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Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations

Thailand is a long-time treaty ally and economic partner of the United States. U.S. government agencies operate numerous regional offices from the Embassy in Bangkok, one of the largest U.S. diplomatic missions in the world. Cooperation has included security initiatives and military operations, intelligence and law enforcement efforts, and regional health and education programs. Two decades of political turmoil in Thailand, including military coups in 2006 and 2014, have nonetheless hampered policymaking and complicated relations with the United States.

Although elections in 2019 nominally ended military rule, efforts by successive Thai governments and the military to manipulate political processes and suppress critics have raised questions about its prospects for returning to democratic governance. The State Department and human rights organizations have reported numerous issues, including curtailment of freedoms of speech and assembly, harassment and prosecution of government critics, use of *lèse majesté* (offenses against the monarchy) laws to muzzle dissent, arbitrary arrests, and a lack of protections for human trafficking victims, laborers, and refugees.

Thailand has long maintained extensive and cordial relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC or China). As U.S.-PRC tensions shape regional decisionmaking, Thailand remains an arena of competition and an important component of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. Congress may consider whether and how it might respond to Thailand's political uncertainty as it weighs defense and foreign relations authorization and appropriations measures and conducts oversight of the executive branch's stewardship of a military alliance that is home to strategic military facilities to which the United States has access. Thailand is also one of Southeast Asia's largest economies, but is highly dependent on tourism and exports; the IMF projects that structural issues and tariff impacts will contribute to slowing economic growth in 2026.

Political Turnover

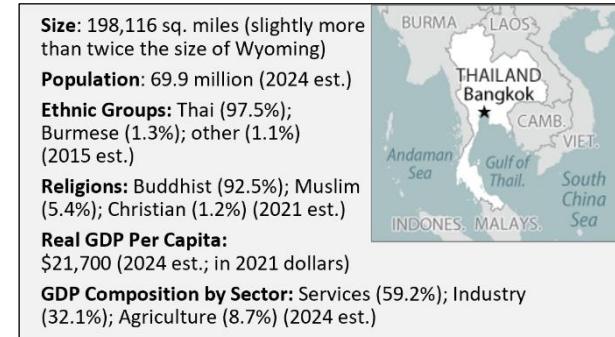
Thailand is scheduled to hold national elections on February 8, 2026. The country is officially a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary democracy, though Thailand has had nine successful coups since 1932. The pro-establishment Bhumjaithai Party and its leader, Anutin Charnvirakul, have headed the government since September 2025. In order to garner sufficient support in parliament, Anutin entered into agreement with the reform-minded Move Forward Party, promising to begin the process of constitutional reform and hold elections within four months.

The previous government was led by the Pheu Thai Party, associated with former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was deposed in the 2006 coup. After national elections in 2023, the Move Forward Party—which had earned a plurality in parliament—was unable to form a government.

Pheu Thai formed an 11-party coalition; after Pheu Thai's first prime minister was removed by the Constitutional Court in August 2024, parliament chose Paetongtarn Shinawatra, Thaksin's daughter, as the new prime minister.

Paetongtarn was removed from office in August 2025, following a reignited border dispute with Cambodia. In a leaked June 15 call between Paetongtarn and former Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, she referred to Hun Sen as "uncle" (an honorific) and criticized a Thai military commander as being "from the opposite side," prompting many Thai observers to criticize her as inappropriately deferential to Cambodia. Following the leaked call, large protests in Bangkok called for her resignation, Bhumjaithai exited the then-governing coalition, and 36 members of the Senate petitioned the Constitutional Court for Paetongtarn's removal, which was ultimately successful.

Figure 1. Thailand at a Glance



Source: CIA World Factbook, 2026. Map, CRS.

Thailand-Cambodia Border Dispute

Pheu Thai's downfall and Bhumjaithai's political ascent was shaped in part by the revival of a long-standing dispute between Thailand and Cambodia over borders drawn by French colonial powers in 1907. On May 28, 2025, Thai and Cambodian military forces exchanged fire over a section of their shared border, leaving one Cambodian soldier dead and prompting troop build-ups, escalatory rhetoric, and retaliatory economic measures.

In July, following incidents in which Thai soldiers were injured by landmines, Thai and Cambodian forces engaged in five days of cross-border firefights, artillery shelling, and attacks by Thai F-16 fighter jets into Cambodia territory. Thai and Cambodian authorities reported more than 43 combined civilian and military casualties, and more than 330,000 people were reported to have been displaced by the fighting. On July 28, the two sides met in Malaysia and agreed to an "immediate and unconditional ceasefire" in a meeting brokered by Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. Prior to the agreement, President Donald Trump halted U.S. negotiations on tariff rates with both Thailand and Cambodia until the fighting stopped. Some observers

and Cambodian officials have credited this pressure as a driver of the ceasefire. During the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit in October 2025, President Trump presided over the signing of the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accords, a peace declaration between Thailand and Cambodia.

Fighting began anew on December 7, 2025, and continued until a new ceasefire agreement was signed on December 27. China reportedly was involved in mediating the truce. Thai and Cambodian officials reported around 100 combined civilian and military casualties, and an estimated one million people were reported displaced by the fighting.

Political Divisions and Protests

Thailand is politically divided between the political establishment (a mix of the military, royalists, and senior bureaucrats) and those seeking more popular democracy—including young, urban Thais supporting the Move Forward Party and less-affluent, traditionally disenfranchised rural citizens who tended to be Thaksin's base of support.

Move Forward has called for the removal of some of the monarchy's privileges, a controversial position in a country where criticizing the monarch is illegal. The interpretation and usage of *lèse majesté* has expanded over the past two decades to include even subtle criticisms of the king, palace, military, or government. King Vajiralongkorn, who succeeded his widely revered father in 2019, is reportedly deeply unpopular with the public for his profligate lifestyle and history of capricious and sometimes violent behavior.

U.S. Security Relations

U.S.-Thai security relations, which date back to the Korean and Vietnam Wars, have long been the highest-profile pillar of the relationship. In addition to hosting military exercises, Thailand provides U.S. forces with access to key facilities, particularly U-Tapao airbase and Sattahip naval base. The U.S. military used U-Tapao for refueling operations during its campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan in the 2000s as well as for humanitarian relief efforts in Asia. U.S. officials have said intelligence and law enforcement cooperation remains a priority, particularly as the United States confronts international criminal and drug networks in the region.

The United States imposed restrictions on foreign aid to Thailand's government following the 2014 coup under §7008 of annual appropriations measures, which primarily affected State Department-administered military aid. U.S. agencies continued most non-military aid and cooperation, along with the large-scale annual Cobra Gold military exercises. (Section 7008 is silent on funds appropriated to the U.S. military.) The State Department certified the 2019 elections as democratic and lifted the §7008 restrictions, which allowed the resumption of U.S. Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and International Military Education and Training (IMET) assistance.

Trade and Economic Relations

Thailand is an upper middle-income country, and trade, foreign investment, and tourism are important to the country's economy. The United States was Thailand's second-largest trading partner, behind China, in 2024. Thailand is a member of the Regional Comprehensive

Economic Partnership (RCEP) trade agreement that includes Asia-Pacific countries (but not the United States).

Following the July 2025 ceasefire agreement, the Trump Administration set tariff rates on imports of Thai goods to the United States at 19% via executive order. Meetings in October 2025 at the ASEAN Summit yielded a U.S.-Thailand memorandum of understanding that aims to strengthen cooperation on developing and diversifying supply chains for critical minerals and rare earths.

Thailand's Regional Relations

Historically, Sino-Thai economic relations have been close, with deep trade and investment ties, and defense ties have been growing. As a member of the China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Thailand is involved in a high-speed railway project that would connect southern China with several Southeast Asian nations.

Thailand was one of five founding members of ASEAN, and has extensive trade and investment relations across the region. Japan is its largest source of foreign direct investment. Thailand has no territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea and has avoided voicing opposition to China's assertive behavior in pressing its claims.

Thailand shares a 1,500-mile border with Burma (Myanmar), and hosts over 90,000 refugees from Burmese internal conflicts over the past several decades, and thousands more who fled after Burma's 2021 military coup. Thailand relies on natural gas imports from Burma to meet its energy needs, and a Thai company is a leading partner of Burma's military-run oil and gas firm. The Thai government's engagement with Burmese governments since Burma's independence in 1948 arguably has been more intensive than that of any other country. Following Burma's 2021 coup, the Thai government refrained from strong criticism, attempted to pursue diplomacy with the Burmese junta, and funded humanitarian assistance to conflict-affected regions in Burma.

Issues for Congress

Since 2014, some Members of Congress have introduced resolutions urging the government of Thailand to protect and uphold democracy and human rights, and conducted oversight of the executive branch's implementation of coup-related foreign assistance restrictions and military-to-military engagements. Members have expressed concern about Thailand's human trafficking record; the State Department's 2025 Trafficking in Persons Report rated Thailand as a Tier 2 nation, indicating the government does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking as set out by the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA, P.L. 106-386, as amended) but is striving to do so.

Members of Congress may consider how, and if, to support Thailand's military, including through military-to-military cooperation, the FMF program, the Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative (P.L. 117-81, §1241), and a pilot program to improve the cyber capabilities of the Thai armed forces (P.L. 116-283, as amended).

William Piekos, Analyst in Foreign Affairs

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