In the second decade of the 21st century, the United States is increasingly finding itself in a difficult situation on several fronts. The economic turbulence ushered in by the Subprime Crisis of 2008 led to long-term adverse effects on the US economy. This economic crisis has signified the relative decline of Western supremacy, as the economic difficulties have been lengthy and particularly spread to the Eurozone, the recovery of which is even more delayed than that of the United States. In terms of security, the War on Terror turned out to be a formidable threat, as demonstrated in the form of extremist terrorism wrought under the banner of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which is now involving more people and is spreading beyond the Middle East. Europe's immigrant crisis is also giving the West a headache. The rise of China insists that the United States has to recalibrate its strategy in managing allies and partner countries in East Asia. The ‘pivot’, or rebalancing, towards Asia, as framed under the US administration of Barack Obama since 2011, is a case in point.

While tensions originating from the Cold War remain a rationale to keep US alliances intact in North-East Asia, this is less the case in South-East Asia, particularly in Thailand and the Philippines, both of which are traditional US allies. While American troops have remained in both Japan and Korea, they withdrew from the Philippines in 1992. The withdrawal from Thailand happened in 1976 following the end of the Vietnam War.
Even in South-East Asia, there seems to be different approaches between the two traditional allies. The South China Sea disputes represent clear and present danger for the Philippines, which, until the election of President Rodrigo Duterte, helped cement its alliance with the United States. Thailand, meanwhile, is an uneasy ally for the United States owing to the fact that both countries share fewer common threats and that Thailand also has close ties with China.

Accordingly, this chapter argues that Thailand represents the most obvious case of an ally at the crossroads in Asia. This can be seen as Thailand tends to pursue a hedging strategy towards several major powers rather than sticking to any single great power. Having no territorial dispute with China, bilateral ties are strengthening between Thailand and China. Thailand thus epitomises a test case for the United States regarding the extent to which it can succeed in managing its alliances in the 21st century.

This chapter first examines how the US–Thailand alliance evolved, focusing on the post–Cold War era. It then explores the changing international environment and the current perspectives of the alliance. It does so by exploring the opportunities and costs of the alliance today, which are punctuated by the outstanding factors of the rise of China and the current Thai political crisis that has continued since 2005. The chapter contends that, while management of the US–Thailand alliance is at a difficult point in its development, it is not impossible, given the two countries share some interests on regional stability and non-traditional security, which is underpinned by interoperability and the existence of a traditional/institutionalised relationship between the two nations.

Origin of the US–Thailand Alliance

Thailand (then known as Siam) became America’s first diplomatic partner in Asia when the two states signed the Treaty of Amity and Commerce in 1833. Though focusing on commercial relations, not security, the treaty well served the purposes of both countries. While Siam could diversify its relations with Western powers as a strategy to avoid colonisation by
European powers, the United States obtained access to mainland South-East Asia that was equal to that of the European nations then operating in the region.\footnote{Catharin Dalpino, ‘The United States–Thailand Alliance: Issues for a New Dialogue’, \textit{NBR Special Report}, no. 33, The National Bureau of Asian Research, Oct. 2011, p. 4.}

The circumstances of the current US–Thailand alliance can be traced back to the end of World War II, when Washington came to defend Thailand from its status as a defeated country. As Britain launched numerous demands on Thailand, which initially sided with Japan during the war, the United States argued that Thailand was not a unitary state during wartime, as several internal Free Thai Movements supported the allied powers against the Japanese. This created the pretext for trust between the two nations. But it wasn’t until the intensification of the Cold War that the alliance was formalised, first by the 1954 Manila Pact, which formed the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and, second, through a communiqué signed by Thailand’s Foreign Minister Thanat Khorman and US Secretary of State Dean Rusk in 1962. The purpose of the Thanat–Rusk communiqué was to seek Thailand’s cooperation to prevent the spread of communism in Laos, but it is always cited as the basis for alliance, which culminated in nine joint military bases.

Various assistance and infrastructure-building schemes, supported by both the United States and the World Bank, were arranged as a result of the alliance. Most prominent among these were military facilities including the US-built airfields at U-Tapao, a deep-water port at Suttahip and the Mittraparb Highway to the hinterland north-eastern provinces. Investment from the private sector also thrived. Importantly, the two countries signed the Treaty of Amity and Economic Relations in 1966, which gave Americans privileges in doing business in the kingdom, where the prevailing conditions for foreign investment were restrictive. Specifically, the treaty allows American citizens and businesses incorporated in the United States, or in Thailand, to maintain a majority shareholding or to wholly own companies in Thailand, and thereby engage in business on the same basis as would a Thai national.\footnote{American companies are also exempt from most of the restrictions on foreign investment imposed by the Foreign Business Act of 1999.}
The alliance weakened when the United States withdrew from the Vietnam War in 1973 and eventually vacated the joint bases in Thailand in 1976. In fact, from 1973–76, Thailand briefly enjoyed a more liberal political atmosphere whereby anti-base protests periodically occurred. Thai leaders, meanwhile, came to view American military presence as an increasing liability. At any rate, Washington was not willing to maintain American troops on mainland South-East Asia. With the communist takeover of the Indochina states, Thailand was left in the cold. When the threat from Vietnam was looming large after its invasion and subsequent occupation of Cambodia in late 1978, Bangkok had to seek help from Beijing instead (further discussed below). Later, Thailand came to limit US military access to facilities following the 1975 Mayaguez Incident, when the United States decided to take action unilaterally. The incident started with the seizing of the American container ship *Mayaguez* by the Khmer Rouge. The United States reacted by sending military operations from the U-Tapao air base in Thailand without consulting Bangkok.3

Thai Perceptions of the United States

Thailand tends to view its alliance with the United States as a broad-based relationship, rather than one of security alone, which seems to be in contrast to America’s view of the relationship.4 Therefore, it is crucial to consider overall bilateral ties when analysing the alliance relationship. It is important to note that I refer to Thai perceptions at both the level of elites and the general public.

Though the general public is not well informed about the relationship with the United States, the media tends to reflect general feelings toward the United States. While Thai people will refer to the United States as *America maha-mit* (great friend America), the term is often used negatively and it tends to be followed by ‘why does a great friend treat us like this?’. These views stem from a variety of American actions, ranging from economic disputes and pressures, and the US characterisation of Thailand as a country with poor standards in the areas of human rights, human trafficking, intellectual property and money laundering. In particular, the two countries’ relations have been subject since the 1980s to difficulties

---

arising from US economic pressure. Thais perceive that the United States has failed to appreciate the historical depth of the bilateral relationship and thus all too often fails to act in honour of the friendship rather than economic calculations and shifting policy interests.

These negative perceptions can be traced back to America’s withdrawal in the 1970s. While the region was still facing threats of communism, the United States supported authoritarian regimes in Thailand. This left America open to criticism of its inconsistencies over democracy and human rights. Indeed, the left-leaning ideology of many Thai intellectuals led to their criticism of the United States in general and American capitalism more specifically. Importantly, under the influence of these outspoken opinion leaders in Thai society, it is relatively common for Thais to be critical of the United States. For example, a joint US–Thailand seminar that included senior politicians, bureaucrats, and leading academics in 2002 concluded that, in Thailand, there is ‘deep mistrust of America’.

Yet, most people who criticise the United States would prefer either visiting or sending their children to study there more than most other countries. Compared to most South-East Asians, the majority of Thais are relatively more receptive to American culture, ranging from Hollywood movies, American music, IT gadgets, fashion, and American lifestyle and consumption in general. In other words, feelings toward the United States are mixed: while there are commonly negative views about the US Government and corporations, most Thais are positive about American culture.

The Post–Cold War Events

After the end of the Cold War, several events strained the US–Thailand alliance during the 1990s. The first was Thailand’s rejection of an American proposal to pre-position military equipment in Thailand’s territorial waters in 1994. The second was the failure of an FA-18 jet fighter sale, when Bangkok decided to trim its military budget largely due to financial difficulties after the 1997 Asian financial crisis. The third was when the United States was found responsible for a chemical spill at Hua

---

Hin airport in 1999. In the same year, Thais were disappointed when US opposition was perceived as pivotal in Thailand’s failed bid for the World Trade Organization presidency.

Likewise, three major events toward and during the late 1990s further qualified Thai attitudes toward the United States. First, the United States offered Thailand little support in response to the impact of the Asian financial crisis in 1997. Antagonism increased further as Western companies bought up Thai companies at fire sale prices. In contrast, regional powers like Japan and China engaged and cooperated with crisis-hit countries. For instance, Japan offered Thailand soft loans under the Miyazawa Initiative and China held back from devaluing its currency. This made it easier for other Asian countries to recover, particularly as export prices were increasing. In this regard, ASEAN+3 (ASEAN plus China, Japan and Korea) represented a significant regional cooperation scheme, fostering closer ties among regional powers and South-East Asian states, including Thailand.

Second, Thais were reluctant to support the unilateralism of the George W Bush administration, which produced policies such as America’s failure to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, the war on terror and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Thai attitudes were further hardened by America’s apparent lack of interest in the region, which was indicated by the consecutive absences of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice from the annual ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meetings during the mid-2000s. Both events tarnished the US image for the Thais and other South-East Asians. This was very much in contrast with the image of China, which is seen as generously giving unconditional assistance to ASEAN countries. Following Bush’s visit to Thailand in 2003 for the APEC Summit, however, the US–Thailand alliance was resurrected after Washington designated Thailand as a non-NATO ally. Despite Thai society’s misgivings about the US-led war in Iraq in pursuit of its oil interests, the administration of Thaksin Shinawatra sent troops to support the US enterprise in Iraq. The aim was to predispose Washington to begin free trade agreement (FTA) negotiations with Thailand.

Third, Washington’s suspension of assistance and criticism of Thailand following the military coup in 2006 further alienated many Thais. Elites who supported the coup charged Washington with failing to understand

---

the context of the kingdom. Some went further and argued that Thai coups solved political deadlocks. Such arguments were made less vocally, however, after the coup further worsened the existing political crisis in the kingdom. Very few Thais understand Section 508 of the US Foreign Operations Appropriations Act, which prohibits providing funds to a foreign government deposed by decree or military coup. Overall, as Thailand's divisions deepened, feelings toward the United States became increasingly mixed. For instance, the anti-Thaksin groups (the yellow shirts) were happy that Thaksin at some point was barred from entering the United States, a position that outraged the Thaksin supporters (the red shirts). Any US statements regarding protests or violence in the nation were received differently by these two groups. Protest groups would be heartened by the airing of US concerns about human rights violations, believing that Washington's protests helped deter the government from ordering military crackdowns. The opposition, meanwhile, would not be happy with US criticism. In short, US action or inaction regarding the Thai political crisis was viewed negatively by one or other of the two sides of the Thai crisis.

The election of the Obama administration briefly restored America's image through its reengagement policy. Thais value high-level visits and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's participation in the 2009 ARF summit in Thailand helped to improve the relationship. America's diplomatic efforts were warmly welcomed by several South-East Asian nations, against a backdrop of China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea and the Mekong River. The territorial disputes over the Spratly and Paracel Islands made Vietnam and the Philippines particularly nervous, while concerns have been raised over China's construction of dams on the Mekong, since they affect countries downstream, like Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand. It should come as no surprise then, that American initiatives such as the Lower Mekong – Mississippi Cooperation have been welcomed as an alternative to engaging with China. Accordingly, the American reengagement efforts, coupled with public diplomacy and strong American soft power, have gained much acceptance from South-East Asia. Overall, the Obama administration strengthened America's image in Thailand.

Following the 2014 coup, however, the United States showed even more hostile attitudes toward the military government. Washington responded to the coup with a series of criticisms and sanctions, including the threat to move Cobra Gold—the largest regional joint military exercise—
GLOBAL ALLIES

to Darwin.7 Wary that such moves would only push Thailand further into Beijing’s orbit, Washington sent its first high-level visit of Deputy Secretary of State Daniel Russell to the kingdom in early 2015. Yet the visit failed to improve relations after he made critical comments about the military junta during his speech at Chulalongkorn University. What further aggrieved the bilateral relationship was the 2015 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report, which saw Thailand drop down to ‘Tier 3’ category, falling even below Myanmar and Malaysia, both of which are allegedly involved in the ongoing Rohingya migrant problem either as a sending or receiving country.8 Recently, US Ambassador Glyn Davies also made a strong comment in front of the media and directly to the Thai Foreign Minister over human rights violations, inviting the wrath of coup supporters. In this light, there seems to be the perception among the military and the Bangkok establishment that the United States is not supportive of Thailand’s domestic politics.

With the new presidency of Donald Trump, the US–Thailand relations seems to be more nuanced. On the one hand, the Trump administration emphasises ‘America First’, showing the sign of less engagement to Asia and resulting in the end of the Obama’s pivot strategy. Most ally countries in Asia are nervous if the alliances would be qualified. Trump’s overall policy so far seems to be detrimental to American soft power and could downgrade the US image. On the other hand, Trump is less interested in democracy compared to his democrat predecessor. This can extend more space for the military government in Thailand, as the Trump government is not likely to pressure Thailand much to return to democracy. Evidently, following North Korea’s frequent missile tests during the 2017 spring, Trump came to value the traditional allies in South-East Asia more by making personal phone calls to Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha of Thailand, as well as the leaders of the Philippines and Singapore. President Trump also invited Prime Minister Prayut to visit him in Washington, DC. Overall, the US–Thailand relations can fluctuate, depending on political regimes and leadership changes.


8. AN ALLY AT THE CROSSROADS

Thailand’s Changing Security Environment

With a new security environment in the post–Cold War era, threats to Thailand’s security primarily come from the border areas in the forms of drug and human trafficking.9 In the 1990s, the Thai Government announced that the drug trafficking industry was a major threat to national security. Meanwhile, skirmishes over territorial disputes with Laos erupted briefly in 1987, and more recently with Cambodia. Border tensions with Myanmar used to be frequent, particularly between the Tatmadaw (Myanmar Armed Forces) and minority rebel groups along the border. Accordingly, Thailand embraced a comprehensive security approach, comprising of both traditional and non-traditional security.

An insurgency in Thailand’s Muslim-majority south has continued since 2004. While Manila allowed thousands of American troops to deploy to help curb terrorism, based on the US–Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement that came into force in 1999, a similar move is unthinkable in Thailand, which would treat it as an infringement of sovereignty.

Since 2005, Thailand has been trapped in a prolonged political crisis. Leading to hundreds of causalities, the political crisis has been dogged by coups d’état, violent riots and military crackdowns. The controversy around former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra continues.10 Thailand’s preoccupation with its protracted domestic conflicts inadvertently affects international relations, including the US alliance.

Another key security problem that arose toward the end of the last decade is a border dispute with Cambodia over Prea Vihear Temple. The United States was less likely to play a role in this dispute due to its cultivation of ties with countries such as Vietnam and Cambodia, including military aid. In fact, Thailand aired concerns over US–Cambodia joint exercises, arguing that it was undercutting the US–Thailand alliance.11 Thailand perceives limited benefit from its US alliance on issues such as territorial disputes with neighbouring countries.

---

Given the changing threat environment, Thai perceptions of the US alliance are not favourable. At a closed-door brainstorming session on Thailand’s strategies toward the United States and China in five years (2012–17), three dozen representatives from concerned agencies (e.g. the ministries of foreign affairs, defence, and commerce), the private sector and academia agreed unanimously that Thailand must look beyond the US alliance and strengthen engagement with China, even as they lamented the decreasing utility of their strategic ties with the United States, which fitted more with the Cold War, but not the contemporary milieu.12

In sum, threats to Thailand’s security can be understood as either domestic, non-traditional, or traditional border disputes with neighbouring countries, all of which are less likely to see direct US involvement. More specifically, the United States does not have a major role in Thai security thinking. Bangkok also believes that Thai security is of increasingly marginal interest to the United States and that the alliance is less important compared to America’s relationship with its other traditional allies in the Asia-Pacific—Japan, South Korea, Australia and the Philippines. Considering that the United States is increasingly cultivating security ties with Indonesia, Cambodia and Vietnam, commentators worry that Thailand is being relegated to the group of second-tier allies.13 As regional developments define new interests for South-East Asian countries, Thailand will increasingly divert its security identity away from the United States.

The Rise of China

The rise of China attracts much attention in the 21st century. Though the fast-growing China was initially viewed as China Threat in the 1990s, since the 2000s, most countries have come to appreciate China as an opportunity, particularly on economic grounds. China’s strategic interests have seen it cultivate bilateral relationships with many countries, and Thailand is no exception.

Since 2009, China has become Thailand’s largest export market, surpassing the United States. By 2012, China replaced Japan as Thailand’s top trade partner. In 2015, Thailand traded with China as much as 2.2 trillion baht.

---

(US$65 billion), which comprises 15 per cent of Thailand’s total trade, compared to the 1.3 trillion baht (US$39 billion), or 9.1 per cent of Thailand’s total trade, that it traded with the United States.\textsuperscript{14} Though Japan has remained Thailand’s top investor, Chinese investments are steadily increasing. Importantly, Chinese from mainland China represent the number one source of tourists in the kingdom, as many as 7.9 million (26.5 per cent of total tourists) in 2015.\textsuperscript{15}

For Thailand, in fact, the turn to China is not a recent phenomenon. Since the late 1970s, when Vietnam invaded Cambodia and American troops left mainland South-East Asia, it was essential for Thailand to seek help from China. As the frontline state, Thailand was concerned at incursions by Vietnamese forces, particularly when they crossed the Thai border to hunt down the Khmer Rouge. Beijing responded by sending support to the anti-Vietnam Khmer Rouge as well as cutting assistance to the underground Thai Communist Party. And, as China waged a border war with Vietnam in early 1979, the Vietnamese military shifted to the north. This changed the shape of regional defence realities and formed the basis for the Sino–Thai alliance. A wide range of arms sales at ‘friendship prices’ was offered to Thailand, including armoured vehicles, artillery and missiles.\textsuperscript{16} This pattern of the Sino–Thai alliance continued despite the two coups in Thailand in 2006 and 2014. When the United States placed sanctions on Thailand after the 2006 coup, especially in terms of security cooperation, China offered Thailand good deals on arms purchases and other forms of assistance and cooperation. Notably, the Chinese provided US$49 million in military assistance, almost double the size of the US$24 million in US military assistance that was legally suspended in accordance with Section 208 mentioned above.\textsuperscript{17}

The Thai political crisis and the two coups should not be exaggerated as the major reason for Thailand to lean toward China. The trend has been that way regardless of who is in government in Bangkok, whether elected or non-elected. Economic interests with China represent a strong incentive for any Thai Government to strengthen the relations

\textsuperscript{15} Department of Tourism, ‘Million of Tourists’, viewed Jul. 2016, www.tourism.go.th/view/2/Million%20of%20Tourists/EN-US.
\textsuperscript{17} Stern, ‘Diverging Roads’, 2009, p. 3.
with China. The Thaksin government (2000–05) and the Yingluck government (2011–14) opposed the Thai military and sought to cultivate ties with China, ranging from free trade agreements, the lease of pandas, arms purchases and frequent high-level visits. The 2014 coup and the subsequent US antagonism only accelerated Thailand’s gravitation towards China.

More recently, China continues to tempt ASEAN and other Asian nations with even bolder initiatives. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative are two examples, aimed at building and upgrading infrastructure to increase connectivity in Asia. Recent train deals with Laos, Thailand and Indonesia represent efforts in this regard, which will contribute to the goal of ASEAN connectivity that was initially proposed and advocated by Bangkok. Beijing also recently proposed the Lancang–Mekong Cooperation Initiative to further cooperation among Mekong River riparian countries. The aim has not only been to ameliorate tensions and concerns over China’s dam construction, which significantly affects the downstream countries, but also to counterbalance the Lower Mekong – Mississippi Cooperation, as proposed by the United States. In addition, China and ASEAN are negotiating the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a pan-regional trade arrangement that also involves Japan, Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand. In short, compared to the United States, China’s engagement appears to have more relevance to the interests of South-East Asia and Thailand.

In 2012, Thailand and China elevated their relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership. Since then, both sides have been steadily following the plan through various schemes of cooperation and exchanges, including frequent high-level visits, exchange of personnel in commander and staff colleges, joint seminars and so on. Importantly, both countries have expanded the Strike military exercises to cover army and also, recently, air force.

Thailand, therefore, arguably has the closest relationship with China, compared to other South-East Asian nations. Short of a territorial dispute with China, the relationship has been cordial. For instance, Thailand is the first country in South-East Asia to host leased pandas from China since 2003. In the so-called ‘Panda Diplomacy’, China leases pandas to only a limited number of countries to signify the importance of relations. Furthermore, in April 2012, Thailand’s Defence Minister led a military
mission, including chiefs of army, navy and air force, to China and paid a courtesy call to the then Vice President Xi Jinping. Such visits are rare and, in the current military government, Prime Minister Prayut has visited China several times, while Defence Minister Prawit Wongsuwan has met with high-level defence counterparts on many occasions.

Risk Factors in Gravitating Towards China

While there is good news about Sino–Thai relations, there are also several risks, and key infrastructure projects are a case in point. Thailand’s railway project with China has become problematic. Initially, the Thai Government was optimistic about upgrading its outdated train system by developing medium- and high-speed railway lines with China. As negotiations dragged on, Thailand increasingly found that China was a demanding partner, particularly compared with other offers from Japan. For instance, China would charge higher interest rates on its loans—at almost 4 per cent, compared to 0.5–1.5 per cent for Japan. On operational management, China’s offers were also demanding and imposed stringent rules relating to technological transfer, which again contrasted with those of the Japanese. Considering Thai leaders’ general positive sentiments toward China, the inability for the railway project to move forward was disappointing.

Second, similar to other South-East Asian states like Myanmar and Laos, Thailand is increasingly exposed to economic threats from China. For instance, Chinese capitalists are purchasing large plots of land through their connections with Thai nominees. Real estate projects are constructed to cater for Chinese customers, and revenue from Chinese tourism flows to Chinese nationals via their travel agencies, restaurants and tour guides. While Chinese students are heavily represented at Thai universities, many never return to China after graduation. Overall, China represents both opportunities and threats for Thailand.

Third, the South China Sea disputes between China and some ASEAN members—the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia—constitutes a risk factor for Thailand–China relations. Though Bangkok may be able to play a coordinator role, as it did constructively during its assignment as China–ASEAN country coordinator during 2012–15, the situation
is escalating. Sporadic tensions in US–China and Japan–China relations also raise concerns for ASEAN countries, including Thailand. Both issues signify that it is not plausible to lean toward China too much.

**Whither the US–Thailand Alliance?**

With negative attitudes towards the United States prevalent in Thailand, it is difficult to develop a common thread of strategic thinking between the two countries. In principle, Thailand maintains the alliance relationship with the United States, as exemplified by the number of annual military cooperation initiatives in which it is involved, including Cobra Gold and more than 50 other bilateral and multilateral exercises. Operationally, the Thai military command structure, weapons and overall interoperability remains highly compatible with US forces.

In practice, however, Thailand, cautiously responding to America’s pivot, sees the United States as a difficult ally to work with. Several events point to that direction. The Yingluck government significantly delayed approval of the usage of the U-Tapao air base for the SEAC4RS (Southeast Asia Composition, Cloud, Climate Coupling Regional Study) in 2012. There was a concern that the project might raise some suspicion from China about US spying activities using the Thai air base. Likewise, the current military government under Prayut Chan-o-cha rejected a US aircraft basing request in 2015.18 This was in stark contrast to earlier Thai responses to US calls to use the base for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) in the case of the 2004 tsunami, the 2008 Cyclone Nargis, as well as the 2015 Nepal earthquake. Thailand still cooperates with the United States, but tends to steer military exercises and cooperation more towards HADR, so as not to make China unhappy. In short, Thailand responded to the American pivot with considerable reluctance.19

To the disappointment of the United States, such reluctance was felt despite the fact that Bangkok and Washington have just signed the Joint Vision Statement for the Thai–US Defense Alliance in 2012. Emphasising the 21st-century security partnership, the joint statement aims to

---

reinvigorate the alliance and update the half-century-long Thanat–Rusk communiqué, which has always been cited as the cornerstone of the US–Thailand alliance. Specifically, the new statement calls for a partnership for regional security in South-East Asia, stability in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond, bilateral and multilateral interoperability and readiness, as well as relationship-building, coordination and collaboration at all levels. As it turned out, the 2012 joint statement falls short of the aim of cementing alliance relations.

Obviously, the status of the US alliance is not a current priority in Thai strategic thinking. In recent defence white papers, there is no clear mention of the US alliance and more emphasis is placed on ASEAN-led mechanisms and multiple partners.20 The US arms previously acquired by the Thai military are ageing, a great many are nearing retirement, and there have been few recent purchases. Understandably, Thailand prefers less costly arms that come with technological transfer, and is trying to diversify its sources of purchase by approaching China, Ukraine, Sweden, Korea, Spain, Israel and Russia. The purchase of the Swedish Gripen, rather than the American F-series jet fighters, is indicative of this.

Though the developments discussed above may seem pessimistic, there are several promising factors for the future of the US–Thailand alliance. First, Thailand continues to have deep and long cooperation with the United States, particularly in terms of interoperability. China is no match in this regard. Regular military exercises and various forms of military cooperation have ultimately quietly and firmly institutionalised the US–Thailand alliance. Military-to-military relations remain robust with more than 50 joint US–Thailand exercises annually. Between 2001 and 2009, the total number of military exercises increased from 44 to 59, seven of which are multilateral.21 Cobra Gold is not the only large-scale military exercise, but also Cope Tiger, the Red Flag (previously Cope Thunder), and CARAT (Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training). While originally focusing on the navy, these bilateral exercises have expanded to cover the army and air force. The Americans also benefit from conducting

exercises in different terrain. In recent years, the exercises increasingly focus on counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, civil affairs, peacekeeping and, importantly, humanitarian assistance.  

US–Thai military relations can be attributed to the role of the Joint US Military Advisory Group Thailand (JUSMAGTHAI), which has been active in various schemes of military cooperation, particularly military exercises, humanitarian and counter-drug missions. In fact, JUSMAGTHAI organises one of the largest International Military Education and Training (IMET) programs for Thailand and a number of cadets will be sent to study in the United States each year. Likewise, American military officers are sent to Thailand’s Command and General Staff Academy. The socialisation is helpful in pursuing more cooperation. Apart from the military-to-military relations, Thailand and the United States engage in bilateral strategic dialogue.

Second, Thailand is a workable partner. Thanks to the interoperability accumulated through years of military exercises, training and equipment purchase, a number of new cooperation initiatives are proceeding. In response to the increasing terrorism threats following the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001, Thailand has been host to a new multilateral naval exercise called SEACAT (South-East Asia Cooperation Against Terrorism) since 2002. This exercise aims to police South-East Asia’s sea lanes for maritime terrorism and piracy. Importantly, Thailand’s cooperation with the United States in arresting Hambali, a key Al-Qaeda member, in 2003 highlights the ability of the two countries to work effectively on non-traditional security issues.

Moreover, Thailand and the United States reached an agreement in late 2002 to create a war reserve stockpile, the first US stockpile outside of NATO territories and South Korea. This demonstrates a part of the cooperation under the non-NATO alliance.

Third, the areas of shared interests between the United States and Thailand remain considerable, specifically on regional stability and non-traditional security. The United States remains the most important actor

---

23 Memorandum of Agreement Concerning the Transfer of Equipment and Munitions from United States War Reserve Stocks to the Government of the Kingdom of Thailand, Treaties and International Act Series 02-1126.
in maintaining regional stability. Thailand relies on stable regional order to develop its country. So do other regional countries. Any cooperation toward that goal would be welcome. Admittedly, however, it may be harder to mutually agree on the appropriate kind of cooperation, and its extent, that would lead to regional stability.

In this regard, cooperation is increasingly focused more on non-traditional security, including drugs, terrorism and insurgency, all of which are important threats to Thailand. Here, information and intelligence sharing is crucial. In 2012, following a US travel warning, several bombs exploded in Thailand. Since then, the US army has been assisting Thailand in developing bomb-disposal skills.25

Meanwhile, Thailand has played a role in peacekeeping operations and HADR, both of which will raise the country’s international profile. This is particularly true after its successful involvement in the peace processes in Cambodia and Timor-Leste. The frequent occurrence of disasters in the region also motivated Thailand to play a more active role in this area. As the United States continues to be a key player in such activities, there is room for joint operation, particularly on HADR.

Finally, Thailand traditionally tends to diversify ties with major powers. Accordingly, sour relations with the United States can be only temporary during this military government. Once Thailand returns to electoral democracy, scheduled for 2018, bilateral relations should improve.

Conclusion

In Thai strategic thinking, the status of the US alliance is not at its peak. Owing to this is the changing security environment and shifting economic equation following the rise of China. There are several downsides in the US–Thailand alliance, stemming from America’s security identity, Thailand’s increasing shared economic and political interests with China and domestic politics. The general trend is that Thailand’s relations with China are on the rise, while those with the United States are in relative decline.

---

Yet, the relationship with China does not have only upsides, but also downsides, including economic threats from Chinese capitalists as well as China’s assertiveness, especially with regard to the South China Sea. Thailand’s high expectation of China’s generosity could be disappointed. Thailand cannot rely too heavily on China, but has to resort to the familiar strategy of hedging and diversifying ties with major powers.

Meanwhile, there are quite a few upsides in the US–Thailand alliance. Military-to-military interactions with the United States remain intact, thanks to a half-century of institutionalised relationships and interoperability. Thailand also has converging interests with the United States on regional stability and non-traditional security. HADR emerged as a promising field for cooperation between the two nations.

At any rate, the United States must accept the changing realities and concentrate on what the two countries can do, rather than aiming unrealistically towards common strategic thinking and action. Thailand is not likely to maximise the utility of its US alliance, but rather prefers to maximise its room for manoeuvring between major powers. Hedging and limited alignments remains the viable choice for small ally countries like Thailand.26 As Thailand tends to view relations with major powers in various lights, the United States should not concentrate on the security realm but rather seek to engage with its ally in a multidimensional manner. Given the region’s security, economic and political environment, alliance management has become more difficult but still manageable.

---