

➤ Thailand's Foreign Policy in a Regional Great Game

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As one of five treaty allies of the United States in East Asia alongside Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea, Thailand plays a pivotal role in this fluid region. During the Cold War, its alliance with the US trumped other hedging considerations, as Bangkok remained staunchly committed to anti-communism, but since the collapse of the Soviet Union its relations with Washington have become increasingly prickly, especially on bilateral trade issues over intellectual property and environmental and labour standards. Concurrently, Bangkok's relationship with Beijing has solidified to the extent that of all of the United States' treaty allies in the region, Thailand enjoys the closest diplomatic ties with China. While its stock of multilayered connections with the US remains dense and diverse, especially in military-to-military aspects, the flow of Thailand's relations and contacts is increasingly towards China, forging the rise of a bloc that might be dubbed 'CLMT' (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand). These countries are strategically central to what is fast becoming a great game of sorts in mainland Southeast Asia, in view of Washington's cultivation of treaty allies and strategic partnerships around China's eastern and southern rim as part of its strategy of geopolitical reinforcement. The contours and dynamics of Thailand's foreign policy outlook and posture are thus portentous for the shape and content of geopolitical outcomes in East Asia.

The following analysis addresses the direction of Thai foreign policy in the context of broader dynamics in mainland Southeast Asia. The upcoming East Asia Summit in Phnom Penh and the relative calm and stability under the government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra present a timely occasion for a forward-looking assessment. Unsurprisingly, the Yingluck government has maintained Thailand's traditional focus on concentric circles of foreign relations, focused first and foremost on immediate neighbours next door, followed by the major powers and the broader regional context. Thailand's strategy, informed by Southeast Asia's fluctuating geopolitical dynamics and elusive regional architecture, reflects its role and position in the context of an emerging division between mainland and maritime states in the region.

THAILAND'S NEXT-DOOR FOCUS UNDER YINGLUCK

After more than a year in office on an overwhelming electoral mandate, Prime Minister Yingluck has translated her solid domestic standing into growing international credibility. While the direction of her government's foreign policy is still inchoate and tentative, Yingluck's priority on next-door relationships is clear. Alongside Myanmar's political transition and economic reforms, Thailand's focus on its immediate neighbours has placed a renewed and unprecedented spotlight on mainland Southeast Asia as an emerging sub-region in its own right, straddling China and the Indian subcontinent and attracting the interest of major powers keenly aware of its immense potential and prospects.

Yingluck's first few months in office were largely written off as her government was consumed with handling a floods crisis. When Thailand's worst deluge in decades subsided by January 2012, the Yingluck government began to implement its raft of campaign pledges in earnest. These mainly pandered to domestic electoral bases, and included a hike in the daily minimum wage, rice price guarantees, and rebates for first-time purchases of homes and cars. While supporters cheered these promises fulfilled, perennial critics of Yingluck's brother, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, condemned these and other 'populist' policies as fiscal profligacy. Largely absent from the cut-and-thrust of Thai politics in Yingluck's first year has been foreign relations.

As her domestic agenda went into motion, Yingluck went abroad more often. Her role in foreign affairs became prominent because the foreign minister, Surapong Tovichakchaikul, is seen more as Thaksin's trusted lieutenant than Thailand's chief diplomat. For the same reason, senior diplomats at Thailand's foreign ministry were more salient in setting policy tone and content. The multifaceted diplomacy of Yingluck's foreign policy apparatus set out to restore key relationships with immediate neighbours, particularly Cambodia and Myanmar. Yingluck visited both countries early in her administration, Phnom Penh in September 2011 and Yangon and Naypyidaw the following December, and has revisited both countries since.

Cambodia was Thailand's most pressing foreign policy priority. The Preah Vihear Temple controversy erupted in 2008 under the administration of Samak Sundaravej, Yingluck's predecessor and Thaksin's then-proxy, as UNESCO World Heritage status for the site revived a long-standing border dispute. Thai-Cambodian relations reached a nadir in 2009-11 under the Democrat Party-led government of Abhisit Vejjajiva. The anti-Thaksin yellow shirts and Abhisit's fiery foreign minister, Kasit Piromya, had been instrumental in the attack against Samak's government for allowing Cambodia's application to UNESCO. Prime Minister Hun Sen of Cambodia also contributed to the bilateral controversy and complications by taking Thaksin's side. In 2011, prior to the election, both sides engaged in military skirmishes in the contested 4.6 square

kilometres land area where Preah Vihear Temple is located, claiming more than two dozen lives, scores of injuries, and thousands of displaced bystanders. It was the worst regional conflict since ASEAN's formation 45 years ago. Under Yingluck, and thanks to the amity between Thaksin and Hun Sen, the Thai-Cambodian front has regained calm and stability. The bilateral spat has been depoliticised, and military presence on both sides has been scaled down dramatically. The next potential flashpoint is the International Court of Justice's clarification of its 1962 ruling (which awarded the temple but not the adjoining land to Cambodia) expected in the next few months, a case Cambodia submitted during Abhisit's tenure. If the contested area is adjudicated in Cambodia's favour, the anti-Thaksin columns are likely to go on the march again. However, Thailand's ties with Cambodia appear cordial as long as the Thaksin camp is ensconced in power.

Thailand's western border stands in marked contrast. The Democrat Party-led government did not preside over bilateral turmoil and mayhem but went along with Myanmar's opening and reforms following the November 2010 elections. That Yingluck's government has followed suit and broadened this bilateral partnership is attributable to Myanmar's indispensable role in Thailand's future economic development. Relations with Myanmar are remarkably non-partisan in deeply polarised Thailand, reflecting the degree of Thai dependence on Myanmar, which runs the gamut from migrant workers and natural gas imports to drugs suppression. Yingluck has redoubled Thailand's commitment to the multibillion-dollar development of the Dawei deep sea port megaproject, initially awarded in 2010 to Italian-Thai Development, a heavyweight in the Thai construction industry, but in which the Thai government has effectively assumed a lead role in project financing, design and development. Irrespective of Thailand's colour-coded political divide, whichever side is in power will recognise Myanmar as Thailand's most vital bilateral relationship.

To a lesser extent, Laos and Malaysia are crucial to Thailand's foreign policy outlook, but they have not figured as centrally in recent times as Cambodia and Myanmar. Laos exports substantial hydropower to Thailand and is in the process of building the controversial Xayaburi dam, which is opposed by a

myriad of human rights and environmentalist groups. The land-locked communist state's accession to the World Trade Organisation after 15 years of negotiations and preparations is likely to spur steady economic growth over the next decade and diversify its aid, trade and investment patterns away from China and Thailand towards the rest of the world. Vientiane's WTO accession can be seen as Laos' 'coming out' manoeuvre, designed to address the imperative of economic development whilst maintaining centralised rule under its communist party. It is a grand exercise in 'having its cake and eating it', not unlike similar non-democratic regimes in Hanoi, Beijing and other residual communist states. Malaysia, engrossed in its own growing political tensions, has maintained stable relations with Thailand, and Bangkok appears in need of Kuala Lumpur's assistance to resolve the Malay-Muslim insurgency in its southernmost border provinces, one of the deadliest internal conflicts in the world that has claimed more than 5,000 deaths since January 2004. High-level Malaysian officials have reportedly offered to be a third-party broker, but such efforts thus far have not borne the hoped-for fruits of peace and stability.

THE MAJOR POWERS IN THAILAND'S ORBIT

Among the countries of Southeast Asia, Thailand holds special and resilient relationships with all of the region's major powers. While its neighbours have had difficult relations in the recent or distant past with either China or Japan, Thailand has long been counted as a valued partner by both Beijing and Tokyo, even as it remains a formal ally of the United States. It is these strong relationships with major powers in the constellation of regional relations that Thai policymakers are trying to leverage and harness for Thailand's role and standing on the global stage in the months ahead.

The formal alliance with the US is the most conspicuous. Bangkok signed on to the Manila Pact in 1954, which established the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) – effectively a precursor to ASEAN. The alliance was cemented by a joint communiqué between the two countries in 1962 as the Cold War intensified. Established almost 180 years ago, Thai-US relations reached their contemporary apex in June

2003 when former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra visited former President George W. Bush at the White House and returned with a package of reciprocal benefits. Thaksin enticed the Bush administration to start negotiations for a bilateral free-trade agreement, and Thailand was given 'major non-NATO ally' (MNNA) status in exchange for sending Thai troops (mainly in support areas of medicine and engineering) to assist in both US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Thailand also signed on to the Container Security Initiative, a programme intended to increase security for maritime cargo shipped to the United States, and provided exemptions for US personnel in legal cases involving the International Criminal Court. Not since the Cold War, in which Thai soldiers fought alongside American GIs in Korea and South Vietnam, had the Thai-US relationship been so significant.

After a military coup ousted Thaksin in September 2006, partly owing to the bilateral trade negotiations that skirted around civil society scrutiny, Thai-US relations increasingly drifted, held hostage by Thailand's domestic political volatility and turmoil. The Americans have tried during the post-coup period to 'revitalise' this bilateral alliance, one of its five major bilateral treaty spokes in East Asia, in both Track I and II endeavours, but thus far to no avail, as neither side sees much urgency in this process. The Thai government is content to avoid the political controversy closer ties with US would likely generate domestically, and American policymakers are yet to coalesce around a shared diagnosis of the problem to underpin their strategic diplomacy. The Thai-US alliance is certainly not what it used to be, and appears in need of a complete revamp after more than two post-Cold War decades.

China has greater freedom in formulating bilateral ties than the US, unhindered by the input-output bottom lines and accountability requirements that constrain the Americans, and as a result the Chinese have deftly fostered close ties with Bangkok. Thai-Chinese relations have warmed to levels unseen since the anti-Vietnam years when Thailand was ASEAN's frontline state in a standoff against the Hanoi-backed Heng Samrin regime in Phnom Penh, a united front that included the Beijing-supported Khmer Rouge.

While Thai-Chinese ties have never been estranged since their normalisation and Bangkok's adoption of a one-China policy in the mid-1970s, this subtle but deepening bilateral partnership is reinforced by the role of the overseas Chinese, who have become economically integrated and ethnically seamless entrepreneurs in Thailand's economic development. As China's economic rise becomes the defining feature of regional politics in the 21st century, Thailand's natural omnidirectional hedging between the major powers has augured well for the Bangkok-Beijing axis. China was the only major power to recognise Thailand's putsch in 2006 and allowed high-level contacts with coup-appointed government officials. Military ties have deepened in recent years, as the Chinese have sponsored more Thai middle-ranking military officers for training in China than ever, and the two countries have undertaken joint military exercises every year since 2003. Indeed, in 2007 Thailand was the first Southeast Asian country to host the People's Liberation Army on its territory.

Similar claims can be made for the unprecedented number of Thai students receiving scholarship opportunities to study in China. More Confucius institutes dot the Thai landscape than in any other Southeast Asian country. China also provides sanctuaries and mobility for Thaksin and a frequent home for Thailand's Crown Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. Much of the recent deepening in Thai-Sino ties builds on the late 1990s when Thailand's most devastating economic crisis in decades was met with Chinese goodwill, aid and loans, while the US Treasury stood by in favour of a painful IMF bailout package. For the Chinese, their interests in Thailand are about open-ended relationship-building for long-term strategic gains rather than short-term convertible benefits. Irrespective of how Thailand's domestic political instability plays out, the Chinese will likely end up on the winning side. Such a long-term view is enabled by the continuity afforded by long periods of stable Chinese leadership and a top-down authoritarian system that can decide and operate on long-range planning. As a result, a new 'CLMT' grouping appears in formation among Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand. The acronym used to be 'CLMV', which included Vietnam and denoted new

ASEAN members in the 2000s. CLMT, on the other hand, refers to the mainland-based sub-region that is increasingly under China's influence.

To be sure, the US also went along with the Thai coup in its own way, notwithstanding its pro-democracy rhetoric and automatic suspension of IMET (International Military Education and Training program), as WikiLeaks cables have revealed. But ironically Washington has not reaped the same credit. As a telling example, Thaksin's visit to the US in August 2012 elicited howls of protest and a demonstration in front of the US embassy in Bangkok, whereas his regular appearances in China and Hong Kong were treated as par for the course in Thailand. The request by the US' National Aeronautics and Space Administration to conduct a joint study of climate change with its Thai counterparts, which was viewed by anti-Thaksin elements with suspicion, had to be cancelled in June 2012. Thailand has veered towards Beijing for understandable reasons of shared heritage, as well as strategic hedging and geopolitical interest, but its relative drift from Washington is a conundrum. Revitalising Thai-US relations first and foremost requires an admission and a prognosis of this drift. Insisting and pretending otherwise, as US officials and diplomats have inclined, is likely to favour Beijing at Washington's expense. It would be beneficial neither to Washington nor Bangkok, which aspires for a balanced footing among the major powers.

Beyond China and the US, Thailand's true and fortuitous friend is Japan. When the region was ravaged by the Second World War, the characteristic disunity of Thai leaders enabled Bangkok to end up officially on Japan's losing side. Unlike their regional peers, Thais harbour no latent ill will from the 1940s towards the Japanese, and the Japanese know and respect that. Bangkok is their longstanding economic springboard, a regional headquarter of choice that suits and caters to Japan's interests and preferences. Recent China-Japan tensions have caused a rethink among Japanese companies and small- and medium-sized enterprises, and more of them are likely to diversify away from China towards Southeast Asia and Thailand in particular for its production and industrial support networks.

In recent years, other major powers with less historic ties to the region have made growing forays into Southeast Asia. India's two decades of 'Look East' policy has made only limited progress, and the huge recent power outage in India has brought India's broader strategic wherewithal into doubt. Nevertheless Thailand has always been close to India on the people-to-people Track III basis. India provides the roots of Thai culture, language, and religion. Thousands of Thai students have been boarding in the Indian foothills for decades, even when New Delhi was more insular and its economy leant towards socialism. As the 'new' Japan, South Korea's impressive rise as an OECD country with growing 'middle power' status, soft power projections such as the regionally popular Dae Jang Geum television series, and the viral Gangnam Style on youtube videos, bodes well for Thailand. Unlike China and Japan, South Korea is an East Asian country where ordinary Thai passport holders do not need a visa to visit, thanks to Thailand's wartime contribution in the early 1950s. Seoul in the northeast of the region and Bangkok in the southeast form an ideal geographical partnership of like-minded countries with similar backgrounds. More can be made of Thailand's promising ties with other rising regional middle powers such as Australia, which views Thailand as the most important ASEAN member after Indonesia. Even Russia, a new member of the East Asia Summit, enjoys a special friendship with Thailand dating to the late 19th century when Siam (as Thailand was known until 1939) was in search of powerful European friends to counterbalance European imperialism, particularly France's territorial ambition. As for the European Union, Thailand can count on strong partnerships in trade and investment with key European countries, including Germany, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. Even the long history of enmity with France does not engender lasting bitterness among Thais.

Thai leaders are currently cognisant of this optimal and unrivalled mix of major powers relations in Thailand's orbit. But Thailand's international problem is its domestic politics. Until its existential domestic conflict is resolved, Bangkok is likely to underachieve and underwhelm despite its past profile and future potential as an up-and-coming middle power in mainland Southeast Asia.

MAINLAND, MARITIME AND REGIONALISED SOUTHEAST ASIA

Thailand's focus on its next-door neighbours and the dynamics and contours of its near abroad and farther afield enables a different lens with which to view regionalism. ASEAN is Southeast Asia's regional organisation, and Asia's most durable. It has succeeded in preventing interstate wars from within since its founding in 1967. ASEAN has reached the pinnacle of its integration efforts in its attempt to forge an ASEAN Community by the end of 2015, resting on the three pillars of ASEAN Political and Security Community (APSC), ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). The blueprints of these plans are ambitious, and ASEAN is expected to need to relaunch its Community objectives, but the organisation is likely to be able to maintain its momentum. Owing to historical mistrust in East Asia, the ten-member organisation has proved its staying power as a steer and steward of regional cooperative vehicles, spanning Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN Plus Three, the East Asia Summit, and, more recently, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meetings Plus.

But the region of Southeast Asia is moving ahead in the face of regionalist rhetoric and aspirations. Maritime Southeast Asia features states that have locked horns with China over territorial claims in the South China Sea. The Philippines and Vietnam are at the forefront, with Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei in support, vis-à-vis China. The South China Sea has thus become an arena of tension and conflict, inviting the US as a countervailing superpower to check Beijing's assertiveness, especially in view of the Obama administration's declared Asian 'pivot' and its broader geopolitical rebalancing strategy. The interests and concerns of maritime Southeast Asian states are divergent from the CLMT, which were either silent or supportive of Cambodia's pro-China stance at the annual regional ministerial meeting in Phnom Penh in July 2012, when ASEAN failed to produce a joint statement due to the insistence of the Philippines and Vietnam on including language on the South China Sea disputes.

On the other hand, mainland Southeast Asia's CLMT is growing as a sub-regional market of more than 200 million consumers, when southern China is included. Mainland Southeast Asia, which connects Northeast, South and Southeast Asia and more than 3 billion people in all, has thus entered an unprecedented period of promise and expectation, revolving around Myanmar's nascent transformation under the leadership of President Thein Sein and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, and Thailand's restored next-door ties. The ongoing development of infrastructure on the mainland is increasingly connecting land routes in all directions, east-west and north-south. Borders erected during colonial times matter decreasingly as the flows and movements of goods, peoples, trade, and investment allow development trends to criss-cross the area. It is a sub-region being courted, as in the Central Asian great game of the 19th century, by China as the regional superpower and the United States with its staying power as an extra-regional hegemon, with Japan heavily invested, and India as a civilisational cradle. Yet for all the economic opportunity sensed by the major powers, contestation cannot be ruled out, particularly in the Mekong where potential dam developments may give rise to issues of energy security. Myanmar may be where China meets India, but Myanmar-Thailand forms the strategic corridor that could pivot and mould the shape of things to come on the mainland, with broader repercussions for the entire Asian landmass.

It appears that maritime Southeast Asia is increasingly leaning towards Washington, whereas mainland Southeast Asia, led by Thailand, is more influenced by Beijing. Regional discussions and meetings on peace and stability should focus on the ever-elusive and contested regional architecture. A working regional framework must rely on the China-US relationship. If China can step back on its South China Sea claims and the US can reassure Beijing of its benign rebalance, both maritime and mainland states in Southeast Asia would have more common interests under the ASEAN umbrella, which can act as a bridge and linchpin of regional security and stability. ■