditional Thai elites. But amid the shift of political power in Thailand, the United States will lose influence if it does not broaden its political ties within the country.

Reviewing the current U.S. sanctions policy. The Obama administration should look at its current policies vis-à-vis the junta to ensure that the latter will not impede the process of democratization. The United States should consider stricter sanctions that specifically target top military elites in the current government, including freezing assets and excluding them from international forums.

Downgrading the U.S. military relationship with Thailand. The United States' suspension of Cobra Gold and continued Thai exclusion from RIMPAC would encourage the military regime to reconsider its political intervention. Cobra Gold has long served as the bedrock of the bilateral relationship. Suspending the exercise would send a serious message that Washington wishes to see rapid political developments in Thailand.

Setting a long-term strategy. Unless Thailand becomes a democratic country again, the United States risks losing its influence, and ultimately its strategic interests, in Southeast Asia. Therefore, pushing for a return to democracy in Thailand should be the ultimate goal of the United States. ♦

PAVIN CHACHAVALPONGPUN is Associate Professor in the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Kyoto University. He can be reached at <pavin@cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp>.

The NBR Analysis Brief provides commentary on the Asia-Pacific from leading scholars and experts. The views expressed are those of the author.