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United States Marine Corps  
Command and Staff College  
Marine Corps University  
2076 South Street  
Marine Corps Combat Development Command  
Quantico, Virginia 22134-5068

MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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*Thailand: A U.S. Struggle to Maintain Influence*

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

MAJOR BRADLEY A. MOTZ  
UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS

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Mentor and Oral Defense Committee Member: CHRISTOPHER S. STONE, Ph.D.

Approved: 

Date: 4/09/18

Oral Defense Committee Member: Nathan M. Packard, PhD

Approved: 

Date: 4/09/18

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Title:** Thailand: A U.S. Struggle to Maintain Influence

**Author:** Major Bradley A. Motz, United States Marine Corps

**Thesis:** If the U.S. remains stagnant in its relationship with Thailand, China will eventually hold the preponderance of influence there.

**Discussion:** Thailand has long been an ally of the United States, and one of only two countries in the ASEAN with which the U.S. has formal relations. Since the 2014 Military Coup in Thailand that deposed the elected prime minister, the U.S. has reduced its cooperation and allowed the alliance to grow stagnant. Conversely, the Peoples Republic of China has grown its relationship with Thailand in the past few decades in the areas of trade, military cooperation/sales, social programs, and various business endeavors. This sudden strengthening of ties between China and Thailand, coupled with the strained relationship between the U.S. and Thailand, has allowed U.S. influence to be contested and potentially outweighed by China in the future.

**Conclusion:** The U.S. is ultimately faced with a decision of whether it is more important to maintain an idealistic form of diplomacy with Thailand or choose to take a pragmatic approach in its relationship with Thailand to ensure a continued alliance. If the U.S. continues to uphold the status quo in its relationship with Thailand, and China continues its upward sloping trajectory, it is possible eventually China will hold the preponderance of influence in the country of Thailand.

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## INTRODUCTION

Currently, the United States is the world's lone superpower; however, China and Russia are establishing themselves as regional powers in the eastern hemisphere. There are several elements to establishing and sustaining the status as a superpower or regional power. One is the amount of influence a country wields in other countries within a region. Exerting influence in different countries and areas — regionally and around the world — is vital to achieve national strategic-level objectives. With the rise of China as a dominant regional power in Asia, the U.S. has faced multiple challenges to remain influential in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region. Although the U.S. conducts trade, partners with, and supports several countries in the ASEAN, it only has two formal alliances with countries in the region, one of which is Thailand.<sup>1</sup>

The United States maintains a relationship with Thailand dating back nearly two centuries. In years past, the U.S. has worked with Thailand in several areas, including science and technology, public health, military-arms sales, combined military exercises, international law-enforcement, and several others. The two countries also enjoy a strong partnership in trade.<sup>2</sup> This partnership has not only benefited Thailand but also the United States, as it has since held the most influence within the country. With China's rise to regional power, it has expanded its interest in Thailand and built a close relationship that has now extended beyond economics to also include military and social relationships. These tightening of ties between China and Thailand have now set a stage where U.S. influence is contested by China. If the U.S. remains stagnant in its relationship with Thailand, China will eventually hold the preponderance of influence there. This is evident as seen in the analysis of the past and current relationships between the U.S. and Thailand, and China and Thailand.

In October 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wrote a foreign policy titled

*America's Pacific Century*. In that policy she stated the following: "the future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States will be right at the center of the action."<sup>3</sup> The U.S. realignment of focus from Iraq and Afghanistan to the Pacific region is significant in the fact that the United States will have to begin strengthening ties with its current allies as well as forge new relationships in the region. This priority, originally set forth by the Barack Obama Administration, continues as a top U.S. foreign policy priority today. The problem current U.S. diplomats are faced with to reenergize the alliance in Thailand is one of idealism v. realism.

This paper is comprised of three parts that serve as the framework for analyzing the current U.S. foreign policy with Thailand. First, is a historical background of U.S. relations with Thailand from beginning to current. This section will begin with a background of the relationship leading up to the recent strain between the two countries and then discuss current security cooperation, non-military funded programs, and trade relations. Second, will be a background of the relationship between Thailand and China leading into the current relationship in the areas of military partnership, new business endeavors and the use of soft power to influence culture in Thailand. Third, is an analysis and recommendation portion which identifies Thailand's importance as an ally, partnership intentions, and alliance progression.

## **U.S./THAILAND RELATIONSHIP**

### **Background**

Before analyzing the level of influence the U.S. currently holds in Thailand, it is important to understand the history of the foreign relationship between the two countries. The U.S. and Thailand established relations in 1818. They subsequently formalized a diplomatic relationship in 1833 with the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Commerce which was "[a] Treaty of sincere friendship and entire good faith between the two nations."<sup>4</sup> It specifically

established the relationship of trade and granted free access to the port facilities in Siam (Thailand) to the United States.

The next major milestone in the relationship was their involvement in the formation of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in September 1954. SEATO, headquartered in Bangkok, was initially formed during the early years of the Cold War to prevent aggressive acts of communism in the region of Southeast Asia.<sup>5</sup> The Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty, commonly referred to as the Manila Pact, was signed concurrently to the formation of SEATO.<sup>6</sup> The original signatories of the pact included both the U.S. and Thailand. It was the first signed document that established a formal military alliance binding U.S. military forces to Thailand. To highlight the obligation the U.S. has to Thailand is a passage taken directly from the Manila Pact agreement: “The United States of America in executing the present Treaty does so with the understanding that its recognition of the effect of aggression and armed attack and its agreement with reference thereto in Article IV, paragraph 1, apply only to communist aggression.”<sup>7</sup> The key verbiage in this statement is that the U.S. would respond only to prevent acts of aggression specifically related to the spread of communism. This is an important aspect to remember as it will be discussed later when analyzing appropriate measures the U.S. should take to advance its relationship with Thailand. SEATO was eventually disbanded in 1977 due to multiple areas of ineffectiveness; however, the Manila Pact remains in effect. In addition, in 1962, the Thanat-Rusk agreement was signed between Prime Minister Thanat and U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk. This was an informal communique that promised U.S. aid to Thailand in the event of aggressive acts from Thailand’s neighbors. Additionally, the 2012 Joint Vision statement between the U.S. and Thailand outlines several areas of security cooperation and support the two countries strive to accomplish for the future. The Manila Pact, Thanat-Rusk agreement, and the

2012 Joint Vision statement are the basis for security cooperation between the United States and Thailand today.<sup>8</sup>

Because of the strong military relationship between the U.S. and Thailand over several decades, Thailand was designated a major non-NATO ally in 2003 by the United States.<sup>9</sup> Over the years, multiple vision statements have been released between the United States and Thailand, with the current statement published on October 2, 2017. During a meeting in Washington between the prime minister of Thailand, General Prayut Chan-o-cha, and U.S. President Donald Trump, the two parties discussed the future of U.S./Thai relations and later released the most current joint statement. The joint statement focuses on growing a stronger security alliance and closer economic partnership. The statement does not speak to details on exactly what projects will be initiated or expanded upon in the future, but simply reaffirms the already-established commitment to try and make a longstanding relationship stronger for the benefit of both countries.<sup>10</sup>

With the background set regarding the various treaties, agreements, and vision statements the U.S. and Thailand have embarked on over nearly 200 years, one can see the importance of the U.S. retention of Thailand as a military ally. Since 2010, the United States has realigned regional priorities from the Middle East to the Pacific. A country needs allies within interest areas for geopolitical reasons, which can involve leveraging allies to serve as building blocks to establish new relationships. There are also military considerations involving physical access to the region from either the sea or air. The United States Government and its military are very conscious of how critical access is when establishing allies in areas where there could be a need for military response. During the Vietnam War, Thailand served as one of the major staging areas for personnel and equipment for United States military. Not only was Thailand geographically beneficial for sustainment of logistics for the war effort, but the agreement

additionally enhanced the Thai military. Simultaneous to operations in Vietnam, U.S. forces trained the Thai military in tactics and standard operating procedures. The training proved critical at the time since Thailand was then fighting Maoist insurgencies. Additionally, the U.S. aided in construction projects and improvement of military bases in Thailand.<sup>11</sup>

Regional influence, by definition, cannot be limited to focus on one country. A more recent example of the U.S. reliance on key allies in a region is the use of Pakistan in 2001 during Task Force 58's initial invasion into Afghanistan. Because of the U.S. relationship with Pakistan, intermediate-support bases were used in three different locations in Pakistan which made the sustainment of ship-to-objective movement of troops and supplies capable of reaching Camp Rhino, Afghanistan. These examples are just two of the many partnerships the U.S. has used throughout history to gain access to a region of interest. Although history does not repeat itself in the sense of exact situations, it often does "rhyme," meaning the U.S. could find itself in situations such as Vietnam as it moves into a period that former Secretary of State Clinton called "America's Pacific Century."<sup>12</sup>

### **Recent Strain in Relationship**

Although Thailand and the U.S. have a rich history of foreign relations with one another and continue to be close allies, a strain in the relationship in the past few years has impacted progression. On May 22, 2014, the Thai military performed a coup, deposing the elected Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. The junta took charge of the office following six months of political protests and upheavals in response to an amnesty bill which was felt to be corrupt on the Prime Minister's part. General Prayut Chan-o-cha, who led the military coup, is currently serving as the interim Prime Minister until elections are held and democracy is presumably restored.

Unfortunately, military coups and government leadership issues are not new scenarios in the Kingdom of Thailand. In fact, since 1932, Thailand has experienced nineteen coups, twelve of which were successful.<sup>13</sup> Wary U.S. government officials and diplomats have strongly urged Thailand to hold elections and return to a democratic form of government. The U.S. standpoint is that democratic government is not only in the best interest of Thailand, but also an essential aspect of continuing the strategically aligned relationship between the two countries.<sup>14</sup> U.S. officials have publicly stated that Thailand needs to restore order to remove the junta and elect a new prime minister. Yet, “In the eyes of Bangkok, antagonizing rhetoric and punitive measures from one its closest friends when it is undergoing a critical transition has been most unwelcome.”<sup>15</sup> In addition to Thailand’s inaction to return to democratic government rule, the death of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, a strong ally of the United States during his 70-year reign, casts even further doubt on the future of U.S. influence in Thailand. His son and successor to the crown, King Maha Vajiralongkorn, took the throne in 2016, so it is too early to speculate whether he will support U.S. goals and visions like his father. The recent military coup has created a rift in the relationship between Thailand and the U.S. that may potentially be cleared up if democracy is restored.

Unfortunately, the current “ruling junta is likely to remain in power for the foreseeable future.”<sup>16</sup> Originally, the elections were forecast to be held in late 2015, but were pushed back to the mid-2016, and then even later to mid-to-late 2017.<sup>17</sup> At this date, still no elections have been held in Thailand to replace the prime minister. The original forecasts for elections assumed that a new draft constitution would be passed very quickly after the office of the prime minister was vacated. Before elections are held, it is important that provisions in the new constitution address corruption to avoid the recurrence of an issue that has plagued the government for so long. Corruption in politics has been vast in Thailand dating back several decades, explaining the high

number of military coups. Currently, the Prime Minister is employing hard tactics, whereby certain civil liberties have been restricted which may inhibit restoration of democracy.

Additionally, the press has been censored and political opponents have been threatened, indicating that that any endorsement of the new government control is gained from intimidation vice support.<sup>18</sup> If maintaining a close relationship between the U.S. and Thailand is dependent on Thailand's return to democracy, it may be some time before the relationship returns to full value.

Gaps in the relationship between the U.S. and Thailand provide an opportunity for China to fill the void and establish a strong and enduring partnership with Thailand. China's priorities in the partnership with Thailand are unlike the U.S., in that China is indifferent to the governance of the Thai people. Democracy or not, China will be there to partner in multiple areas and may become more appealing to Thailand than the U.S., since China does not place its support under the same restrictions. The U.S. should be conscious of this fact when considering agreements and the ramifications of future relationship restrictions when moving forward.

### **Current Security Cooperation**

Before analyzing specific areas of cooperation between the U.S. and Thailand, it is important to be aware of the amount and diversity of involvement the two countries share when analyzing influence. The major areas the U.S. have historically been involved with in Thailand consist of: security cooperation, military-arms supply, science and technology, law enforcement, wildlife trafficking, public health, and trade, the majority of which began during the height of the relationship during the Cold War.<sup>19</sup>

Undoubtedly the strongest of all the areas the U.S. partners with Thailand in is the military alliance the two countries share. The U.S. and Thailand have enjoyed a close joint military exercise program in the past several decades, as they have averaged 40 joint exercises

per year, engaging each of the military services within the Department of Defense.<sup>20</sup> The largest is Thailand's hosted joint multinational exercise in the Pacific named Cobra Gold. Now in its thirty-sixth year, Cobra Gold has traditionally highlighted the close U.S./Thailand military relationship and demonstrated the mutual support of each country to train together, while also working with participants from 29 other countries.<sup>21</sup> Cobra Gold strengthens regional partnerships while improving interoperability between not only the U.S. and Thailand, but all participants from the region that are involved. Cobra Gold is an example of how the United States can leverage its current alliance with Thailand to build further relationships with various countries in the Pacific. If the focus of U.S. strategic goals are centered around Asia gaining as many partners in the region as possible, this annual exercise will help build influence and also boost U.S. opinion. Main events during the exercise include a headquarters command-and-control exercise, an amphibious assault on an objective, non-combatant evacuation operations and various combined arms live-fire ranges in order to maximize the synergy of the exercise.

The U.S. has participated since the inaugural exercise; however, involvement has been downgraded since 2014 and has yet to return to its peak of 9,500 U.S. participants. In 2017, the U.S. only offered up 3,500 troops to the joint exercise.<sup>22</sup> Every year that passes without the U.S. contributing maximum participation is another demonstration to Thailand of the potential weakening of military relations. Additionally, not as many U.S. troops are there to engage Thai forces. However, until Thailand returns to a democracy, the U.S. is likely to withhold involvement in Cobra Gold, which one could speculate as a form of punishment for not doing what the U.S. Government has so strongly urged them to do.

In addition to Cobra Gold being affected by the current state of the relationship, Thailand was completely excluded from the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise in 2014 due to U.S. acknowledgement of human-rights violations. RIMPAC is the World's largest maritime

multinational exercise in the world.<sup>23</sup> The tactic of downsizing and exclusion may not strengthen an apparently fragile relationship, but gross violations of human rights prove justifiably inexcusable for any partnership with this U.S. Both the U.S. and Thailand officials are currently unrelenting in their current positions, causing further strain on the bi-lateral relationship.<sup>24</sup>

### **Non-Military Funded Programs**

The United States also works closely with Thailand on issues concerning international law enforcement and improvement to their criminal justice system.<sup>25</sup> U.S./Thai law enforcement cooperation is evident by the treaties and memoranda of understanding the two countries have signed over the years, to include the Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the Narcotics Field, and Treaty on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters.<sup>26</sup> Because law-enforcement cooperation requires a particularly high level of trust, these two documents demonstrate the close ties between the two signatories. Together the two countries have worked for several decades in halting illicit trafficking and narcotics, and the U.S. has traditionally funded law enforcement training of Thai Police.<sup>27</sup> In 2014, the United States halted Thai police training that was supposed to be funded from a \$4.7 million-dollar allocation of financial assistance, again demonstrating a reduction of support in an area that has traditionally been very progressive.<sup>28</sup>

### **Trade Relationship**

Since the 1800s, with the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Commerce, the U.S. and Thailand have been steadfast partners in trade. Leading Thai imports from the U.S. are “machinery, aircraft, gold, optic and medical goods, and agricultural products.”<sup>29</sup> Leading exports from Thailand into the U.S. are “machinery, rubber, prepared meat, shrimp and tuna, and other agricultural products.” Currently the U.S. ranks number three in bilateral trade with Thailand, trailing China at number one and Japan at two.<sup>30</sup> Since China and ASEAN signed a

free trade agreement in 2003 and China's continual economic boom, it is no shock that China has become Thailand's largest trading partner. Geographically, China is the closest of the leading trade partners to Thailand, so it makes delivery of products faster and more efficient than countries located thousands of miles away. The comparative distance hinders the U.S. when it comes to retaining the preponderance of the influence in Thailand by a leading superpower. Given its geographic location and U.S reluctance to support the current Thai government, China is likely to remain Thailand's most important trade partner. It will thus be able to grow even closer in trade and investments with Thailand and "use the country to counter balance U.S. influence in the region."<sup>31</sup>

## **CHINA/THAILAND RELATIONSHIP**

### **Background**

China and Thailand have had a cultural and economic relationship dating back to the fourteenth century. Though Thailand has had a longer relationship with China, it has not been as stable as the U.S./Thailand relationship and at times has been a largely uncooperative one. Following Thailand's last tribute to China in 1854, China and Thailand had no formal diplomatic relations until 1946 after signing of the Sino-Siamese Amity Treaty. Despite a lack of a formalized diplomatic relationship in the late nineteenth century, Chinese civilians continued to trade with Thai businesses as well as migrate into the nation. In fact, migration from China to Thailand became so prominent that the Chinese became and still hold the highest minority rate in Thailand.<sup>32</sup> The large number of Chinese in Thailand has undoubtedly been a shaping force for Thai-Chinese relations throughout the years. A solid relationship was short lived, however, after the establishment of the Sino-Siamese Amity Treaty due to the creation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. With the fear of the spread of communism into Thailand, it quickly allied with the United States to reduce the Chinese threat to its national security. By 1958 the

Thai government banned all trading with the PRC. It was not until 1975 that a diplomatic relationship with the PRC was restored. Since the late 1970s, the relationship that has been forged between China and Thailand has been significant and over the past couple decades has gained further momentum.<sup>33</sup>

Geographical considerations must be assessed to understand diplomatic decisions made by Thailand to bring China in as a close partner. Thailand's relationship with China has long been one of accommodation. Since China is the regional power in Asia, it is not practical for Thailand to refuse cooperation with it, potentially leading to elevated tensions or unnecessary conflict.<sup>34</sup> For many years, Thailand has tried to avoid any kind of a diplomatic relationship with China because it feared Chinese influence would be too great. Thailand has made it known throughout its history that it has remained an uncolonized independent country.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, it has established relationships with the U.S., Japan, and China to counterbalance influence so no single country oversteps its bounds.

### **Military Partnership**

It is clear China has recently expressed considerable interest in Thailand, as seen by the dramatic increase in Sino-Thai trade over the past ten years. In July of 2016, it was confirmed by Defence Minister General Prawit Wongsuwan that Thailand was purchasing three S26T diesel-electric, non-nuclear submarines from China. Delivery of first sub began in 2017 and procurement will be complete in 2020, a project that is estimated to be worth a total of \$1.12 billion USD. The rationale behind the decision comes in the development of a new port facility in Myanmar and the need for stronger security to protect the country's interests.<sup>36</sup>

While there are no restrictions with Thailand purchasing large-scale military equipment from countries outside the U.S., it is a significant step forward in relationship building with China that the U.S. should be wary about for several reasons. First, the purchase was one of

Thailand's biggest military deals in its history. Second, the deal was with China and not the United States, which has typically been among the top countries from which Thailand has purchased military arms since its alliance. Finally, there is much speculation what the intent is with the submarines and why Thailand made its purchase. Waters surrounding Thailand are all very shallow and non-conducive for employment of submarines as a means of coastal defense. Some reports have justified it by stating that the subs are needed to protect Thailand's resources in the Andaman Sea.<sup>37</sup> Protection of resources in the Andaman Sea will come in the early 2020s when a deep-sea port opens in Dawei, Myanmar. Thailand is a principal investor in the port and access will allow Thailand to bypass the Gulf of Thailand while importing and exporting goods from Europe and India. Additionally, in May 2016, Thailand announced a contract between itself and China to purchase twenty-eight VT-4 tanks with an option to potentially expand to 100 tanks.<sup>38</sup> With the combination of the two major high-end purchases, China appears to be supplanting the U.S. as Thailand's major arms supplier.

Military cooperation between China and Thailand continues beyond just the purchase of weapons. In late 2014, the two countries embarked on their first joint air force exercise. Both sides reacted to the prospect of working militarily in hopes of enhancing relationships. In an interview by *The Diplomat*, Desmond Walton, a former military attaché to the U.S. embassy in Bangkok had the following remarks regarding the exercise: "Clearly the Thais are expanding security cooperation with the Chinese, and I think this is partly aimed at demonstrating to the United States that they have other options."<sup>39</sup> Previously it was mentioned that the Thailand/China relationship has been one of accommodation, but the future of the relationship appears to be moving beyond that. One could go so far as to say that Thailand may be attempting to align its interests with China since the latter is the greatest power in the region. Either way, it

is undeniable the relationship is close and could lead to greater influence militarily, since China now has a considerable foothold.

### **New Business Endeavors**

In addition to building influence within military operations, Thailand and China continue to enhance their relationship through new business endeavors. The most recent example, and that of highest strategic importance, is the proposed construction of a canal across the Kra Isthmus in Southern Thailand. If built, it would shorten the shipping route from the Andaman Sea to the Gulf of Thailand by 700 miles and avoid the overcrowded Straits of Malacca. Although China has not made any firm commitments to build the canal, it is one of the major supporters and potential investors in the project.<sup>40</sup> The proposal is one of many infrastructure projects that the Chinese would finance falling under the umbrella of its “One Belt One Road” plan.<sup>41</sup> Multiple countries dating back to the 17th century have expressed interest in building the canal for various strategic reasons. The plan has never come to fruition because of geological considerations, making it an extremely expensive project. Recent estimates of the project has been between \$30 and \$50 billion USD.<sup>42</sup> The estimate fluctuates drastically due to the uncertain nature of supplies necessary to overcome terrain obstacles involved in its construction. Because of the high cost to build the canal, Thailand would require an investing partner to proceed. Since China’s economy is the largest in the region, it is the top prospect Thailand is looking to as a partner in the project.

The strategic implications with building the Kra Canal go far beyond trade efficiency and would heavily affect several countries in the ASEAN, the United States, and several major trade partners outside of the ASEAN. Most effects to countries outside the United States would be economical. For the argument of this paper, strategic implications affecting the United States will be the focus. “The United States currently conducts anti-piracy patrols in the region, and in

the Malacca Strait in particular.”<sup>43</sup> If the U.S. Navy needs to interdict vessels in the Straits of Malacca, it is currently in a good position to do so. If the Kra Canal was built, there would be an alternative route which would create a reduction in U.S. Naval power projection in the region. “Moreover, a Chinese-built canal would presumably be subject to a considerable amount of influence from Beijing, potentially creating a situation where China might have an advantage over the U.S. in shifting naval forces between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea.”<sup>44</sup> Bottom line, Thailand is going to do what is best for Thailand. Anything that would boost the economy of Thailand would be welcome, regardless of the source. With the decline in the economy over the past three years due to drops in private investment from 3 percent to 2.7 percent, the canal would undoubtedly enhance its economy.<sup>45</sup> Influence from China would grow significantly since the two countries would be partners in a potentially \$50 billion-dollar venture. The United States would come out a loser in this scenario unequivocally, with the possible exception of Singapore, which currently is the monetary beneficiary of vessels traveling through the Straits of Malacca.

### **Soft-Power Approach**

China is exerting influence through hard-power and soft-power initiatives. For this argument, soft power will be defined as “the ability to shape the preference of others through appeal and attraction.”<sup>46</sup> One of the various ways China is using soft-power is through expanding Chinese education in Thailand. In the early 2000s, China’s interest in Thailand began to expand through cultural means. It initiated discussions in 2004 to build a framework to bring Chinese education to Thailand. This cooperation was formalized and signed in 2009 between the Thai Ministry of Education and China. The educational establishments are known as Confucius Institutes (CI). Currently there are 8,000 volunteers in the Thailand CI system that are working to spread Chinese cultural education to all students wishing to learn. Part of the attraction of the

institutions are that they are non-profit and offer scholarships to students. CI has proven to be a remarkable way to establish influence in Thailand and has resulted in a considerable migration over the past decade.<sup>47</sup> Initiatives such as CI establishes a connection with the people which it seeks to influence, while also spreading Chinese culture and language into Thailand in a very welcoming manner. On top of Thai students attending CI, the Chinese government awards 200 grants per year to school officials in Thailand to travel to China. There they observe Chinese classroom procedures and absorb the culture in which they are surrounded. This is beneficial to China because with the education in Chinese methods of teaching, the visiting student returns to Thailand and spreads the techniques and procedures to other instructors there.

Concerns by some scholars include the notion that the Institutes serve as an arm of the government to promote Chinese propaganda and political influence. Some skeptics on university staffs in Canada and the United States have stated that programs similar within these nations should be eliminated at universities. Some universities initially onboard with the program have since disassociated with CI's, including McMaster University (Canada), The University of Chicago, and Stockholm University. Educators at the CI have denounced accusations of being linked to an instrument of Chinese government influence and maintain that the CI are completely independent.<sup>48</sup>

China has also yielded a considerable social impact on tourism. In recent years, there has been an exponential growth in the amount of Chinese tourism to Thailand. In 2013, a total of 7.4 million Chinese tourists visited Thailand, a 66.8% increase from the previous year. Additionally, China has now overtaken the U.S. as the world's biggest travel spender. This is yet another Chinese-provided and needed boost to the Thailand economy. Many Thai businesses are now dependent on the mass of tourists from China. Chinese tourism will likely continue to grow in the future based on the economic need in Thailand and the attractiveness it creates by specific

cultural catering to Chinese travelers. Everything from food, decorations, and even ceremonies are geared toward Chinese culture.<sup>49</sup> This soft-power technique is unquestionably effective in creating an overall environment that welcomes Chinese culture.

Confucius Institutes and tourism represent a side of the Thai/China relationship that does not draw much attention, yet should be examined in concert with other factors. Indeed, social relationships underpin the influence one country holds in another and are the heart of social change. These social endeavors have served to enhance the relationship between the two countries.

## **ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Thailand is the Key ASEAN Ally**

Though the U.S. has two formal allies in the ASEAN — the Philippines and Thailand — retention of Thailand may become even more vital in the future due to the uncertainty of the relationship with the U.S. and Philippines. Since Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte took office in June 2016, he has expressed interest in diversifying relations by pursuing relationships with other regional powers, including China and Russia. He has expressed that this effort would allow the Philippines to be less reliant on the United States and not have to deal with restrictions in partnership the U.S. has placed on the Philippines regarding democratic values, specifically civil-rights issues and the war on drugs. Additionally, President Duterte has been quoted in saying that Russian President (Vladimir Putin) is his “favorite hero.”<sup>50</sup> Putin possesses much different values and methods of leading his country than liberal western democracies, so it begs the question whether the leadership of the Philippines will seek to partner with countries such as China or Russia in the future. Both countries can offer military arms sales, an area which had been withheld recently under the Obama administration, as well as economic funding across various initiatives. Overall, there has been a severe strain in the U.S./Philippine relationship that

is much deeper than the strain of the U.S./Thailand relationship. If the Philippines reconsiders its alliance with the U.S. and creates an alliance with either China or Russia, that will leave only Thailand as the single formal alliance for the U.S. within the ASEAN.

### **Keeping the Faith**

When analyzing how the U.S. can rekindle relations with Thailand to ensure future partnership progression, it is prudent to evaluate what areas the U.S. can influence more than China and what areas it cannot. Unfortunately, the answer to the current problem is not simply for the U.S. to trade more with Thailand or make military arms more available. There are many factors which are out of U.S. direct control, of which China has the strategic advantage. The geographic location of China naturally gives it an advantage when conducting trade due to efficiency and less cost in shipping. If China is selling less-expensive military equipment, it is because the United States equipment is superior and inevitably costs more. However, the American businesses that produce submarines cannot be expected to lower their price because the U.S. Government wants to make an ally happy. What needs to be considered when looking to strengthen the current strained relationship is the overarching intentions of good faith from the U.S. to Thailand in all current cooperation strategies. This is where the U.S. is faced with the difficult decision of which form of diplomacy to use in dealing with Thailand — an idealistic or realistic approach. The U.S. has had a long history of basing diplomacy on idealism, but with growing importance being placed to relations in the Pacific Theater it may be time to overlook certain issues in the country of Thailand and adopt a realistic approach to preserve the alliance. Many of the negative comments publicized by U.S. officials rebuking Thailand for its lack of urgency to return to democratic rule have accomplished nothing more than offending Thai officials. There is much change to undertake at one time in Thailand regarding its government; it should be recognized by the U.S. that it may take time to get issues resolved before effectively

transitioning back to a democracy. Instead of using a pragmatic approach or exercising strategic patience, the U.S. has enforced tactics of withholding support across many areas in an attempt to force Thailand into U.S. compliance. So far, these tactics have not worked and have only served to further upset and distance the United States' longtime friend and ally.

### **Alliance Progression**

The first order of business to enhance the progress of the U.S./Thailand relationship involves revisiting the formal alliance the two countries share. The original Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty binds the U.S. to protect Thailand through military means, but only does so under acts of communist aggression.<sup>51</sup> This treaty's verbiage is exceedingly out of date for the post-Cold War era. Therefore, the United States should sign a new treaty with Thailand that goes beyond "communist acts of aggression" and addresses maritime security, transnational threats, and terrorist threats. These threats are currently addressed in the 2012 vision statement for the Thai-U.S. Defense Alliance, but should be put into a formal signed treaty that is binding.<sup>52</sup> Currently the U.S. alliance with Thailand is working from three different documents to create an overall strategy between the two countries: the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty, the Thanat-Rusk agreement, and the 2012 Joint Vision Statement. These should be consolidated into a more clear and concise document that outlines security cooperation between the two countries so there is no confusion. Additionally, in an act of good faith and to show U.S. priorities in Thailand, the new treaty should be publicly signed by senior officials from the United States government and have a high reach of broadcast. Senior U.S. officials present at the signing should be, at the least, the U.S. Ambassador to Thailand. Also in attendance, to show military support, could be the U.S. Secretary of Defense or Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Pacific Command (PACOM) Commander. High-level participation in and of itself

would demonstrate the commitment the U.S. has to Thailand and sets a precedent of growing future relations.

The next effort in which the U.S. should work to restore immediately is military cooperation with Thailand. Since military cooperation is by far the strongest relationship in the alliance with Thailand, it should be the first area of focus after formal signing of official documents that the U.S. seeks to not only restore but enhance provisions outlined in the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty. It is also among the top factors, in addition to trade, in maintaining influence within the country. The reason being is that the military serves as the arm of policy, therefore if the U.S. and Thailand are aligned militarily, it allows for the U.S. to enjoy strong influence with regard to policy within the country. Subsequently, it also serves as an area to use for regional access while projecting U.S. military power. The way that the U.S. can begin to renew military cooperation is by reinstating maximum participation in the annual exercise Cobra Gold. An exercise which once involved 9,500 U.S. military personnel has been reduced to a footprint of 3,500.<sup>53</sup> The fall in Cobra Gold numbers was due to the U.S. stance on the 2014 military coup and has yet to be reevaluated. Again, the U.S. appears to be employing idealistic diplomacy by the immediate retraction of forces present at the exercise; however, if strategic patience was enacted to preserve the participation level of the exercise, there could potentially be more cooperation gained by both countries. There are a few issues that U.S. lack of participation has created. The first issue is that the reduction in participation has not been seen as an act of good faith on the part of the U.S., but rather served as a tactic using hard power in an attempt to influence Thailand to return to democracy. Additionally, the reduction is a missed opportunity for the U.S. to build working relationships with the Thai military and focus on strengthening joint operations. Furthermore, it does not allow the U.S. to capitalize on leveraging the exercise to build relationships with the additional 29 countries which participate

in the exercise. These represent missed opportunities during an era where U.S. foreign policy is supposed to be refocusing on the Pacific, considered the influential center of gravity for years to come.

Lastly, the U.S. can no longer withhold funding meant for Thailand and expect anything positive to occur with the relationship. The withholding of \$4.7 million dollars of aid, some of which was earmarked for law-enforcement training, only weakens Thai efforts to return to democracy and establish a criminal justice system that meets the United States' standards. Withholding funding to penalize the Thai government has not been received well by its officials and has worked counter to reviving the relationship. If the U.S. hopes that the government of Thailand will return to democracy, the more prudent approach would be to hold a planning meeting between the two countries and identify the shortfalls that are causing the election timeline delay, and then fund efforts to restore those areas. During that process, the U.S. should allow enough time for problem areas to be solved and exercise strategic patience. Since the \$4.7 million withholding in 2014, there has been a shift in American presidential administrations from President Obama to President Trump. It remains to be seen if there will be any further reduction of aid from the U.S. to Thailand under the current administration.

In the end, the U.S. needs to reassess the requirements a country must meet to be an ally in direct relation to how important an ally is in its geographical location. It also needs to figure out if the historically driven idealistic approach of diplomacy is more important to maintain than ensuring the continued alliance with Thailand — its strongest ally in the region. It is known the U.S. government has made Southeast Asia a key area of interest globally. It is critical to retain allies there and also understand that the U.S. is not the only power to which smaller countries can ally with and be successful. So the key question the U.S. policy drivers need to evaluate is, is it more important for Thailand to quickly return to a democratic state or be a strong U.S. ally?

Once that question is answered, the U.S. can build a strategy of tactics that will restore the strong relations that the U.S. and Thailand not so long ago shared with one another, a relationship the U.S. needs in order to remain relevant in the Southeast Asia region.

### **CONCLUSION**

The U.S. and Thailand have enjoyed a long, mutually beneficial alliance. There are multiple agreements, treaties, initiatives, and support operations that still demonstrate a significant relationship between the two countries. However, since the military coup of 2014, and the fact that Thailand has yet to return its government to a democracy, there is a severe strain on the relationship with the U.S. This has led to the U.S. suspending funds, downsizing exercises, and overall becoming stagnant in its relationship with Thailand. On the opposite side of the spectrum, China has done the opposite regarding its relations with Thailand. Since the 1980s, it has been tightening ties with Thailand and in the past two decades has significantly increased its connections in the areas of trade, education, and lucrative business endeavors. Because of this, Chinese influence in Thailand has gone from virtually non-existent to threateningly robust in a very short period of time. If the U.S. continues to uphold the status quo in its relationship with Thailand, and China continues its upward-sloping trajectory, it is possible eventually China will hold the preponderance of influence in the country of Thailand.

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