



Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations

Overview

Thailand is a long-time military ally and economic partner of the United States. These ties endure, but more than a decade of political turmoil in Thailand, including two military coups in 2006 and 2014, has complicated U.S.-Thai relations and erased Thailand's image as a model democracy in Southeast Asia.

Thailand conducted nationwide elections in March 2019—its first since 2011—and in June seated a new government led by Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, the former Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army who led the 2014 coup. The polls were conducted under new rules drafted by the junta that structurally protect the military's influence, and questions remain about the new government's popular legitimacy. The military government also rewrote Thailand's constitution to create a military-appointed Senate, and was widely criticized for harassment of government critics and severe restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly.

The United States suspended security assistance to Thailand after the 2014 coup as required by law, but other aspects of the U.S.-Thai military relationship remain, including the annual Cobra Gold military exercise, the largest multilateral exercise in Asia. The United States continues to provide non-security aid to the country, and maintains regional offices for many U.S. programs at the Embassy in Bangkok.

As one of Southeast Asia's most developed nations, Thailand has the potential to support U.S. initiatives, such as broadening regional defense cooperation. Thailand is the 2019 chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and as such is to convene and lead the region's key multilateral forums this year. However, Bangkok's domestic challenges and the resulting damage to U.S.-Thai relations have diminished opportunities for new bilateral coordination. Following the 2019 polls, U.S. policymakers face challenges in rekindling the bilateral relationship while encouraging Thailand to fully return to democratic norms.

Thailand's Politics and Elections

Thailand's political turmoil has involved a broad clash between the nation's political establishment (a mix of the military, royalists, senior bureaucrats, and many urban and middle class citizens) and backers of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was deposed in the 2006 coup and now resides overseas. Thaksin was popular, particularly with the rural poor, because of his populist policies and political empowerment of traditionally marginalized communities. Yet, Thaksin was, and still is, a divisive figure, and critics accused him of corruption and human rights abuses while he was in office. Between 2001 and

2011, Thaksin and his supporters won six consecutive national elections, but their leaders were repeatedly removed from office, by either military or judicial coup. The 2014 military coup deposed an acting prime minister after Thaksin's sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, was ousted from the premiership by a Constitutional Court decision that many observers saw as politically motivated. During this period of instability, Thailand has seen numerous large-scale demonstrations, and some have turned violent. In 2010, clashes over several weeks killed 80 civilians in Bangkok.

Thailand

Capital: Bangkok

Size: Slightly more than twice the size of Wyoming

Population: 68.6 million (July 2018 est.)

Infant Mortality: 9 deaths/1,000 live births

Fertility Rate: 1.52 children born/woman (U.S.=1.72)

GDP (official exchange rate): \$455.4 billion (2017 est.)

GDP per capita (PPP): \$17,900 (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World Factbook, 2018

The 2014 coup was Thailand's 12th successful coup since 1932. It installed then-Army Commander Prayuth as prime minister and head of the military junta. Although Prayuth declared an end to martial law in April 2015, the junta retained authoritarian powers under the new Constitution approved by Thai voters in 2016 that was later signed into law by the King. The new Constitution limits the power of political parties and gives the military the ability to appoint members to an upper house that along with the elected lower house selects the prime minister.

In the March 2019 polls, voting ran smoothly overall. The Election Commission of Thailand, however, received widespread criticism when irregularities such as releasing inconsistent and delayed results occurred, raising skepticism about the credibility of the elections. Poll statistics, such as voter turnout in comparison to the number of ballots cast, fluctuated in the days after the election. As poll results continued to change, Prayuth's military-backed party and the opposing pro-democratic Thaksin faction both claimed to have won enough votes to form a coalition government. Official results were released on May 9, and Prayuth's party was able to form a coalition government in Parliament by a narrow margin. Prayuth was officially voted in as Prime Minister on June 5, 2019.

Royal Succession

The monarchy is one of Thailand's most powerful political institutions. It has few formal authorities, but during King

Bhumiphol's reign, the palace enjoyed popular support and, in turn, political influence. In October 2016, King Bhumiphol passed away, ending a 70-year reign that had made him the world's longest serving monarch. After his accession to the throne, Bhumiphol's son Maha Vajiralongkorn, officially known as King Rama X, has been more politically active than his father, opposing some parts of the 2016 Constitution and taking control of the bureau managing the throne's vast fortune in July 2017.

Bhumiphol rarely interfered in politics in his later years, but was seen as a moderating force that fostered stability among competing political actors. The new king is much less popular than his father, and his political inclinations lean towards the military, which has played a major role in supporting royal legitimacy. Since the 2014 coup, as the military government has sought to limit political criticism, it has interpreted Thailand's lese-majeste laws, which forbid insults to the monarch, more broadly, to include perceived insults to other officials and government entities.

U.S.-Thailand Security Relations

Security cooperation has long been the strongest pillar of the U.S.-Thai relationship. In addition to hosting military exercises, Thailand has provided the U.S. military with access to important facilities, particularly the strategically located Utapao airbase. The U.S. military used Utapao for refueling operations during its campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan in the 2000s, as well as for multinational relief efforts, including after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and 2015 Nepal earthquake. For U.S. officials, intelligence and law enforcement cooperation with Thai counterparts remains a priority, particularly as the United States confronts international criminal and drug networks. In the past, transnational terrorist organizations have taken advantage of Thailand's relatively permissive environment, including tourist-friendly travel procedures and central location, for their operations in the region.

Before the most recent coup, U.S. military leaders generally touted the alliance as apolitical and praised the Thai armed forces for exhibiting restraint amidst the competing protests and political turmoil. However, following the 2014 coup, the United States immediately suspended military aid to Thailand, including \$3.5 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and \$85,000 in International Military Education and Training (IMET) funds. The U.S. took similar action following the 2006 military coup.

The United States has not suspended non-military aid, and capacity building assistance to the country largely has continued. In February 2018, USAID committed \$10 million to curtail human trafficking in Thailand. Some military exercises, including the annual Cobra Gold military exercises, have continued. In the years immediately after the coup, fewer U.S. troops participated in Cobra Gold than in previous years, but the scale of U.S. participation has since returned to pre-coup levels.

Several analysts have noted that limits on U.S. engagement could lead U.S.-Thai security ties could weaken, and that

Sino-Thai ties could expand to fill the vacuum. In June 2017, the Thai government announced it would buy 34 Chinese armored personnel carriers, perhaps in an attempt to reduce its reliance on U.S.-made weapons.

U.S.-Thai Trade and Economic Relations

Thailand is an upper middle-income country, and trade and foreign investment play a large role in its economy. In 2018, Thailand's GDP grew 3.7%, continuing a period of comparatively slow growth. The United States is Thailand's third largest trading partner, behind Japan and China. In 2018, Thailand was the United States' 20th largest goods trading partner; its 26th largest goods export market; and a source of \$44.5 billion in total two-way goods trade. In 2018, the United States ran a \$19.31 billion trade deficit with Thailand, ranking Thailand as the country with the 13th largest bilateral surplus with the United States. In 2017, USTR placed Thailand on its Section 301 Priority Watch List because of the country's poor intellectual property rights protection and enforcement.

Thailand's Regional Relations

Thailand's importance for U.S. interests in Southeast Asia stems from its large economy, its good relations with its neighbors, and, until the coups, its relatively long-standing democratic rule. Thailand is chair of ASEAN for 2019, and Thai officials hope to foster an ASEAN position on the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, a strategic concept adopted by the Trump Administration. However, because of Thailand's political turmoil, it has recently played little leadership role in the region. Historically, Sino-Thai ties have been close. Unlike several of its Southeast Asian neighbors, Thailand has no territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea. Thai imports from China have boomed under the 2010 China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement.

Human Rights and Democracy Concerns

International groups, some Members of Congress, and U.S. officials have criticized Thailand's alleged human rights abuses, including arbitrary arrests and the lack of protections for trafficking victims, laborers, and refugees. International groups have also identified human rights violations in the Muslim-majority southern provinces where an ongoing insurgency has killed over 7,000 people since 2004. In its 2018 Trafficking in Persons report, the State Department ranked Thailand as a Tier 2 country, an improvement over recent years. Thailand argues that human smuggling, not trafficking, is the main cross-border issue.

Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention nor its 1967 Protocol and does not have a formal national asylum framework. In 2016, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported that Thailand hosted nearly 600,000 refugees, asylum-seekers, and stateless people.

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