

Navigating New Realities

The Future of US–Thai Relations

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Abstract

This article explores the shifting dynamics of US–Thai relations, emphasizing missed opportunities and potential areas of collaboration. Recent Thai elections could have rekindled US enthusiasm as a victory for democracy, but the conservative establishment’s actions led to a less democratic outcome. Yet, with a new Thai government and foreign minister, opportunities arise for increased cooperation. Potential areas of focus include safeguarding the Mekong River ecosystem, addressing climate change, and strengthening economic ties in mainland Southeast Asia. Additionally, this shift presents a chance for more constructive dialogue on Myanmar, especially in terms of cross-border humanitarian assistance. In the realm of defense and security, discussions on transforming U-Tapao Air Base into a regional disaster relief hub and addressing potential security concerns, such as Chinese access to Ream Naval Base in Cambodia, are on the horizon. While a return to the alliance’s heyday may seem improbable, this article argues that patience, persistence, and an acknowledgment of new geopolitical realities can pave the way for a more productive relationship between these long-standing allies.

With the conclusion of the Cold War, Southeast Asia entered a transformative era that spanned approximately 25 years. During this period, the geopolitics of the region underwent profound changes, reshaping the foundations of regional security. Washington’s two pivotal alliances in Southeast Asia, which had been cornerstones of stability, struggled to find purpose. In the post-Cold War era, US–Philippine relations weathered a turbulent course, while the alliance between Washington and Bangkok drifted. Policy makers in Washington relegated both alliances to secondary roles in US Asian foreign policy.

However, since the inauguration of the Bongbong Marcos administration, the past year has witnessed a revitalization of the US–Philippine alliance. A series of proactive measures have been taken to strengthen defense ties, highlighted by Marcos’ successful visit to Washington and a continuous stream of high-level US officials visiting Manila. In stark contrast, US–Thai relations have continued to amble along,

characterized by senior-level visits but a conspicuous lack of momentum, leading some to question whether the relationship qualifies any longer as an “alliance.”¹

How Did We Reach This Point?

Numerous factors have contributed to the erosion of the alliance, which reached its zenith during the Vietnam War, driven by mutual concerns regarding communist expansionism. Rewinding to 1975, the fall of Saigon and the broader US withdrawal from the region left Thai officials bewildered, shaking their confidence in Washington. Consequently, they embarked on diversifying their international relationships, notably by establishing ties with China.

The conclusion of the Cold War severed the alliance from a shared threat or adversary, and it marked the loss of the strategic lens through which Washington had previously viewed Thailand and Southeast Asia as a whole. The United States began exerting pressure on Thailand on a wide array of issues, spanning from trade matters to democracy and human rights. Thai officials voiced discontent, asserting that they were no longer receiving the special treatment befitting an ally. Furthermore, during the 1997–1998 Asian Financial Crisis, Washington offered minimal support and encouraged Thailand to follow the International Monetary Fund’s stringent prescriptions. In stark contrast, China provided more substantial support to its new partner. This period of US policy remains a source of disappointment, if not anger, for many Thais.

Relations experienced a modest warming in the early 2000s. Washington embraced Thailand’s democratic progress, its cooperation in the Global War on Terror, and its role as a regional hub for security cooperation, humanitarian relief, and US diplomatic endeavors. The US military and American officials working closely with Bangkok highly valued Thailand’s collaboration on an array of issues. The George W. Bush administration even bestowed major non-NATO ally status upon Thailand and initiated negotiations for a bilateral free trade agreement. However, this period of the alliance paled in comparison to its former “glory days.” This was evident in the absence of a shared threat perception, the dearth of substantial personal connections between senior Thai and US officials, and the relatively limited attention Washington—outside of the Pentagon—paid to Thailand.

The downward trajectory of the relationship gained momentum in 2006 when the Thai military ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra’s government in a

¹ Several authors recently have discussed this alliance versus partnership question. See, for example, Benjamin Zawacki, “U.S.-Thai Relations Have an Alliance Problem,” *Foreign Policy*, 12 May 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>; and Murray Hiebert, “The United States Makes Up Critical Terrain in Thailand,” *CSIS*, 2 September 2022, <https://www.csis.org/>.

coup. Washington denounced the coup and suspended military assistance in compliance with the law, though this reaction did not precipitate a complete breakdown in the relationship. Over the subsequent years, Thailand's deep-seated political polarization, persistent street protests by the "yellow shirts" and "red shirts," and occasional judicial interventions in electoral politics led to bewilderment and frustration among US officials.² They struggled to comprehend why the Thai establishment found it challenging to accept the outcomes of competitive elections.

The turning point came in 2014 with another military coup, which prompted a sharply critical response from the United States. This included another suspension of military aid and a deliberate distancing of the United States from the new Thai government. In response, the coup government and its conservative supporters bitterly criticized Washington, alleging double standards and a lack of understanding of the Thai situation. The government also began leaning increasingly toward China, which offered diplomatic backing, arms, and additional defense cooperation. Bangkok maintained a distinct chilliness toward the United States for several years, even initiating a brief 'investigation' of US Ambassador Glyn Davies for public comments related to the *lèse-majesté* law.³

The Trump administration, with a focus on the geopolitical rivalry with China rather than democracy and human rights, reengaged with Thailand in 2017–2018. It invited then–Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha to the White House and restored military-to-military relations following Thailand's pseudo-democratic 2019 elections. These actions stabilized bilateral relations, albeit at a less enthusiastic level than what the two countries had enjoyed for decades.

Where Relations Stand Today

After a sluggish start, the Biden administration ramped up its efforts in 2022 to enhance the United States' relationship with Thailand. This included hosting Prime Minister Prayut as part of the US–ASEAN Summit, convening the inau-

² See: Janjira Sombatpoonsiri, "Two Thailands: Clashing Political Orders and Entrenched Polarization," in *Political Polarization in South and Southeast Asia: Old Divisions, New Dangers*, ed. Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020), 67–80, <https://carnegieendowment.org/>. The red shirts initially emerged as backers of the deposed former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who faced removal in a military coup in September 2006. Over time, this support shifted to Thailand's ruling Pheu Thai party, led by Thaksin's sister, Yingluck Shinawatra. Conversely, the yellow shirts signify those who stood in opposition to Mr. Thaksin and played a pivotal role in the street protests that precipitated the 2006 coup.

³ Thomas Fuller, "Thai Police Investigate U.S. Ambassador on Suspicion of Insulting the King," *New York Times*, 9 December 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/>. This law makes it illegal to defame, insult, or threaten the monarch of Thailand.

gural bilateral Strategic and Defense Dialogue, dispatching Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to Bangkok for discussions on military modernization, and publicly lauding the signing of a communiqué by Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai. The communiqué was framed as an expansion of the renowned 1962 Rusk–Thanat communiqué, which had solidified the alliance half a century earlier.⁴

Despite these advancements, the relationship has yet to approach its previous heights for several notable reasons. Foremost, the two nations lack a shared perception of common threats. Notably, the United States perceives China as a threat, while Thailand regards China as a significant partner. Consequently, Washington has no doubt felt dissatisfaction with the deepening security ties between Thailand and China, including arms sales and joint military exercises.

Secondly, the United States has voiced its discontent with Thailand’s robust support for the Myanmar junta and its neutral stance regarding Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Thirdly, the Biden administration continues to be disappointed with the Thai conservative establishment’s employment of legal and parliamentary tactics to impede the restoration of full democracy in the kingdom. As an indication of this disappointment, the Biden administration opted not to invite Thailand to participate in its December 2021 and March 2023 Summits for Democracy. These decisions irked Thai authorities, as did President Joe Biden’s choice to skip the Thailand-hosted Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation leaders meeting in late 2022.⁵ Furthermore, Washington’s recent refusal of Thailand’s request to purchase F-35 fighter jets, possibly influenced by concerns regarding Thailand’s deepening security ties with China, undoubtedly contributed to Bangkok’s frustration.⁶

The Way Ahead

As previously highlighted, the current reality has prompted some to question the relevance of the US–Thailand alliance in its current form. Some wonder if it might be more accurate to reclassify the relationship as something other than a traditional alliance, considering the glaring lack of strategic alignment and Thai-

⁴ “Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Thai Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai Remarks to the Press” (press release, US Department of State, 10 July 2022), <https://www.state.gov/>.

⁵ Masayuki Yuda, “Thailand Belittled Again as U.S. Ostracizes It From Democracy Summit,” *Nikkei Asia*, 9 December 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/>; and “Thailand Shut Out of U.S. Democracy Summit Again,” *Bangkok Post*, 29 March 2023, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

⁶ Matthew Fulco and Chen Chuanren, “U.S.-Thai Military Alliance Is At A Crossroads,” *Aviation Week*, 19 July 2023, <https://aviationweek.com/>.

land's burgeoning closeness to China. Considering these factors, it appears that the objectives of the two nations are increasingly divergent. In fact, discreet voices in Thailand have been quietly suggesting for years that their "alliance" with the United States appears less meaningful and valuable when compared to Washington's "partnerships" with non-allies, such as Singapore and even Vietnam.

While it is true that the current state of the relationship is more aptly described as a partnership rather than a conventional alliance, this does not necessarily imply that the governments should terminate the alliance altogether. In the realm of diplomacy, such a move would inevitably be perceived as a downgrade of the relationship, regardless of any new title applied to it. It would be more prudent for both governments to focus on enhancing the substance and tone of the relationship while accepting the inherent ambiguity of being somewhat misaligned allies.

The key to strengthening these ties lies in both countries adjusting their expectations regarding each other and the relationship itself. The United States should accept that Thailand is not currently strategically aligned with Washington nor a full-fledged democracy. Nevertheless, Thailand can still play a crucial role as an important partner. This recognition, among other factors, necessitates patience concerning Thailand's domestic politics and faith that the kingdom will not fall excessively under China's influence. Instead, like Indonesia and Malaysia, it can seek to maintain positive relations with both major powers as well as numerous middle powers.

On the other hand, Thailand should realize that its relationship with Washington holds significance for its own strategic autonomy, security, and economic interests. It should strive to be a more constructive partner.

Moving forward, both nations can capitalize on the numerous strengths within their broad and deep relationship. The United States remains Thailand's leading export market and its third-largest source of foreign investment. Thailand has also aligned itself with Washington's Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. Health cooperation, notably the long-standing partnership in health research, continues to thrive. The security relationship, which has long been at the core of the alliance, remains robust, albeit less exclusive than in the past. The United States and Thailand jointly host the influential annual Cobra Gold exercise and engage in cooperation and training across various domains. Washington continues to be a key supplier of weaponry and equipment to the Thai military. The two countries also collaborate closely on law enforcement, including counternarcotics efforts. People-to-people connections, including the Peace Corps program, educational exchanges, scholarships, and various initiatives, help maintain a deep reservoir of goodwill between the two nations.

The recent Thai elections represented a missed opportunity. The establishment of a new government led by the victorious political party could have triggered a surge in US enthusiasm for the relationship, not because Washington endorsed a particular party, but because it would have marked a triumph for democracy. Regrettably, Thailand's conservative establishment obstructed that party from forming a government, resulting in a less democratic outcome.

Despite the disappointing outcome, the emergence of a new Thai government and a fresh Thai foreign minister provides an opening to strengthen cooperation between the US and Thailand on regional and subregional issues. Thailand has traditionally been influential in these areas, but its diplomacy lacked vigor during the Prayut era. This potential cooperation encompasses expanded efforts to safeguard the crucial Mekong River ecosystem, increased collaboration on mitigating and addressing climate change, and the enhancement of economic ties among mainland Southeast Asian nations.

A new government could also facilitate more constructive dialogue regarding Myanmar, offering a prime opportunity to increase cross-border humanitarian assistance. On the defense and security front, both countries should reinstate discussions on the earlier proposal to transform U-Tapao Air Base into a regional disaster relief hub. Additionally, regular dialogues on potential security concerns, such as the possibility of Chinese access to Ream Naval Base in Cambodia, are essential.

While a return to the alliance's heyday seems unlikely, a path to a more productive and robust relationship between these long-standing allies exists through patience, persistence, and a willingness to embrace new geopolitical realities. 🌟

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