An Ally at the Crossroads: The Thailand Case

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The US-Thailand Alliance

- 1954 Manila Pact -- SEATO
- 1962 “Thanat-Rusk Communiqué”
- 1982 starting the Cobra Gold
- 2003 The status of non-NATO alliance
2012 Joint Vision Statement for Thai-U.S. Defense Alliance
A 21st Century Security Partnership

• Partnership for Regional Security in Southeast Asia
• Supporting Stability in the Asia-Pacific Region and Beyond
• Bilateral and Multilateral Interoperability and Readiness
• Relationship Building, Coordination, and Collaboration at All Levels
The Meaning of the Alliance

• The meaning of alliance depends on security and economic concerns.
• Unlike during the Cold War, Thai security priority is now more on non-traditional security, Southern insurgency, and domestic conflicts in which the US can hardly play a role.
• Economically, China surpassed the US as the largest trade partner for Thailand.
Thailand and China

• 1975 normalization of diplomatic relations
• China’s assistance against Vietnam’s occupation of Cambodia during the 1980s
• 2001 CAFTA
• Increasing arms purchase from China
• Bilateral military exercises
• 2012 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

* Increasing cooperation w China after the Vietnam War
* The role of ethnic Chinese elites in Thailand
Thai Security Identity

• Thailand has no territorial disputes with China.
• China threat is more in economic realm which has not clearly appeared yet.
• Over all, diluting security identity with the US
• Given the rise of China, a perception emerged that the US needs Thailand more than the other way around.
Strained Relations w the US after the 2014 Coup

• The perception among the military/Bangkok establishment that the US is not supportive (lack of understanding) during the difficult time of domestic conflicts.

• Disappointment over Daniel Russell’s visit

• Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report dropped Thailand into the lowest tier.

• Scaled down Cobra Gold 2015

• Earlier, Thai cautious response to ‘pivot’ (e.g. SE Asia Composition, Cloud, Climate Coupling Regional Study: SEAC4RS)
Matrix of Thai Foreign Relations

Structure of Interests (security/economic)

Domestic Supports

low

high

China

USA
US Arms in Thai Military

• Army: 54%,
• Navy: 41%
• Air Force: 37%

• not much recent purchase, most close to retirement
• Thailand prefers less costly w technological transfer and diversifying sources of purchase, inc. China, Ukraine, Sweden, Korea, Spain, and Israel.
Comparing of Up/Down Sides of the Alliance at Present

**Down Side**
- Diluting security identity w the US
- Domestic politics tip Thailand more towards China
- Increasing interest w China, esp. in economic realm

**Up Side**
- Longer and deeper cooperation; interoperability
- Can be temporarily and Thailand traditionally diversify ties w superpowers
- Converging interest w the US on regional stability and NTS
Conclusion

• The status of the US alliance is not as high as before in Thai strategic thinking (no clear mentioning about the US alliance; more emphasis on ASEAN-led mechanisms).

• Alliance management is more difficult but not impossible, given some converging interests and traditional/institutionalized relationship.

• Risk of even lower status of alliance if not properly managed.
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