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U.S. OPERATIONAL ACCESS IN THAILAND: HOW AND WHY IT HAS VARIED SINCE THE 1950s

by

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Despite the increasing range of U.S. military assets, ships need places to repair and refuel, planes need places to land, and ground forces need forward staging areas. Accordingly, the United States goes to great lengths to ensure that it develops access to partner nations that it can rely on in times of crisis. There is widespread understanding that access varies over time, even with close allies, but little literature about the causes of that variation. So, why does access vary? To answer this question, this thesis defines the scale of access by outlining five levels pertinent to U.S. military operations; hypothesizes that access is a function of prior agreements and threat perception; and tests those hypotheses in a case study of the U.S.–Thai alliance between 1954 and 2023. It finds that access has been mainly a function of threat perceptions—when U.S. and Thai perceptions converged during the 1950s and 1960s, access increased; when they diverged in later times, access declined. However, bilateral agreements from the earlier era sustained modest levels of access in later decades. These findings suggest U.S. engagement strategies should leverage prior agreements but will likely be constrained by current threat perceptions.

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U.S. OPERATIONAL ACCESS IN THAILAND: HOW AND WHY IT HAS VARIED SINCE THE 1950s

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ABSTRACT

Despite the increasing range of U.S. military assets, ships need places to repair and refuel, planes need places to land, and ground forces need forward staging areas. Accordingly, the United States goes to great lengths to ensure that it develops access to partner nations that it can rely on in times of crisis. There is widespread understanding that access varies over time, even with close allies, but little literature about the causes of that variation. So, why does access vary? To answer this question, this thesis defines the scale of access by outlining five levels pertinent to U.S. military operations; hypothesizes that access is a function of prior agreements and threat perception; and tests those hypotheses in a case study of the U.S.–Thai alliance between 1954 and 2023. It finds that access has been mainly a function of threat perceptions—when U.S. and Thai perceptions converged during the 1950s and 1960s, access increased; when they diverged in later times, access declined. However, bilateral agreements from the earlier era sustained modest levels of access in later decades. These findings suggest U.S. engagement strategies should leverage prior agreements but will likely be constrained by current threat perceptions.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
BPC	Building Partner Capacity
CAFTA	China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement
CRS	Congressional Research Service
DOD	Department of Defense
DSC	Defense Security Consultation
DPD	Defense Policy Dialogue
HADR	Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief
HN	Host Nation
IMET	International Military Education and Training
JFK	John Fitzgerald Kennedy
JP	Joint Publication
MBT	Main Battle Tanks
MDT	Mutual Defense Treaty
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PLAAF	People's Liberation Army Air Force
PN	Partner Nation
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
SC	Security Cooperation
SEAC4RS	Southeast Asia Composition, Cloud, Climate Coupling Regional Study
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
SOFA	Status of Forces Agreement
UN	United Nations
U.S.	United States
USCENTCOM	U.S. Central Command
VFA	Visiting Forces Agreement

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. RESEARCH QUESTION

The United States invests significant manpower, time, and money in order to build and maintain military access throughout the world. Over the past decade the U.S. focus on rising competition with China has shifted resources away from the Global War on Terror effort toward the Asia-Pacific region. While the partnerships and Status of Forces Agreements (SOFA) with Japan and Korea grant persistent access to Northeast Asia, the only U.S. allies in Southeast Asia, the Philippines and Thailand, provide significantly less access. A longstanding Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the Philippines ensures that the United States retains both a foothold and potential staging area for operations throughout the region. The U.S.–Thai alliance has neither a SOFA nor a VFA in place and U.S. forces have significantly less access in Thailand than in the other allied nations.

As the growing size and impact of China has led to increasing rivalry with the United States, there has been mounting pressure for Southeast Asian nations to align with either the U.S. or China. While this competition has presented significant opportunities, many countries are reticent to support one power at the risk of inciting the other. This hesitance has led some Thai leaders to question whether expanding or maintaining U.S. access will potentially aggravate China.[1]

Founded on the 1954 Manila Pact and the 1962 Thanat-Rusk communiqué, the U.S.–Thailand alliance has evolved over the years, with Thailand granting varying levels of access at different times. During the early Cold War period, Thailand invited U.S. forces into the country as a buffer against communism. Following U.S. withdrawal from the region in the early 1970s, access was effectively cut off. Concerns over the Cambodia crisis

[1] The government of Thailand delayed approving U.S. access to Utaphao air base for the 2012 Southeast Asia Composition, Cloud, Climate Coupling Regional Study (SEAC4RS) over concerns from China about U.S. espionage. Additionally, Thailand began to "steer military exercises and cooperation [with the United States] more towards HADR, so as not to make China unhappy."; Kitti Prasirtsuk, "An Ally at the Crossroads: Thailand in the U.S. Alliance System," In *Global Allies: Comparing Us Alliances in the 21st Century*, ed. Michael Wesley (Australia: ANU Press, 2017) 128, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1sq5twz.11.

led to the rekindling of the alliance in the early 1980s, with agreements put in place for annual bilateral training exercises and storage of U.S. equipment in Thailand. When the United States designated Thailand as a major non-NATO ally in 2003 because of its support for U.S. policy during the Global War on Terror, it further helped rekindle the alliance.[2] The United States did not request any additional access and Thailand did not promise any in response to that designation. Despite the existing agreements, there are arguments that "U.S.–Thai security cooperation is largely based on precedent and ongoing dialogue," rather than more thorough agreements as exist with other U.S. allies in Asia.[3]

The current nature of U.S.–Thai relations could present a challenge to U.S. access in future operations. Recent U.S. engagement strategy with Thailand has leaned heavily on building partner capacity through bilateral and multilateral training exercises. This thesis addresses the importance of engagement strategies as one of the primary variables that influence access, in concert with historic agreements and national threat perceptions. Since the beginning of the Cold War, the U.S. alliance with Thailand has been based on the 1954 Manila Pact and the 1962 Thanat-Rusk communiqué. Although the foundations of the alliance have not changed, the extent and reliability of U.S. military access in Thailand has varied widely over time. **The questions this thesis will answer are: How and why has U.S. access varied since the 1950s?**

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

As one of only two U.S. treaty allies in Southeast Asia, Thailand is a natural partner for U.S. efforts throughout the Pacific. This partnership has been challenged in recent years as Thailand sought to maintain equal relationship with both the United States and China. For example, a prominent Thai analyst, Pongphisoot Busbarat has argued that "Thailand's

[2] U.S. Department of State, *Major Non-NATO Ally Status* (2021) https://www.state.gov/major-non-nato-ally-status/; Under Title 22 United States Code §2321k, designation as a major non-NATO ally grants countries "military and economic privileges," intended to ease U.S. Foreign Arms and defense cooperation. In addition to increasing the ally country's eligibility to purchase U.S. arms and equipment, the designation facilitates the bilateral and multilateral training exercises.

[3] Catharin Dalpino, "The U.S.-Thailand Alliance: Continuity and Change in the 21st Century," in *Strategic Asia 2014–15: U.S. Alliances and Partnerships*, ed. Ashley J. Tellis, Abraham M. Denmark, and Greg Chaffin (Seattle and Washington, DC: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2014) 153.

general posture between America and China is simply to keep a balance between the two."[4] However, as this approach to politics predates the U.S.–Thai alliance, it does not explain why the U.S. access in Thailand has varied over time. As China continues to court Thailand both economically and politically, the United States needs to strengthen the alliance to ensure continued access.

Existing scholarship largely addresses the historic relationship, the growing gap between the two nations, and the events surrounding the 2014 military coup. There is little question that the 2014 coup and subsequent U.S. response negatively impacted U.S.–Thai relations. A few years later, William Tow went so far as to describe U.S.–Thai relations as being in a "constant downward spiral" since that event.[5] While there is significant cause for concern, opportunities still exist to mend the damage and strengthen the relationship between the two countries. RAND studies have highlighted that "given the constraints and uncertainties associated with expanded U.S. access to facilities in ASEAN countries…the United States should diversify its regional military infrastructure as much as possible."[6] Using this approach to best position the United States for potential conflicts in the region, planners need to seek to expand access in Thailand without straining the U.S.–Thai alliance. As the United States continues to develop new warfighting concepts that rely on distributed forces, access to allies and partners is becoming increasingly important. Access to one of our key allies, Thailand, is not assured and has diminished over time. An assessment of the current level and the main drivers of access will help planners make informed decisions about where forces are likely to have access in the future. This will be of particular interest to the U.S. Marine Corps whose "small size and warrior ethos has

[4] Pongphisoot Busbarat, "Bamboo Swirling in the Wind," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 38, no. 2 (August 2016): 238, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24916631.

[5] William T. Tow, "U.S.-Southeast Asia Relations in the Age of Rebalance," *Southeast Asian Affairs*, Singapore (2016): 6, ProQuest.

[6] Richard Sokolsky, Angel Rabasa, and C.R. Neu, *The Role of Southeast Asia in U.S. Strategy Toward China* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2000): xiv, https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1170.html.

made us an attractive partner on the global stage," and in their regular exercises with the Thai military.[7]

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding the causes in variation of U.S. military access to Thailand requires a thorough understanding of the nature of access and of the relationship between the two countries. First, in order to analyze the extent and reliability of U.S. access in any given country, it is essential to define the terms access and reliable. What constitutes access and what makes it reliable? At what point do we say we have enough? With the extent and reliability of access as a dependent variable, it is possible to begin to examine the independent variables that influence access. The three most significant of these variables are engagement strategies, the institutional legacy of existing and agreements, and the two nations' threat perception. Once both the dependent and independent variables are clearly defined it becomes possible to understand their relationship.

This literature review seeks to better frame the concept of access than existing literature. Current literature on Thailand is not framed around the issue of access. Current literature on access is framed around the need for access and the ways it can be achieved, but not explanations of what actually causes it to vary across countries and time. This review will begin by outlining the different levels of military access. There is a significant difference between building personal relationships to smooth joint training exercises and signing agreements to facilitate drone strikes launched from host nation (HN) airfields. While the United States wants both, they are not the same. After outlining the different levels, the review will address how the United States secures access across the globe. It will analyze the various types of treaties, agreements, and activities that the United States undertakes in order to set conditions for future operations. It will conclude with an overview of U.S. access in Thailand.

[7] U.S. Marine Corps, *Forward Deployed and Forward Engaged: The Marine Corps Approach to 21st Century Security Cooperation* (Headquarters Marine Corps, 2012), i, https://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Portals/138/Docs/PL/PLU/2012%20USMC%20Security%20Cooperation%20Narrative.pdf.

1. Determining the Extent of Access

The extent of access that the United States has to a country can be identified by the permissions or privileges granted to U.S. forces operating there. Permission to station forces or use airspace or port facilities constitute greater levels of access than simple transit permissions in support of training exercises. Despite the increasing range of U.S. military assets, ships need places to repair and refuel, planes need places to land, and ground forces will likely always need staging areas closer to their current area of operations than the continental United States. Accordingly, the United States goes to great lengths to ensure that it develops access in partner nations that it can rely on in times of crisis. U.S. Joint Publication (JP) 3–20 lists "Provide Access," as the second primary task of security cooperation in order to "promote flexibility in the U.S. defense posture, provide freedom of movement and support freedom of action during military operations."[8] The U.S. Marine Corps 2012 publication *Forward Deployed and Forward Engaged: The Marine Corps Approach to 21st Century Security Cooperation* highlighted the importance of "maintaining operational access, increasing interoperability, and building relationships with higher-end partners and emerging regional powers."[9]

Close examination of the U.S. joint definition makes it easier to understand the different levels of access. JP 3-20 defines access as anything that "supports U.S. strategic requirements in a theater."[10] Complete access would include forward basing agreements, overflight permissions, information sharing on internal security, standing permissions for entry of U.S. forces, access to training facilities for U.S. forces, and use of local infrastructure to support both U.S. and joint activities. Levels of access can be measured by the specific permissions granted to U.S. forces in formal agreements. In his thesis about the requirements to support U.S. Central Command, (USCENTCOM) Harold Bakken identified five measurable types of access that are relevant to Southeast Asian nations:

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[8] Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Security Cooperation,* JP 3-20 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2017), I-3, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_20_20172305.pdf.

[9] U.S. Marine Corps, *Forward Deployed and Forward Engaged: The Marine Corps Approach to 21st Century Security Cooperation*, 6.

[10] Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Security Cooperation,* I-3.

Semi-permanent, Limited, Training, Technical Facility, and Overflight.[11] Bakken's levels of access are extremely helpful in meaningfully measuring U.S. access to any nation, but they were organized based on what he viewed as the requirements to support USCENTCOM. To understand the importance of the access and challenge of obtaining it, they are better organized as follows:

a. Level One Access – Semi-Permanent Stationing of U.S. Personnel or Equipment

Level one access entails a formal agreement between the HN and the United States for the semi-permanent stationing of U.S. personnel and equipment in that nation. The most challenging level to obtain, it requires an active decision by the HN to end once it has been granted. Level one access can include everything from the leased or semi-permanent bases in Japan and Korea to the rotational deployed forces stationed in Australia. It also includes prepositioned U.S. war reserve supplies or equipment that are maintained in the HN.

b. Level Two Access – Limited Use of Airfields and Ports

Level two access entails formal agreements between the HN and the United States to allow the U.S. military to use HN airfield and/or port facilities. The U.S. specifically seeks this level of access throughout Southeast Asia to extend the operational reach of its forces as friendly air and seaports shorten lines of supply and facilitate global force projection. Level two access is generally easier to obtain than level one because of the lower visibility of the agreements. The political backlash of allowing a U.S. aircraft to land and refuel has less potential to damage international relations than allowing U.S. forces to be stationed in the HN. The U.S. regularly invests in HN infrastructure to facilitate level two access. These investments increase the HN capacity to support the U.S. military through the construction of facilities capable of supporting U.S. equipment.

[11] Harold Bakken, *United States Strategic Military Access in Northeast Africa* (Master's Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 1984), 36–37, http://hdl.handle.net/10945/19602.

c. Level Three Access – Use of Technical Facilities

Level three access entails formal or informal agreements between the HN and the United States to allow the U.S. military to use HN technical facilities. The U.S. uses partner nation intelligence and communications facilities to support its forward deployed forces across the globe. Level three agreements grant the U.S. permission to use HN facilities, or to operate similar equipment within HN borders. These agreements are not regularly advertised to the international community.

d. Level Four Access – Transit Permissions

Level four access entails either formal or informal agreements between the HN and the United States to allow the U.S. military to move through sovereign HN territory. The extent of these agreements can vary across modes of transportation, potentially including everything from overflight of sovereign airspace to naval navigation of territorial waterways. Many nations restrict military transit through their sovereign territory, and the U.S. seeks to overcome these restrictions by obtaining level four access agreements.

e. Level Five Access – Training Agreements

Level five access entails either formal or informal agreements between the HN and the United States to grant U.S. forces short-term access to conduct training activities in the HN. The U.S. actively seeks to conduct bilateral and multilateral training throughout Southeast Asia to give U.S. forces the opportunity to train in the region and integrate with HN militaries. Level five agreements are required to support these events and often expire upon completion of the training and need to be renegotiated regularly. Examples of level five agreements include the agreements that facilitate the execution of Thailand's annual COBRA GOLD exercises. In addition to the training value and relationship building, training access also presents opportunities to upgrade existing infrastructure in the HN to meet U.S. specifications to set conditions for future operations.

2. Determining the Reliability of Access: Types of Access Agreements

It is important to examine reliability from both the U.S. and Thai perspectives. Considering historic precedents and current events, both nations have cause for legitimate

doubts about the other's reliability. U.S. concerns center around the political instability associated with military coups and the uncertainty of a new monarch, raising doubts about Thailand's long-term reliability.[12] King Bhumibol often acted as a stabilizing force in Thailand and his death in 2016 raised concerns about his successor's ability to do the same. From the Thai perspective the United States has a history of leaving Thailand to fend for itself. Concerns about a repeat of the withdrawal after Vietnam, lack of support during the Asian Financial Crisis, and temporary withdrawal of aid following each military coup raise questions about U.S. reliability as an ally. Mitigating these concerns through continued partnership and formal agreement can help to increase the confidence on both sides.

The United States obtains access to partner nations through various formal and informal diplomatic agreements. Certain agreements make access more reliable. Any nation could choose to limit or even break the terms of any alliance, but formal promises or agreements to provide access increase the likelihood that it will be available to the United States when necessary. The United States and international community tend to treat certain agreements differently and view them with varying levels of importance. The most common agreements concerning military operations are Mutual Defense Treaties (MDT), SOFA, and VFA. Beyond these, the United States often enters into limited specific agreements that grant access either on a temporary or limited basis. While certain agreements are considered more important than others, they do not necessarily provide increased access as a result. In terms of access, the true value to the United States can be measured by what levels of access these agreements provide. Through that lens, U.S. agreements should be considered as follows:

a. SOFA

In Asia, the United States has a signed SOFA with both Japan and Korea. While not identical, these agreements promise the U.S. access to facilities and areas in each nation, overflight and naval navigation access to ports and airports, freedom of movement for U.S. service-members throughout the country, prioritized access to any public utilities

[12] Bakken, *United States Strategic Military Access in Northeast Africa*, 79.

and freedom to contract in the local economies for any required logistical support.[13] These agreements can be considered to provide all five levels of access to the U.S. military.

b. VFA

The United States currently only has one active VFA in Asia, a longstanding agreement with the Philippines. The VFA promises freedom of movement for personnel, aircraft, and naval vessels, as well as special legal permissions and protections for U.S. service-members and civilian employees.[14] Notably, it does not promise access to Philippine facilities, utilities, or provide contracting rights to U.S. forces within the Philippines. While the Department of Defense (DOD) can contract services through Philippine companies as any other private entity, it is not granted any special permissions or status under the VFA as it would under other nations' SOFA. The wording of the VFA is sufficient to ensure level four and five access to support U.S. personnel movements as well as bilateral and multilateral training. It does not necessarily provide levels one through three access.

c. MDT

The 1954 Manila Pact, also known as the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty, formed the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and served as an MDT between the United States and seven partners, including Thailand. While the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) dissolved in 1977, the MDT remains active between the United States and Thailand. This requires both nations to recognize that an "armed attack on either of the parties would be dangerous to its own peace and safety," and to respond accordingly.[15] MDT are commonly considered one of the highest forms of agreements,

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[13] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Agreement Regarding the Status of United States Armed Forces in Japan* (Washington, DC, 1960), https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/q&a/ref/2.html; U.S. Embassy Seoul Korea, *Facilities and Areas and the Status of United States Armed Forces in Korea* (Seoul, Korea: U.S. Embassy, 1966), https://www.usfk.mil/Portals/105/Documents/SOFA/A01_SOFA.Art.I-XXXI.pdf.

[14] U.S. Department of State, *Treaties and Other International Acts Series 12931* (Manila, 1998), https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/107852.pdf.

[15] U.S. Department of State, *American Foreign Policy 1950–1955* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1957), https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/phil001.asp#art1.

and a signal that the nations are closely aligned. They have significant political value. In terms of access however, they provide the United States limited utility as standalone agreements. While this type of agreement provides a legal framework for responding to military threats to the partner nation, it does not specifically grant any level of access to U.S. forces to operate within that nation.

What MDTs can provide is groundwork for additional agreements that do grant access. The 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement with the Philippines is a prime example. Considered essentially an addendum to the MDT, it specifically grants the United States levels one, two, and three access. While the agreement includes wording that the United States "not establish a permanent presence or base in the Philippines," it includes provisions to enable the permanent prepositioning of U.S. equipment within the Philippines.[16] Another example would be the Thanat-Rusk communiqué between the United States and Thailand, issued March 6, 1962, by Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman and U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk. Intended to alleviate concerns surrounding the collective nature of the SEATO MDT, the communiqué agreed that the defense agreement between the United States and Thailand did not depend on the "prior agreement of all other parties to the Treaty," and highlighted that both nations viewed it as a bilateral as well as collective MDT.[17] While the communiqué does not directly permit access to Thailand, it paved the way for follow-on agreements that did, specifically, an agreement in May 1962 to deploy U.S. forces to Thailand to defend Thailand against the threat of communist aggression from Laos.[18] The formal, joint statement shifted perceptions of the U.S.–Thai defense relationship from its multilateral origin with SEATO into a bilateral agreement. In addition to alleviating Thai concerns at the time and reaffirming U.S.

[16] Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs, "Frequently Asked Questions on the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement," April, 28, 2014, https://dfa.gov.ph/dfa-releases/2693-frequently-asked-questions-faqs-on-the-enhanced-defense-cooperation-agreement.

[17] U.S. Department of State, *American Foreign Policy Current Documents 1962* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966), 1092, https://books.google.com/books?id=9q19YkzhANEC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

[18] U.S. Department of State, 1093; The May 1962 agreement called for U.S. forces to be stationed in Thailand for in response to the "pro-Communist troops which are presently approaching the Thai Territory," highlighting that the two countries perceived the growing communist threat similarly.

commitment to the region, the Thanat-Rusk communiqué remains one of the cornerstones of the U.S.–Thai alliance.

d. Temporary or Limited Agreements

Temporary and limited term agreements can provide access to U.S. forces for a wide range of activities. These can range from the prepositioning of U.S. forces to permissions for a naval vessel to navigate territorial waters for the duration of a bilateral or multilateral exercise. Examples of temporary agreements include the March 1962 agreement to move forces into Thailand that followed the Thanat-Rusk communiqué. While the Thanat-Rusk communiqué in March 1962 provided the long-term justification for maintaining the U.S. military footprint in Thailand, the initial prepositioning of U.S. forces was not until a temporary agreement to begin troop movements was reached two months later.[19] Smaller scale limited agreements include the 1982 agreement that created the annual COBRA GOLD exercises between the United States and Thailand. For the annual COBRA GOLD exercises to continue, new temporary agreements are reached annually to facilitate the exercise. As a limited agreement that has continued for forty years now, the decision to conduct COBRA GOLD is largely considered a success for both sides.[20] The United States actively works to build relationships and develop similar exercises to set precedents with its partners across the globe.

3. Engagement Strategies: U.S. Operations Designed to Increase Access

While there is a clear advantage to obtaining formal SOFA or VFA arrangements, many nations balk at providing guaranteed access to U.S. forces for a variety of reasons. Because of this hesitance, current U.S. strategy employs a combination of bilateral and multilateral operations and exercises under the umbrella of building partner capacity (BPC) operations to build relationships and set precedents for U.S. military access across the globe. Toward this goal, the U.S. Joint Operational Access Concept calls for U.S. forces to

[19] U.S. Department of State, 1093.

[20] Kitti Prasirtsuk, "Old Ally, New Direction: Cobra Gold and Beyond," *Asia Pacific Bulletin 578* (November, 2021) 1, https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/old-ally-new-direction-cobra-gold-and-beyond.

engage with foreign partners to every extent possible to include "key leader engagements… negotiations to secure basing and transit rights…support agreements… freedom-of-navigation exercises with regional partners…grants and contracts to improve relationships…and planning conferences to develop multinational plans," in order to facilitate future access requirements.[21] Accordingly, the U.S. engagement strategy with Thailand uses BPC to build and maintain relationships with the Thai military while increasing their capacity to conduct operations or support U.S. efforts.

a. Building Partner Capacity

One of the primary methods that the United States uses to gain access is through regular engagement with partner nations during exercises designed to build partner capacity. There is utility in building up international partners, but the real value of BPC operations is the increased access that it provides to U.S. forces. These exercises normally only provide level five access, but infrastructure improvements to the HN can help to set conditions for future interoperability. U.S. partners generally welcome these types of operations as they often come with little to no permanent requirements on the HN and provide funding and training that would otherwise be unavailable. BPC operations develop relationships that facilitate multilateral operations and provide level five access. They have been largely unsuccessful however at helping the United States gain higher levels of access.

The United States does not have a universally accepted definition for "building partner capacity." Instead, different U.S. agencies have their own unique definitions that overlap to a limited extent. The concept first appeared in U.S. vernacular in the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review as a strategy for combatting terrorist networks across the globe. Its purpose at the time was to help develop "mechanisms to share the risks and responsibilities of today's complex challenges," by addressing "common security challenges."[22] Since that initial unveiling, the concept has been thoroughly fleshed out and

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[21] Department of Defense, *Joint Operational Access Concept* (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2012), 18, https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/JOAC_Jan%202012_Signed.pdf.

[22] Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, DC: Secretary of Defense, 2006), 88, https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/quadrennial/QDR2006.pdf?ver=2014-06-25-111017-150.

enshrined in doctrine. U.S. JP 3-20 defines BPC as "Developing specific PN [Partner Nation] capabilities and capacity for security and defense addresses their internal security and their participation or coordination in operations with U.S. forces or multinational operations."[23] A broader definition is offered by the Defense Security Cooperation Agency as "the focal point for DOD planning, execution, and management, and oversight of numerous Title 10 Security Cooperation (SC) programs…supporting the full spectrum of capabilities that security cooperation endeavors to deliver."[24] Falling under the umbrella of SC activities, BPC operations are designed to build access to the PN through training and operational commitments that require face-to-face interaction between U.S. and PN forces.

The scholarship surrounding BPC primarily focuses on debating its effectiveness and measuring its actual costs. It does not address the extent to which BPC actually increases access. Numerous studies by the Congressional Research Service and the RAND corporation have highlighted that BPC needs to maintain consistent funding, purpose, and scope between the United States and the partner nation in order to build the relationships, personnel development programs, and infrastructure to actually improve HN capacity. Similar to the assessment process outlined in U.S. Joint doctrine, this thesis will examine BPC through two lenses: Direct performance at the tactical level, and effectiveness at a strategic level. Increasing the HN capabilities and infrastructure can be evaluated as tactical goals, while building relationships and increasing U.S. access are strategic goals. The former is significantly easier to study and has been examined extensively. There is less consensus when addressing the strategic impacts of BPC.

Tactically, the successful execution of BPC should be relatively easy to measure. In the grand sense, all it takes is a thorough analysis of a partner nation's (PN) capabilities before and after BPC. If it there was a significant increase in capability, then it can be considered a tactical success. Various authors have helped identify the conditions that best facilitate tactical success. In his text *What Works Best When Building Partner Capacity in*

[23] Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Security Cooperation,* II-2.

[24] "Building Partner Capacity," Defense Security Cooperation Agency, accessed August 25, 2021, https://www.dsca.mil/building-partner-capacity.

Challenging Contexts, Christopher Paul identified nine key variables that regularly influenced success, highlighting specifically that "Consistency is key," talking about funding, objectives, agreements, and relationships.[25] Zachary Hoover, James Self, and David Yu came to similar conclusions about the importance of consistency of funding, and added that may be important to assign "U.S. military personnel to positions where they can build intimate and sustained relationships," with partner nations.[26] Current scholarship fails to outline how the conduct of individual BPC operations increases overall access, though there is general concurrence that any opportunity for relationship-building is positive.

Whether BPC is successful at furthering U.S. strategic goals of increasing access is significantly harder to measure. The U.S. Congressional Research Service has conducted multiple studies to in an attempt to determine how and when BPC is best utilized. The most recent was from 2015 by International Security Analyst Kathleen J. McInnis. Her research highlighted the mixed results from past BPC efforts and argued that when applied to other strategic objectives beyond stability "BPC programs have not meaningfully delivered intended strategic effects."[27] McInnis concluded that to have any hope of success, U.S. execution needs to be consistent.

4. Institutional Legacy: Existing U.S.–Thai Agreements

Thailand is the oldest formal U.S. partner in Southeast Asia, with agreements dating back to the 1833 Treaty of Amity and Commerce. Until the United States further developed those ties during the Vietnam War in order to use Thailand as a staging area for forces moving in and out of Vietnam, the two countries relations were primarily economic in nature.[28] With the 1954 Manila Pact and the 1962 Thanat-Rusk communiqué, the

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[25] Christopher Paul et. al., *What Works Best When Building Partner Capacity in Challenging Contexts?* (RAND Corporation, 2015), 10, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt19w73nv.

[26] Zachary T. Hoover, James Self, and David Yu, "Building Partner Capacity: The Science Behind the Art," (Master's Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2016), 101, http://hdl.handle.net/10945/51719.

[27] Kathleen J. McInnis and Nathan J. Lucas, *What is "Building Partner Capacity?" Issues for Congress,* R44313 (Congressional Research Service, 2015), 57, https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/AD1000790.

[28] Kitti Prasirtsuk, "An Ally at the Crossroads: Thailand in the U.S. Alliance System," 117.

relationship developed a military component. While the two countries have remained close partners since the 1970s, the relationship has been strained over the past two decades. In his article *An Unaligned Alliance: Thailand-U.S. Relations in the Early 21st Century,* Thitinan Pongsudhirak went so far as to call the declining relationship "inevitable because of structural changes in the region and more broadly in the international system" talking about the end of the Cold War and removal of the immediate communist threat to Thailand.[29] Whether he is right remains a topic of debate, along with potential origins of that strain. Despite the recent strain, the historic relationship between the two nations has endured with the MDT and annual bilateral exercise agreements remaining intact.

5. Threat Perception

How the United States and Thailand perceive threats has historically had a significant impact on the two nations' relationship. Commonly perceived threats have helped to draw the two nations closer, while diverging threats have pushed them apart. The U.S.–Thailand alliance was initially formed in the 1950s because the two nations aligned in response to the threat of spreading communism. Thailand had significant vested interest in securing U.S. military assistance and assurances of support. The United States had an interest in containing communism and Thailand was a willing partner in a strategic location. Throughout this period the United States enjoyed all five levels of access to Thailand though the Thailand-U.S. agreement of 1962.[30]

This access continued throughout the U.S. war in Vietnam but began to weaken as the United States withdrew from the region and the shared threat from communism began to recede. In 1975 the United States used Thailand as a launching point for rescue and bombing operations to recover the U.S. merchant vessel Mayaguez without first consulting their Thai counterparts. This decision led to significant political unrest in Thailand, and in response "Thailand refused to renew U.S. basing rights, leading to the expulsion of all U.S.

[29] Thitinan Pongsudhirak, "An Unaligned Alliance: Thailand–U.S. Relations in the Early 21st Century," *Asian Politics & Policy* 8 no. 1 (January 2016): 64, https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12233.

[30] U.S. Department of State, American Foreign Policy Current Documents 1962, 1093.

forces."[31] With U.S. priorities shifting towards minimizing international commitments, at the time, the loss of access in Thailand was not considered a vital gap.

It was not until threat perceptions began to realign that the two countries sought to revitalize the alliance. The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1978, and the subsequent Cambodian crisis in the early 1980s raised enough concern for both the United States and Thailand to look to renew their relationship. The resulting response was the 1982 institution of the annual COBRA GOLD exercises, and the 1987 War Reserve Stockpile agreement. The events of September 11, 2001 focused U.S. threat perceptions on combatting the threat of terrorism as the United States began its Global War on Terror. Thaksin Shinawatra's decision to support the U.S. efforts and commit Thai forces to the U.S. policy led to Thailand's designation as a major non-NATO ally, drawing the alliance closer than it had been since the 1970s. When the 2006 military coup overthrew Thaksin it placed significant strain on the relationship, which has continued but been troubled ever since.

Following the 2014 military coup in Thailand, the U.S.–Thai alliance has been strained. Both U.S. faith in Thailand as a stable ally and Thailand's faith in U.S. commitment were weakened as General Prayut Chan-ocha took over as the acting Prime Minister of Thailand. That he retained power until his official election to Prime Minister in 2019 did little to reassure the United States that Thailand is on track to return to democratic governance. Despite this, the United States attempted to resolidify its alliance with Thailand as an extension of its pivot to Asia. The only significant developments in the U.S.–Thai alliance over the past decade have been the signing of the 2012, 2020, and 2022 Joint Vision Statements.[32] The vision statements highlighted the U.S.–Thai common interest in maintaining "regional peace and stability" and committed each nation to working towards increased interoperability while at the same time reinforcing the

[31] Stacie L. Pettyjohn and Jennifer Kavanaugh, *Access Granted: Political Challenges to the U.S. Overseas Military Presence* (RAND Corporation, 2016), 14, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1339.html.

[32] Hugo Meijer, "Shaping China's Rise: The Reordering of U.S. Alliances and Defense Partnerships in East Asia," *International Politics* 57 (October, 2019): 171. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-019-00201-y.

"enduring presence" of the 1954 and 1962 agreements.[33] What the vision statements fail to do is explicitly state a common threat shared by the two nations, similar to the threat of communism outlined in the 1962 agreement. Despite the confident language conveyed in the 2012, 2020, and 2022 vision statements, they refrain from addressing the divergence in U.S. and Thai perceptions of China. While the United States recently labeled China as a "revisionist power" and a threat, Thailand continues to court China as an essential ally and close military partner.[34] The impact of this divergence on the relationship has yet to be fully realized.

Approaching the issue from the Thai perspective, it has been argued that fluctuations in U.S. commitment to the region have strained the relationship. Political scientist Enze Han argued that the lack of U.S. support during the Asian Financial Crisis began to erode the trust between the two nations.[35] The United States responded to the 2006 and 2014 coups by temporarily halting bilateral operations and assistance while internationally condemning the Thai military's actions. Many Thais interpreted this as a sign that the United States does not truly support Thailand leading to increased doubt about U.S. commitment to Thailand and the region. Withdrawal of military assistance and financial support, however quickly reinstated, only served to widen the gap between the two nations.[36] The introduction of Chinese military assistance immediately following the two coups further increased the two nations' diverging views of China.

The opposing narrative is that instability within Thailand caused the United States to question its viability as a partner, and in some instances forced the United States to take action. This view is reinforced by a report from the Congressional Research Service

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[33] U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Thailand, *Joint Vision Statement 2020 for the U.S.-Thai Defense Alliance* (Bangkok: U.S. Embassy, 2019), https://th.usembassy.gov/joint-vision-statement-2020-for-the-thai-u-s-defense-alliance/.

[34] Zachary Abuza, "America Should be Realistic About its Alliance with Thailand," *War on the Rocks*, January 2, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/01/america-should-be-realistic-about-its-alliance-with-thailand/.

[35] Enze Han, "Under the Shadow of China-US Competition: Myanmar and Thailand's Alignment Choices," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 11, no. 1 (2018) 83, https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pox017.

[36] Dalpino, "The U.S.-Thailand Alliance: Continuity and Change in the 21st Century," 149.

blaming the strained relationship on instability within the Thai government. It argued that while "Thailand's struggles are almost entirely domestic and generally not destabilizing for the region," they prevent Thailand from being a productive ally in the region.[37] The report continues to highlight that U.S. withdrawal of military aid and funding was largely (if not completely) dictated by U.S. law.[38] U.S. responses to the 2021 coup in Myanmar reinforce this narrative as the Biden administration took similar action, maintaining a consistent stance on military takeovers.[39]

D. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

U.S. access to Thailand has varied widely over the duration of the relationship. While the United States and Thailand remain close-tied treaty allies on paper, in practice current engagement between the two nations primarily consists of military financial support or BPC activities in the form of multilateral and bilateral exercises that do not necessarily lead to increased levels of access. While the institutional legacy of existing agreements has continued to tie the two nations together, diverging perceptions of evolving threats in the region are cause for concern. This thesis will explore U.S. access in Thailand as the dependent variable. It will analyze the impact of the independent variables presented by engagement strategies, institutional legacies of historic agreements, and threat perception on the U.S. ability to build access in Thailand.

1. Hypothesis 1: Institutional Legacy

The U.S.–Thailand alliance has developed several institutions over time that have allowed access to persist and the relationship to continue despite changing engagement strategies or threat perceptions. While the available levels of access have fluctuated, institutions like the MDT that survived despite the dissolution of SEATO have allowed access to persist. These observations lead to the hypothesis that prior agreements may

[37] Emma Chanlett-Avery, Ben Dolven and Wil Mackey, *Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations,* RL32593 (Congressional Research Service, 2015), 1, https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/RL32593.pdf.

[38] Chanlett-Avery, Dolven and Mackey, 2.

[39] Conner Finnegan, "US Hits Myanmar with Sanctions, Aid Cuts, Export Bans in Bid to Reverse Military Coup," *ABC News,* February 11, 2021, https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/us-hits-myanmar-sanctions-aid-cuts-export-bans/story?id=75834174.

sustain access after threat perceptions begin to diverge, but the lack of agreements may limit access as threat perceptions begin to converge.

2. Hypothesis 2: Threat Perception

The alignment of U.S. and Thai perception of threats has impacted the extent of U.S. access. Converging threat perceptions of communism led to increased access in the 1960s. Diverging threat perceptions after the U.S. withdrawal from the region in the 1970s saw that access rapidly diminish, while reconvergence began to again increase access in the early 1980s. U.S. attempts to rebuild that access in the future will continue to be influenced by how closely the two nations align their national interests and fears. These observations lead to the hypothesis that when threat perceptions converge, the United States is likely to obtain more access; however, when those threat perceptions diverge, the United States is likely to receive less access.

3. Argument

In the past, U.S. forces enjoyed a high degree and a wide range of access in Thailand. At that time, both countries feared the spread of communism, especially in mainland Southeast Asia. During the Vietnam War Thailand provided the U.S. military with extensive access, especially to airfields. For two decades after the end of the Cold War, neither Thailand nor the United States perceived any major threats, and U.S. access to Thailand decreased. Despite a lack of permanent agreements for access, Thailand has routinely granted temporary access to enable the United States to make use of Thai facilities to support military operations in the Middle East, provide humanitarian assistance in Southeast Asia, and conduct exercises in Thailand. However, many analysts believe that Thailand does not share the growing U.S. perception of China as a major threat to regional peace and stability. Further, during most of the post-Cold War era, U.S. engagement strategy did not prioritize the kinds of access that would be required in the event of conflict with China. As a result, there are serious doubts that the United States will have sufficient access in Thailand during such a conflict. Moreover, the United States is unlikely to acquire such access unless Thailand begins to share the U.S. perception of China and the United

States refocuses its engagement strategy on reaching agreements that provide access that would be assured in the event of a U.S.-China conflict.

E. RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis will examine the U.S.–Thai relationship from 1954–2023 to determine the validity of my hypotheses. To do so, I will explore the different levels of access in Thailand over the course of the alliance by analyzing the variations in access during three time periods, between 1954–1970, 1970–2000, and 2000–2023. It will begin by examining how the United States built access during the first period, why the United State lost access during the second, and how successful it has been in regaining access during the third. It will analyze the impact of the independent variables on changes in access over each of these periods.

The research design will utilize the explanatory approach to analyze available literature and government statements. It will begin by developing a broad understanding of the impact of U.S. and Thai policies on their alliance before addressing the current level of U.S. access in Thailand. Building the full picture from both nations' perspective will inform the causes of success or failure in U.S. policies intended to increase access.

F. THESIS OVERVIEW

This thesis is organized into three sections. The introduction outlined the history of U.S.–Thai relations from the 1954 to the present, identified the dependent and independent variables, proposed three hypotheses on the causes of variation of access and discussed the body of literature surrounding each. Further it defined the extent and reliability of access as the dependent variable before outlining how engagement strategies, institutional legacies, and threat perception act as independent variables. The second chapter examines the three periods from 1954–1970, 1970–2000, and 2000–2023 as U.S. access to Thailand shifted over time. The discussion of each period will be broken into four major sections beginning with an outline of the variation in access and changes in national engagement strategies. Each period will then continue with an analysis of the impact of legacy agreements throughout the period before concluding by discussing U.S. and Thai threat perceptions. The conclusion addresses the impact of the three independent variables on

U.S. access in Thailand over the duration of the relationship. By examining the historic drivers of variation in access it becomes possible to understand how future interactions are likely to increase or decrease levels of available access. The conclusion highlights the importance of maintaining legacy access agreements and carefully tailoring U.S. engagement strategy to intentionally build access. I will argue that doing so will increase the likelihood that the United States will be able to retain access in Thailand in the future.

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II. SHIFTING LEVELS OF ACCESS

It is hard to measure how much access the United States has with a partner and often even harder to understand how it got that access, or why. In part, this is because international relationships are constantly evolving as they are influenced by domestic and international pressures on the nations involved. Examining how such pressures have influenced U.S.–Thai relations helps to explain how and why levels of access shifted. As the threat of communism caused the domestic and international pressures on both nations to converge during the 1960s, the relationship evolved, and access increased dramatically. When those pressures diverged following the end of the Vietnam War, access decreased accordingly. Since the 1980s, the United States has been working to rebuild the relationship and regain some of the access that it previously enjoyed. As U.S. interests shifted back toward Southeast Asia in the early 2000s, these efforts were redoubled. This chapter will examine the development of the U.S.–Thai relationship over time and analyze the drivers behind each nation as the partnership evolved. It will examine the domestic and international pressures on each nation as the relationship matured over time and how they influenced both nations' decision-making.

A. 1954-1970: THE HEIGHT OF U.S. ACCESS IN THAILAND

Thailand is one of the oldest U.S. partners in Southeast Asia, with economic ties dating back to the mid-1800s. This relationship continued relatively unchanged for nearly a century until after the end of the second world war. As the concept of communism gained momentum throughout Southeast Asia, both the United States and Thailand came to view it as a threat to their national interests. As the two nations began to recognize the common threat that had been growing throughout the 1950s, the relationship began to evolve for the first time. The 1962 Thanat-Rusk communiqué marked the culminating point of this evolution, with the two countries being drawn closer together than ever before. Despite U.S. hesitance throughout the 1950s to commit forces to Southeast Asia, the 1962 communiqué was not a surprise, and is not a particularly hard decision to understand. The

combination of domestic and international pressures combined with the unique leadership of the Kennedy administration make the decision seem almost inevitable in hindsight.

The U.S. decision to commit forces to Thailand and the Thai decision to accept them was not made in a vacuum. It was a result of numerous pressures on both countries to take decisive action. It is not unusual for domestic and international pressures to pull the national leadership in different directions. There are times where international forces call for action while the domestic populace demands restraint. Conversely, it is not unusual for the domestic population to demand responses while the international community pushes for the United States to limit interference. The decision to station forces in Thailand in 1963 was not one of these times. There was no disconnect between internal or external forces in either country, but rather an unusually clear consensus about what the threat entailed. Both countries had come to perceive the same danger from continued communist expansion in Southeast Asia. For over a decade Thailand had made its position clear, it wanted support. Throughout the early 1960s, growing domestic and international pressures aligned to push John Fitzgerald Kennedy's (JFK) hand toward action.

1. Variation in Access

The period between 1954 and 1970 saw the most significant developments in the U.S.–Thai relationship. The formation of SEATO, the signing of the Thanat-Rusk communiqué, and the two nations' partnership during the Vietnam War enabled the United States to build unprecedented access to Thailand for its forces and operations. Following the signing of the Thanat-Rusk communiqué, the United States managed to establish and maintain all five levels of access in Thailand that continued uninterrupted until the conclusion of the conflict in Vietnam. U.S. development and maintenance of bases in Sattahip, Udon Thani, Nakhon Phanom, Nam Phong, Nakhon Ratchasima, Ubon Ratchathani, Ta Khli, and Utaphao ensured that the U.S. forces were able to flow through Thailand into Vietnam with staging, training, and technical facilities available to support the war effort.[40] With full access to Thailand during this period, the United States enjoyed

[40] Barbara LePoer, "Thailand a Country Study," (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, 1989), 41, 252.

the ability to station forces and equipment on semi-permanent bases, access to ports, airfields, and technical facilities, full transit permissions for military movements into and through Thailand, and areas to train and stage forces. This relatively unfettered access represents a success in U.S. foreign relations in building the relationship with Thailand.

2. Impact of Historic Agreements

Prior to 1954, the only historic agreement between the United States and Thailand was the 1833 Treaty of Amity and Commerce. An economic agreement, the treaty provided for free trade between the two nations, as well as permission for U.S. vessels to rest and refit at Thai ports free of any additional charges or requirements.[41] While this agreement did not provide any military access, it set the initial conditions for the U.S.–Thai relationship that continued throughout the next century. Building on the existing good will between the two nations, Thailand's participation in the formation of SEATO in 1954 saw it becoming one of the only two Southeast Asian countries tied to the United States through that organization. The MDT that formed the core of SEATO would later serve as justification for increased cooperation between the two nations in the face of the rising communist threat in the region.

3. U.S. Threat Perception: Concern Over Growing Communist Threat

The commitment of forces to Thailand in 1962 marked a reversal of the U.S. policy of avoiding military commitments in Southeast Asia. In response to rising domestic and international pressures the United States signed the Thanat-Rusk communiqué in 1962. Months later, the communiqué was followed by the prepositioning of U.S. troops in Thailand as the rising security threats from neighboring Laos and Vietnam drew international attention. It was not a small commitment. Over the next ten years, the United States expanded the Sattahip Naval facility, constructed seven major air bases in Thailand, numerous intelligence outposts, and stationed as many as 45,000 personnel and 500 combat

[41] Treaty of Amity and Commerce U.S.-Thailand, Mar 20, 1833, 8 Stat. 454. 980. https://th.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/90/Treaty-of-Amity-and-Commerce-between-Siam-and-the-United-States-1833.pdf.

aircraft to support the war effort in Vietnam.[42] Following the Thanat-Rusk communiqué, the United States gained levels 1–5 access to Thailand that would greatly enable its ability to prosecute the war in Vietnam.

The conditions surrounding the 1962 commitment of forces to Thailand can be best observed on three different levels. JFK and his administration, the U.S. domestic situation, and the international political context are all worth analysis. As a leader, JFK sought to build an image of strength and confidence. He demanded that himself, his staff, and the nation make hard decisions and remain firm in the face of adversity. The character of JFK's administration showed a clear bias toward decisive action, even though in some cases (particularly the Bay of Pigs) it proved to be ineffective or unwarranted. Domestic politics worked to reinforce JFK's bias toward action. Constant challenges that he was soft on communism, unidealistic, or inexperienced worked to push him to prove himself. Far from pushing for restraint from JFK's administration, the international community constantly pushed for further commitments. International pressures all aligned to demand action from JFK. France's attempts to gain nuclear weapons, Pakistan's request to strengthen the partnership, and Thailand's requests for support all pulled the United States toward increasing global commitments. While adversaries could have pushed back to limit U.S. activity, the nature of the Cold War gave the anti-communist rhetoric an increased influence on U.S. politics as it elevated the challenge from maintaining global influence to an almost existential threat.

a. A Bias Toward Action: Kennedy's Administration

Eventually known for some of the most memorable speeches in American history, it was a confident JFK administration that took to the White House in 1961 following a narrow victory over Richard Nixon. Working to overcome charges of being soft on communism, JFK's administration sought to build what journalist William Shannon described as a "cult of toughness."[43] Increasingly harsh anti-communist rhetoric was a

[42] LePoer, "Thailand a Country Study," 41, 252.

[43] Thomas G. Paterson, "Bearing the Burden: A Critical Look at JFK's Foreign Policy," *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 54, no. 2 (1978): 204, http://www.jstor.org/stable/26436325.

logical response to Republican criticisms of weakness. The administration's optimism and confidence were tempered by what has been described as a fear "to be thought fearful." Statements by JFK's advisors reflected the desire to overcome these fears and set the stage internationally. Perhaps the most direct and notable was Deputy National Security Advisor Walt Rostow's statement that they would have an "opportunity to prove we were not paper tigers," through foreign policy actions across the globe.[44] Referencing the conflict with the Soviet Union, Rostow's comments specifically called out Southeast Asia as a testing-ground for that competition.

The aggressive rhetoric and assertiveness of JFK's administration was not a coincidence. Intelligent, charismatic, well-spoken, and energetic, JFK was more than simply a figurehead. His confidence, assertiveness, and calm collected presence, ascribed by some to his competitive upbringing, was one of the hallmarks of JFK's time in office. Taught from a young age that the objective was not to compete, but to win, JFK built his team accordingly, surrounding himself with a younger, more aggressive, and more highly educated staff than those of his predecessors.[45] His personal approach as a detached intellectual can be clearly seen reflected in his Harvard thesis *Why England Slept*, in which he pled for Americans to learn from the mistakes of the British people and understand the need for increased armament in order to maintain America's superiority.[46] Throughout his time in office, there is consensus that JFK grew both as a politician and as a leader. While his emphasis on maintaining a position of strength in the world continued, over time he began to temper his rhetoric against the Soviet Union, even going so far as to advocate disarmament in a speech at the United Nations (UN) in 1961.[47] It is worth noting that despite that speech, he continued to advocate for increased defense appropriations within the United States.

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[44] Paterson, 203.

[45] James David Barber, *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House*, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, 1977): 298, 314.

[46] John F. Kennedy, *Why England Slept* (New York: Wilfred Funk Inc, 1961): 230.

[47] Earl Latham, *J.F. Kennedy and Presidential Power* (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1972): 212.

b. Domestic Pressures in the United States

Domestic pressure on U.S. foreign policy decisions can come in numerous forms. Partisan politics, public opinion, social and cultural trends, and even media attention all play a role in shaping leaders' decisions. It is not unusual for U.S. leaders to temper their actions in response to opposition narratives, or to be pushed further than they intended by an overzealous support base. Despite the closeness of JFK's presidential race, the political conditions in the country were relatively favorable to the fledgling administration. At face value, it looked like the administration enjoyed nearly overwhelming support in the legislature with a congressional majority of 264 Democrats to 173 Republicans in the House of Representatives and 65 Democrats to 35 Republicans in the Senate.[48] What these statistics fail to show however is that while JFK's party enjoyed the majority, he personally did not, as more conservative Democrats tended to lean toward the Republicans against him, and any legislation would get bottlenecked by his conservative opposition in the House Rules Committee.[49] With a relatively weak base of support, JFK faced an uphill battle as he entered the presidency.

Anti-communist attitudes in the United States continued to play a major role in shaping U.S. foreign policy when JFK took office. Experiences throughout the 1950s had shown that Communists would exploit any opportunity to spread their ideology, and that "it had to be met wherever it appeared to be gaining ground, at almost any cost."[50] Throughout his presidential campaign, JFK used a hardline stance against communism as one of the central tenets of his platform, building on his track record of anti-communist rhetoric during his time in congress. Despite this, following the failure of the Bay of Pigs, political opponents still accused him of softness and "yielding ground" to communism.[51] Despite repeated statements by JKF that he wanted to withdraw from what he saw as a

48 "Congress Profiles, History, Art, and Archives," United States House of Representatives, accessed 13 March 2022, https://history.house.gov/Congressional-Overview/Profiles/87th/ and "*Party Division,"* United States Senate, accessed 13 March 2022, https://www.senate.gov/history/partydiv.htm.

49 Barber, The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House, 293.

50 Thomas G. Paterson, ed, *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961–1963* (Cary: Oxford University Press USA – OSO, 1989), Accessed February 15, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central, 10.

51 Paterson, 237.

doomed effort in Vietnam, the impact of these accusations could be clearly seen on his decisions. Talking to journalist Charles Bartlett, JFK admitted that despite his concerns on Vietnam, he couldn't expect reelection if he surrendered it to the Communists.[52] Regardless of his feelings toward communism, JFK was extremely clear about his unwillingness to lose, and domestic opposition almost guaranteed that failing to oppose communism would lead him to do just that. It could be argued that the use of Thai bases during the Vietnam War implies that positioning forces there in 1963 was a precursor intended to set conditions for ramping up that conflict. While that may have been the eventual result, JFK's personal statements painted a different picture, in which he was working to reassure an ally even as he planned to "withdraw all forces from Vietnam after the 1964 election"[53]

c. International Pressures from the U.S. Perspective

International pressures worked more directly to influence JFK's decision to commit forces to Thailand. With the turnover in U.S. government to the new administration came questions abroad about how America would continue to honor its global commitments. The entire spectrum of nations from friend to foe sought to test the character of the new administration. The Soviet Union's placement of missiles in Cuba and the proceeding crisis was a test of strength. Pakistani attempts to use the United States to push India into concessions in Kashmir was a test of the administration's reliability.[54] Thailand's requests for support were a test of the administration's commitment both to Thailand and the region. Underlying everything was a simple question, would the United States stand firm against communism, and would it honor commitments to support its allies and partners abroad in a meaningful manner? JFK's 1961 Inaugural Address articulated clearly that he intended to, and that the United States would "support any friend" and "oppose any foe" regardless

[52] Paterson, 10.

[53] Barber, *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House,* 337.

[54] Thomas G. Paterson, ed, *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961–1963,* 207.

of the cost.[55] JFK's anti-communist rhetoric and commitment to containing the Soviet Union seems to have supported that statement.

4. Thai Threat Perception: Concern Over Growing Communist Threat

Thailand's motivations throughout this period are significantly easier to identify. Like the United States, Thailand faced both domestic and international pressure from communist expansion. Communism was not a distant ideological threat to Thailand. It was real and it was close to home, with communist regimes taking power in neighboring China and Vietnam even as Thailand sought to suppress its own communist movement.[56] Given this rising threat, it is unsurprising that Thailand pushed to sign the Manila Pact in 1954, or that it offered to host the SEATO headquarters in Bangkok. Throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, Thailand repeatedly requested increased military commitment from the United States, both in SEATO and bilaterally with the United States directly. While these requests had been rejected in the past in favor of retaining operational flexibility, they gained a new perspective in light of increasing communist pressures in Laos and Vietnam. The 1960 revolution in Laos drew U.S. attention to the region even further, with former president Eisenhower going so far as to highlight it as a potential linchpin that could lead to the fall of the region to communism.[57] Thailand increased its pressure on the United States to solidify their relationship beyond the loose bonds of SEATO into a military alliance. The 1962 Thanat-Rusk communiqué did just that, paving the way for the deployment of U.S. forces to Thailand in what was deemed a "defensive" measure.[58]

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[55] Historic Speeches, Inaugural Address, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, accessed 14 March 2022, https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/inaugural-address.

[56] LePoer, "Thailand a Country Study," 252.

[57] *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963, Volume XXIV, Laos Crisis*, edited by Edward Keefer and Glenn LaFantasie (Washington: Government Printing Office 1953), Document 363, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v24/d363.

[58] P. Michael Rattanasengchanh, "U.S.-Thai Public Diplomacy: The Beginnings of a Military-Monarchical-Anti-Communist State, 1957–1963," *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 23, no. 1 (2016): 80, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43898448.

a. Domestic Pressures in Thailand

The 1950s were a time of domestic upheaval within the Kingdom of Thailand. By 1954, rampant corruption and arbitrary imprisonment of political opponents had begun to delegitimize the government under Field Marshal Luang Phibun Songkhram (commonly referred to simply as Phibun).[59] In an attempt to stabilize the government through democratic rule, Phibun allowed elections to be held in 1957, in which he unsurprisingly managed to retain control of the government. Unhappy with the election results, one of Phibun's rivals, General Sarit Thanarat, staged a coup in September 1957, bloodlessly replacing Phibun as the dominant power in Thailand.[60] Sarit worked to stabilize Thailand's domestic turmoil through education reform and economic development, while simultaneously ruthlessly crushing the rising Communist Party of Thailand.[61] The newfound stability, coupled with the harsh crackdown on communism within Thailand helped to reinforce Sarit's narrative to the United States that Thailand was a viable partner in the region.

b. International Pressures from the Thai Perspective

After the communist victory in Hanoi in 1954, Thai leaders began to increasingly fear the possibility of Vietnamese incursions into Laos and Cambodia as the Viet Minh consolidated their hold on Vietnam. These fears proved well founded during the 1960 crisis in Laos, reinforcing concerns about potential communist encroachment on Thai borders.[62] The grip of communism appeared to be tightening on Southeast Asia. SEATO's failure to respond to the conflict in Laos reinforced Thai concerns and played a large role in galvanizing support in both the United States and Thailand to solidify the partnership, leading to the signing of the Thanat-Rusk communiqué.

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[59] Norman G. Owen, *Modern Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 474, Kindle.

[60] Owen, 475.

[61] Owen, 475.

[62] Owen, 476.

B. 1970-2000: DECREASES IN ACCESS

The period from 1970–2000 saw a significant reduction to U.S. access in Thailand. In the early 1970s, U.S. access was almost completely eliminated. As the Vietnam war came to an end and Thailand experienced a brief, turbulent period of democratic rule, U.S. forces were withdrawn, bases that had been occupied for over a decade were abandoned, and financial aid to Thailand decreased significantly. In the 1980s, U.S. access grew modestly as Thailand faced a direct threat by Vietnamese forces, which had invaded and occupied neighboring Cambodia in the late 1970s. However, the United States did not attempt to reestablish bases inside Thailand. In the 1990s, after the Cold War ended and Vietnam withdrew from Cambodia, neither the United States nor Thailand faced significant security threats. Although bilateral military exercises continued, U.S. access remained far lower than it had been during the Vietnam War era.

1. Variation in Access

As the United States withdrew and attempted to reduce its regional commitments, it experienced a significant loss of access to Thailand. Without the requirement to flow forces through Thailand into Vietnam, the expense presented by maintaining the Thai bases proved unnecessary and the United States largely abandoned them to its Thai partners. With their American partners leaving, Thailand sought to rebuild and normalize relations with both China and Vietnam. While former did not, the latter insisted that it would be unwilling to deal with Thailand until it renounced its "collusion" with the U.S. war effort.[63] Accordingly, Thailand sought to downplay its historic partnership with the United States To this goal, Thailand revoked U.S. access to Thai bases completely in July 1975, and began to openly discuss the dissolution of SEATO on the grounds that the institution had "outlived its usefulness."[64] While the Thailand and the United States quietly continued their MDT, U.S. troops were completely removed from Thailand by 1976, and SEATO was formally disbanded in 1977.

[63] LePoer, "Thailand a Country Study," 216.

[64] LePoer, 216.

It is worth examining how the United States withdrew from Thailand in the mid-1970s. Between President Nixon's campaign promises to reduce overseas commitments and the Thai public's growing demands for U.S. withdrawal, it can be hard to determine whether the U.S. left or was kicked out. That it was Thailand, and not the United States that announced the first withdrawals of U.S. forces in 1969 definitely hints towards the latter.[65] Closer analysis reveals that was not the case. Far from being a confrontational encounter, Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman highlighted that his American counterparts recognized that the cessation of bombing of North Vietnam "rendered the strong military presence unnecessary, even superfluous," and readily agreed to the redeployments.[66] With politics in the United States clearly leaning towards departure from the region, Thailand needed to begin looking for other partners. Asian Pacific security expert Leszek Buszynski summarized the Thai perspective that "the reduction of American forces and bases in Thailand was the price paid" to open the doors for those partners, particularly China and the Soviet Union.[67] To build bridges, Thailand needed to be seen distancing itself from the United States. Buszynski highlighted that the U.S. departure was seen in Thailand as a reinterpretation of priorities "with little regard for Thai susceptibilities," and that while the Thai military were strong advocates for maintaining the relationship with the United States, the civilian government had to do something to avoid finding itself alone without the assured support of a great power.[68] Despite U.S. desire to reduce foreign commitments and Thailand's push for their withdrawal, the U.S. departure from the region was anything but swift. Beginning in 1969, it was seven years before the last base was returned to the Thai military on 20 June 1976. Seven years that would give Thailand time to reconcile itself with China, and to attempt to normalize relations with Vietnam.

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[65] Pongphisoot Busbarat, "Thai-US Relations in the Post-Cold War Era: Untying the Special Relationship," *Asian Security* 13, no. 3 (2017) 259, DOI: 10.1080/14799855.2017.1357999.

[66] Thanat Khoman, "American Military Withdrawal from Thailand," *Southeast Asian Affairs* (1976) 395, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27908291.

[67] Leszek Buszynski, "The Erosion of a Balanced Foreign Policy" *Asian Survey* 22, no. 11 (Nov 1982) 1039, https://doi.org/10.2307/2643978.

[68] Buszynski, 1039.

The U.S. withdrawal from the region reflected a rift in the U.S.–Thai relationship that took years to begin to heal. With all bases returned to Thai control by 1976, the United States relinquished all five levels of access to Thailand. The process of rebuilding that access was slow, with training access again established with the 1982 creation of the annual COBRA GOLD exercises at a time when Thailand was led by Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda, one of the most influential generals in Thailand's history. While Thailand granted transit and overflight permissions for the duration of these exercises, the United States no longer enjoyed regular military access to Thai port, airfield, or technical facilities. It was another four years until the 1987 War Reserve Stockpile Agreement granted the United States limited level one access to permanently position equipment inside Thailand. That agreement carried the very important caveats that the equipment was not intended for use outside of Thailand, and that there were no provisions for the positioning of U.S. forces in Thailand.[69]

2. Impact of Historic Agreements

As the United States and Thailand began to distance each other following the end of the conflict in Vietnam, the historic agreements played a significant role in preventing complete dissolution of the relationship. While Thai leaders expressed concern that U.S. withdrawal from the region "raised doubts" about U.S. dependability, neither the United States nor Thailand attempted to withdraw from the MDT as SEATO disbanded in 1977.[70] Statements like U.S. Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger's "I would have to consult my lawyers," response to whether the U.S. would defend Thailand were cause for concern, but not an end to the relationship.[71] Quite the opposite, Thailand only moved to support the dissolution of SEATO after the U.S. reassured them that the MDT would remain in effect.[72] It was the premise of maintaining that relationship that enabled bilateral training

69 Kenneth S. Harbin, *The expanding Sino-Thai military relationship: implications for U.S. policy in Thailand* (Master's Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 1990), 41, http://hdl.handle.net/10945/27592.

70 Harbin, 19.

71 Ann Marie Murphy, "Beyond Balancing and Bandwagoning: Thailand's Response to China's Rise," *Asian Security* 6, no. 1 (Jan 2010) 19, https://doi.org/10. 1080/14799850903471922.

72 Leszek Buszynski, "Thailand and the Manila Pact," *The World Today* 36, no. 2 (Feb 1980) 45, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40395167.

to resume in the early 1980s, and eventually justified the 1987 War Reserve Stockpile Agreement in the eyes of U.S. and Thai leaders. Without the historic precedents to build on, it is unlikely that either nation would have agreed to expand the relationship as the United States sought to reduce international commitments and Thailand recognized that extended relations with the United States had the potential to harm its regional partnerships.

3. U.S. Threat Perception: Reducing International Commitments

To say that anti-war sentiment was rampant in the United States by the late 1960s would be an understatement. When President Richard Nixon took office in 1969, he did so having run on a platform promising to end the war "in a matter of months."[73] Within six months of taking office, President Nixon expressed his intent to Thai partners that the United States was seeking to "lower the future American military profile in Asia without undertaking any new security obligations."[74] As President Ford took office following President Nixon's resignation in 1974, the U.S. presence in Southeast Asia was drawing down. Congress was no longer willing to fund the war effort and had already begun taking measures to cut military and economic assistance to Southeast Asian countries.[75] Following the withdrawal from Vietnam and Thailand in 1976, bitterness over the defeat left many Americans with little desire to remain engaged in the region. For the next five years, the United States largely withdrew from the region until the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in December 1978. Within weeks, President Carter highlighted that U.S. "interests were affected by the Vietnamese invasion" and warned that the U.S. would stand beside its Thai ally.[76] U.S. military sales credits were increased by an additional $6 million, and U.S. attention was drawn back to the region. When the Reagan administration took office in 1981 President Reagan reiterated the importance of the U.S. international presence abroad, and reinstated significant amounts of funding to the U.S. anti-communist allies.[77]

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[73] Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The Vietnam War a Concise International History* (New York: Oxford University Press: 2008), 138, Kindle.

[74] LePoer, "Thailand a Country Study," 215.

[75] Lawrence, *The Vietnam War a Concise International History,* 164.

[76] Leszek Buszynski, "Thailand and the Manila Pact," 49.

[77] Lawrence, *The Vietnam War a Concise International History,* 174.

President Reagan's administration worked to regain the United States access in Thailand. Recognizing that Thailand was an essential "staging post for rapid deployment of U.S. forces" throughout the region, the United States sought to rebuild the relationship.[78] In 1982, the annual Cobra Gold exercise was established. Originally designed as a bilateral exercise, Cobra Gold has developed into one of the largest multilateral exercises in the world, with the number of participating nations growing annually. An important training opportunity for the Thai military and a key to maintaining American access to the region, both nations had significant stake in seeing the exercise grow since its creation. Continuing in this manner, the administration sought to rebuild what had been broken, increasing training assistance, foreign aid, and allowing Thailand to purchase military equipment from U.S. vendors, most notable of which was the 1985 sale of twelve F-16 fighter aircraft.[79] The 1987 agreement to create a war reserve weapons stockpile in Thailand marked the largest victory in regaining access to the country, ensuring that the United States would have limited level one access there to maintain permanently staged equipment on Thai soil.[80] Between the war stockpile and the establishment of COBRA GOLD, the United States made significant progress in restoring its access to Thailand.

4. Thai Threat Perception: Coping with U.S. Withdrawal

Even amid their own internal turmoil, with coups in 1971, 1976, 1977, and 1991, Thai foreign policy remained externally focused. As the U.S. withdrawals began in the early 1970s, concerns over U.S. reliability forced Thai leaders to question the viability of their U.S. allies as partners. Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman went as far as to voice the question "will the help come," referencing doubts about whether the United States would engage in conflicts that did not directly affect its interests.[81] Recognizing the inevitability of the U.S. withdrawal, Thailand fell back on its historic pattern of courting

[78] William T. Tow, *Assessing U.S. Bilateral Security Alliances in the Asia Pacific's 'Southern Rim': Why the San Francisco System Endures* (Stanford University: Institute for Int. Studies, 1999), 17. https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Tow_Final.pdf.

[79] LePoer, "Thailand a Country Study," 263.

[80] LePoer, 220.

[81] Tow, "Assessing U.S. Bilateral Security Alliances in the Asia Pacific's 'Southern Rim," 19.

great powers, specifically China. Hoping to stabilize relations with the communist Chinese, Thai leaders began to gently re-engage with Beijing, sending sports teams to China in 1972, lifting trade bans in 1974, and eventually normalizing diplomatic relations in 1975.[82] Considering the U.S. efforts to normalize relations with China at the same time, Thailand's policy was not at odds with the United States. These efforts made significant headway when Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1978. Even as Thailand sought reassurances from the U.S. that the Manila Pact remained valid, it increased ties to China by allowing Chinese support to flow through Thailand to the Khmer Rouge.[83] Working to court both the United States and China as partners, Thailand built relationships with both nations throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Time proved this decision to be a wise one. When the United States refrained from supporting Thailand in the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, the Chinese government stepped in. In support of its regional relationship China pledged "not to devalue the RMB while committing U.S.$1 billion to the international bailout of Thailand," earning itself tremendous amounts of goodwill throughout Thailand.[84]

C. 2000-2023: U.S. ATTEMPTS TO REKINDLE THE ALLIANCE

The developments in the U.S.–Thai relationship during the period between 2000 and 2023 are best understood when viewed in context of Thailand's historic foreign policy strategy alongside its growing relationship with China. This strategy, often referred to as "bamboo in the wind," seeks to maintain balance and stability by remaining "always solidly rooted, but flexible enough to bend whichever way the wind blows in order to survive."[85] Not to be confused with more recent concepts of balancing, Thai policy can more easily be understood as one of nonalignment while seeking to build and court friendships. In keeping with this approach, Thailand was careful to nurture its relationships with both the United States and China between 2000 and 2023.

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[82] LePoer, "Thailand a Country Study," 216.

[83] Murphy, "Beyond Balancing and Bandwagoning: Thailand's Response to China's Rise," 10.

[84] Han, "Under the Shadow of China-US Competition: Myanmar and Thailand's Alignment Choices," 99.

[85] Arne Kislenko, "Bending with the Wind: The Continuity and Flexibility of Thai Foreign Policy," *International Journal*, 57, no. 4 (Autumn, 2002): 537. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40203691.

1. Variation in Access

The first twenty-three years of the 21st century did not see significant changes to the levels of U.S. access in Thailand. While the annual COBRA GOLD exercises continued and the War Reserve Stockpiles Agreement remained in effect, the U.S.–Thai relationship did not see any meaningful developments. The U.S. designation of Thailand as a major non-NATO ally in 2003 to reward the Thai participation in the Global War on Terror was not intended to build access in Thailand, and the subsequent vision statements to maintain and build the defense relationship were little more than symbolic gestures. The result was been that while the United States continued financial and training assistance to its Thai defense partners, it only succeeded in retaining training access through bilateral exercises as well as limited access to maintain the reserve equipment stockpile. The United States did not make any progress in regaining permissions to station forces, regularly utilize facilities, or transit forces through Thailand during this period.

2. Impact of Historic Agreements

Historic agreement ensured that the U.S.–Thai relationship continued throughout the early 2000s despite the political hurdles that arose. There is little question that the 2006 and 2014 coups hurt the U.S.–Thai relationship. Thai military intervention in politics led U.S. leaders to question Thailand's viability as an effective partner in the region. At the same time, U.S. condemnation of the coups and withholding of support immediately following led the Thai leadership to further distance itself from the United States and to again question U.S. reliability. The enduring historical agreements helped to overcome these challenges however, with the reserve stockpiles maintained and bilateral exercises continued in support of the MDT. Despite a reduction in U.S. participation, the pre-existing agreements enabled the annual COBRA GOLD exercises to continue uninterrupted, and Thailand allowed the U.S. to temporarily use Utaphao airbase to support relief efforts following the 2015 earthquake in Napal.[86] While there were temporary reductions in funding to Thailand, U.S. aid was resumed within a year of each of the two coups.

[86] Emma Chanlett-Avery, Ben Dolven and Wil Mackey, *Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations*, IF10253 (Congressional Research Service, 2018), 2, https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF10253.pdf.

3. U.S. Threat Perception: Pivot to the Pacific

In the early 2000s, the United States began to shift its attention back towards the Pacific, placing increasing emphasis on rebuilding ties with regional allies and partners. Concerns over the growing competition of China pushed the United States to expand its commitments to the region. The 2007 establishment of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between the United States, Australia, India, and Japan; the Obama administration's Pivot to Asia policy; and the 2017 renaming of U.S. Pacific command as the Indo-Pacific Command all highlighted the increasing emphasis that the U.S. leadership placed on the region as a whole. Building and maintaining the relationship with Thailand and using the multilateral COBRA GOLD exercises as a means of engaging with other regional partners played an important role in pursuing U.S. objectives in the Southeast Asia.

Working towards its regional goals, the United States sought to increase its access to Thailand and secure further alliance commitments from its Thai partners through increased efforts to build partner capacity. A 2015 Congressional Research Service (CRS) report highlighted that BPC operations "should help the United States maintain a long-term, low-visibility presence" and tend to be "more geared toward building linkages with U.S. allies," and alliance management than traditional security cooperation activities.[87] The objective in Thailand at the time was to reinforce the precedent of military cooperation with the United States while increasing Thai capabilities, "thereby enhancing our collective ability to deter aggression."[88] The scope and scale of the COBRA GOLD exercises gave the U.S. the opportunity to work towards some of these goals.

U.S. efforts to reinvigorate the alliance with Thailand between 2000 and 2023 were met with lukewarm reception and achieved only limited success. The relationship moved forward, but access did not significantly change. The alliance between Thailand and the United States took another formal step forward following the 2003 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit with Thailand's designation as a major non-NATO ally to

[87] Congressional Research Service, *What is "Building Partner Capacity?"* R44313 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2015), 7, https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R44313.html.

[88] Congressional Research Service, 8.

the United States.[89] While the 2006 coup and overthrow of the Thaksin government put a damper on relations, it did not break the pattern of cooperation. The annual Cobra Gold exercises continued, more were created, and eventually the two countries signed the Joint Vision Statement for the Thai-U.S. Defense alliance in 2012 calling 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."[90] Follow-on statements in 2020 and 2022 similarly vague. At face value the vision statements had little direct impact on U.S.–Thai cooperation and did nothing to increase U.S. access in Thailand. Indirectly they signaled that the two countries recognized the historic value in maintaining their relationship and that there could still be value in cooperation.

The vision statements were not a sign of threat perceptions converging once again, but rather proof that historic precedent was helping to maintain a weakening relationship despite the lack of a common threat. Even cursory examinations of the numerous joint statements between the United States and Thailand reveal a stark contrast between the language of the 1962 Thanat-Rusk communiqué and statements released between 2000 and 2022. The 1962 communiqué was concise, explicitly outlining the communist threat from neighboring Laos and the plan to combat it. The 2012, 2020, and 2022 statements were not. The only threat referenced in the 2012 vision statement was "modern challenges," that would be met by "supporting stability in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond."[91] Similarly, the 2020 statement alluded to "complex-security challenges across the Indo-Pacific region," while the only threats addressed in the 2022 statements were "climate change,"

89 Prasirtsuk, "An Ally at the Crossroads: Thailand in the U.S. Alliance System," 120.

90 Prasirtsuk, 129.

91 "Text of the Thailand-US Joint Vision Statement," *Bangkok Post*, 16 November 2012, https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/321551/text-of-thailand-us-joint-vision-statement.

"terrorism, pandemics, and transnational crimes."[92] The lack of specific language surrounding common challenges in the later statements reflected the two countries' desire to cooperate and maintain the alliance despite the lack of a shared threat.

4. Thai Threat Perception: Growing Sino-Thai Relationship

Throughout its history Thailand has worked to balance its national interests against the demands of the greater powers around them. As the only mainland nation on Southeast Asia to have avoided colonization, its track record of carefully balancing great power competition is impressive. The more recent competition between the United States and China in the region is no exception. Thailand's approach of pursuing military cooperation with the United States while simultaneously courting economic interdependence with China is most succinctly described by the political scientist Van Jackson's term "omni-enmeshment," which he describes as a "deliberate effort to entangle China (and the United States) in a web of interdependent economic and diplomatic relations in the hopes of influencing and forestalling any aggressive intentions."[93]

At the turn of the century the Sino-Thai relationship was strengthened even as the U.S.–Thai relationship experienced strain. In 2010, political scientist Ann Marie Murphy highlighted that "Thai perceptions of China have undergone a dramatic shift from viewing its large neighbor as a revisionist threat that must be balanced against to a status quo partner with whom Thailand cooperates widely."[94] This shift was enabled by a combination of Chinese efforts to entreat its neighbors and perceived U.S. slights to its Thai partners. Growth in the Chinese economy and their sustained commitment to building economic and

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[92] "Joint Vision Statement 2020 for the U.S. – Thai Defense Alliance," U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Thailand, November 17, 2019, https://th.usembassy.gov/joint-vision-statement-2020-for-the-thai-u-s-defense-alliance/; "United States-Thailand Communiqué on Strategic Alliance and Partnership," U.S. Department of State, July 10, 2022, https://www.state.gov/united-states-thailand-communique-on-strategic-alliance-and-partnership/; "Joint Statement between the United States of America and the Kingdom of Thailand," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand, November 29, 2022, https://www.mfa.go.th/en/content/5d5bd0d215e39c3060021900?cate=5d5bcb4e15e39c3060006828

[93] Van Jackson, "The Rise and Persistence of Strategic Hedging across Asia: A System-Level Analysis," in *Strategic Asia 2014–15: U.S. Alliances and Partnerships*, ed. Ashley J. Tellis, Abraham M. Denmark, and Greg Chaffin (Seattle and Washington, DC: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2014), 327.

[94] Murphy, "Beyond Balancing and Bandwagoning: Thailand's Response to China's Rise," 8.

military ties throughout the region increasingly began to challenge the United States influence in Southeast Asia. While the United States worked diligently to increase partner capacity, build access, and mature relationships throughout the region, it made several key missteps. Largest among these were how it responded to the 2006 and 2014 military coups in Thailand, unintentionally creating political maneuver space for China. By cutting aid following the coups the U.S. gave China the opportunity to move closer to Thailand, which it did. According to public opinion polls taken between 2008 and 2010, "more than 70 percent of Thais rank China as Thailand's closest friend," while "only 2 percent viewed China's growing military power as a threat."[95] Historic precedent highlights that Thailand likely preferred to avoid having to make a choice between the two partners and instead continued to court both nations. Understanding that makes it easier to understand why Thailand was willing to provide the U.S. with less access during the period between 2000 and 2023.

Political analysis between 2019 and 2023 highlighted that as Thailand drew closer to China, U.S. access to the country came increasingly in question, particularly when U.S. and Chinese interests diverged. In 2019, political scientist Ian Storey argued that "Thailand's military relations with China strengthened considerably," as a result of the negative U.S. response to the 2014 Thai coup.[96] Hope that the U.S.–Thai alliance was revitalizing in 2020 was tempered by that year's Sino-Thai celebration of the "10th anniversary of the comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership between Bangkok and Beijing," the fifth iteration of the Sino-Thai "Falcon Strike," and Huawei's participation in the construction of Thailand's 5G network.[97] Storey went on to argue in 2023 that the U.S.–Thai alliance was "Treading Water," and that the alliance had suffered from the lack

[95] Murphy, 14.

[96] Ian Storey, "Thailand's Military Relations with China: Moving from Strength to Strength," *Perspective*, no. 43 (May 2019): 1, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2019_43.pdf.

[97] Murray Hiebert, *The United States Makes Up Critical Terrain in Thailand* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic International Studies, 2022), https://www.csis.org/analysis/united-states-makes-critical-terrain-thailand.

of a common enemy and U.S. concerns over increasing ties between Thailand and China.[98] While the U.S.–Thai alliance continued throughout this period, lack of a common threat and the increasing Sino-Thai cooperation prevented the United States from obtaining additional access to Thailand.

a. Developments in the Sino-Thai Relationship

The Sino-Thai relationship developed significantly between 2000 and 2023. First discussed in 2001 when China created "its first bilateral Defense and Security Consultation (DSC) or Defense Policy Dialogue (DPD) with Thailand," actual military cooperation between the two nations took years to develop.[99] Already conducting annual military exercises with the United States and regularly sending officers to participate in training abroad, Thailand was in no rush to court the Chinese military. With Chinese technology and training widely viewed as inferior to the United States, Thailand did not expend significant effort to develop the relationship. When the first bilateral exercise between the two countries was conducted in 2005, it was not only a milestone in their relationship, it was China's first military exercise in the region.[100] Relations between the two were stabilized but not expanded by the 2007 Joint Action Plan on Thailand-China Strategic Cooperation which "called on the two sides to maintain military dialogue and exchange visits, conduct combined military exercises focused on countering nontraditional security threats, and promote further cooperation."[101] Thailand and China continued to conduct one to two bilateral exercises a year until the relationship was elevated in 2012 to a

[98] Ian Storey, "Why is the US-Thai alliance treading water?" *ThinkChina,* 11 April 2023, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/media/op-eds/why-is-the-us-thai-alliance-treading-water-op-ed-by-ian-storey-in-think-china/.

[99] Kelly L. Bischoff, "Chinese Security Cooperation in Southeast Asia, 2000–2017: Evidence From Thailand and the Philippines," (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School Monterey, 2019), 6, https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/62780.

[100] Bischoff, 6.

[101] Ian Storey, "China's Bilateral Defense Diplomacy in Southeast Asia," *Asian Security* 8, no. 3 (October 2012): 295, https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2012.723928.

Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.[102] In 2013 the two nations recommitted to cooperation, participating jointly in one bilateral and two multilateral exercises.[103]

As Thailand found cooperation with the United States more challenging because of U.S. reactions to the Thai coups, it continued to increase cooperation with China. The 2016 BLUE STRIKE exercise marked the first time that a bilateral Sino-Thai maneuver included humanitarian relief training in addition to combined maritime and ground operations.[104] By 2021, Thailand was China's "forth-most-frequent partner in military diplomacy activities," and a key enabler of Chinese military engagement in Southeast Asia.[105] As Sino-Thai cooperation continued to expand grow, the 2022 Falcon Strike exercises marked a significant development in the Sino-Thai relationship, with the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) including advanced fighter-bombers, early warning and control aircraft, and fighters for the first time in a bilateral exercise.[106] While the exercise was nowhere near the scale of the multinational COBRA GOLD exercises, and Thailand and China insisted that Falcon Strike was a "non-partisan combat training aimed at strengthening mutual trust and cooperation," it did little to reassure the United States about the future of U.S. access in Thailand.[107] The trend was that Sino-Thai security cooperation was expanding in scope.

Increasing Sino-Thai security cooperation sent a clear message that U.S. and Thai threat perceptions were not closely aligned. There is no easy way to reconcile the U.S. perception of China as a revisionist threat with the Thai perception of their Chinese partners. While this disconnect did not necessarily mean that the U.S.–Thai relationship was near its end, it signaled that perhaps Thailand was exploring its options, and like its

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[102] "China and Thailand," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2014, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zzjg_663340/yzs_663350/gjlb_663354/2787_663568/.

[103] Bischoff, "Chinese Security Cooperation in Southeast Asia, 2000–2017," 57.

[104] Busbarat, "Thai-US Relations in the Post-Cold War Era: Untying the Special Relationship," 270.

[105] John Bradford, "China's Security Force Posture in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia," *Special Report* no. 505 (December 2021): 4, https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/thailand-china-and-the-revival-of-falcon-strike/.

[106] Tita Sanglee, "Thailand, China, and the Revival of Falcon Strike," *The Diplomat,* 25 August 2022, https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/thailand-china-and-the-revival-of-falcon-strike/.

[107] Sanglee, "Thailand, China, and the Revival of Falcon Strike."

business approach, was seeking to diversify its portfolio of allies and partners. As of 2023, Sino-Thai cooperation was still nowhere near the level of U.S.–Thai cooperation, but experts on Thailand like Pongphisoot Busbarat have theorized that the BLUE STRIKE exercises could one day "expand and compete with Cobra Gold in the future."[108] As the Sino-Thai partnership expands, it is unlikely that Thailand will be particularly interested in granting increased U.S. military access to the country.

b. Thailand's 2006 Coup and Subsequent Shift Toward China

While the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis generated anti-U.S. and pro-China sentiment in Thailand, the U.S. response to the 2006 coup widened the gap further. It is often misstated that withdrawal of U.S. economic assistance was legally required in accordance with Section 508 of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Act. It is largely overlooked that Section 508 was repealed in 1973, and not appropriately readdressed until the Consolidated Appropriations Resolution enacted by Public Law 108-7 was passed in February of 2003. While the resolution retained verbiage against providing support to governments established through military coup, it also contained provisions to continue assistance with the goal of restoring democratic elections.[109]

Whether driven by law, or simply as a public statement against the coup, the United States chose to cut funding to Thailand following Prime Minister Thaksin's overthrow. In addition to curtailing arms sales to Thailand, the most immediate impact was the suspension of $24 million in military aid including the International Military Education and Training (IMET) funding.[110] The main value to the United States of the IMET funding is that it provides the opportunity for relationship building across all military ranks as foreign officers attend American schools and training curriculums.

With the United States backpedaling from the military leadership under General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, China was quick to offer to fill the delta. Within weeks of the coup,

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[108] Busbarat, 270.

[109] Consolidated Appropriations Resolution, 2003, Pub. L. No. 108–7, 117 STAT. 182 (2003). https://www.congress.gov/108/plaws/publ7/PLAW-108publ7.pdf.

[110] Storey, "China's Bilateral Defense Diplomacy in Southeast Asia," 300.

China more than doubled the amount that Thailand had been receiving, providing nearly $49 million in aid, the vast majority of which was immediately then used to purchase Chinese equipment.[111] While still considered inferior to American equipment, Chinese equipment was cheaper and easier to obtain for the new regime. The United States resumed aid and arms sales to Thailand in 2007, and though it is widely agreed that the Chinese aid did not directly affect the U.S.–Thai alliance, trust in the United States had been eroded once more.[112] This sentiment was reflected in a 2012 strategic brainstorming session in which "the [Thai] private sector and academia agreed unanimously that Thailand must look beyond the U.S. alliance and strengthen engagement with China, even as they lamented the decreasing utility of their strategic ties with the United States."[113]

Even as these events were eroding trust between Thailand and the United States, economic growth and rising interconnectivity between the Chinese and Thai economies was working to draw the two nations closer. In 2005, the United States received 15% of all Thai exports, trailed by Japan at 13% and China with 8% while the Thai market was dominated by Japan with 22% of imports followed by China with 9% and the United States at 7%.[114] While U.S.–Thai trade increased consistently over the next five years, Chinese economic growth more than closed the gap. In 2010 China had passed both the United States and Japan as the largest importer of Thai goods. That year 11% of Thai exports went to China, while only 10.4% of exports went to the United States, barely passing the 10.3% to Japan.[115] Thailand was clearly succeeding in diversifying its export markets. Thai imports followed a similar trend, though Japan retained a commanding lead. In 2010, Japan supplied 20.7% of the Thai market, trailed by China at 13% and the United States with only 5.8%.[116] China's growing economy passed all competition in Thailand in 2014,

111 Bischoff, "Chinese Security Cooperation in Southeast Asia, 2000–2017," 57.

112 Storey, "China's Bilateral Defense Diplomacy in Southeast Asia," 300.

113 Prasirtsuk, "An Ally at the Crossroads: Thailand in the Us Alliance System," 124.

114 "Thailand Trade Summary 2005," World Integrated Trade Solution, accessed June 12, 2021, https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/THA/Year/2005/Summary.

115 "Thailand Trade Summary 2010," World Integrated Trade Solution, accessed June 12, 2021, https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/THA/Year/2010/Summary.

116 World Integrated Trade Solution, "Thailand Trade Summary 2010."

becoming both the largest importer of Thai goods and the largest exporter to Thailand.[117] By 2015 China, Japan, and the United States remained within 1% of each other in competition for Thai exports, while China had taken wrested a commanding lead from Japan as the largest importer to Thailand.[118] Widening the gap, Thai imports of Chinese goods had increased to $69.6 billion in 2021, while Thai imports of U.S. goods that year were only $12.2 billion, solidifying China's place as Thailand's largest trade partner.[119]

The Thai economy came to rely on China for more than trade during this period. In addition to being the largest source of international tourism, China was also Thailand's second largest investor after Japan.[120] The two nations continued to grow increasingly interconnected with everything from additional free trade agreements to arms purchases to China's media friendly "Panda Diplomacy," drawing them ever closer. China's continued efforts to expand the 2023 version 3.0 of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), participation in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the United States' exclusion continued the trend while simultaneously widening the gap between Thailand and the United States.[121]

c. Perceived U.S. Missteps Following Thailand's 2014 Coup

Similar to events in 2006, the 2014 military coup lead by General Prayut Chan-ocha caused significant disruption between the United States and Thailand with minimal negative impact on Sino-Thai relations. Despite General Prayut's claims that military rule was intended to "reform the political structure, the economy and society" in order to clean

117 "Thailand Trade Summary 2014," World Integrated Trade Solution, accessed June 12, 2021, https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/THA/Year/2014/Summary.

118 "Thailand Trade Summary 2015," World Integrated Trade Solution, accessed June 12, 2021, https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/THA/Year/2015/Summary.

119 "Thailand / United States," Observatory of Economic Complexity, accessed 14 June 2023, https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/tha/partner/usa; "Thailand / China," Observatory of Economic Complexity, accessed 14 June 2023, https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/tha/partner/chn?dynamicBilateralTradeSelector=year2021.

120 Prasirtsuk, "An Ally at the Crossroads: Thailand in the Us Alliance System," 125.

121 Prasirtsuk, 126.

up corruption, the United States once again suspended military financial aid to Thailand.[122] In addition to suspending IMET funding, the United States significantly cut down joint military training with Thailand.[123] Increased tensions between the nations rose as bilateral naval exercise COOPERATION AFLOAT READINESS AND TRAINING 2014 was canceled, and Thailand was banned from exercise RIM OF THE PACIFIC 2015.[124] When told that the United States was considering canceling COBRA GOLD 2015, Thai officials responded, "We are a strategic location for them to gain access to other countries…We are the key that [the U.S.] can't afford to lose."[125] Thailand clearly recognized the leverage that their strategic importance could give in their relations with the United States. As political scientist Enze Han noted, "By courting Chinese support, the Thai government has effectively resisted pressure from the United States."[126] Echoing this sentiment, one post-coup Thai official was quoted saying "Do whatever you want with Cobra Gold, we've got Dragon Gold if we need it."[127]

China's response to the 2014 coup was decidedly different from that of the United States. Within weeks of the coup, the PRC had formally recognized the new Thai government. Seeking to further weaken U.S.–Thai relations, the Chinese Communist Party's official newspaper published a statement that "From Kiev to Bangkok, the politics of the street and public clashes have caused deep sorrow…whether openly or behind the scenes, American and Western forces have been involved. From West Asia and North Africa to Ukraine and Thailand, each one without exception was led astray on the path of 'Western-style Democracy.'"[128] The strong rhetoric clearly highlighted China's desire to drive a wedge between the United States and Thailand.

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[122] Dalpino, "The U.S.-Thailand Alliance: Continuity and Change in the 21st Century," 149.

[123] Bischoff, "Chinese Security Cooperation in Southeast Asia, 2000–2017," 54.

[124] Dalpino, "The U.S.-Thailand Alliance: Continuity and Change in the 21st Century,"156.

[125] Benjamin Zawacki, Thailand: Shifting Ground Between the U.S. and a Rising China (London: Zed Books, 2017): 309.

[126] Han, "Under the Shadow of China-US Competition: Myanmar and Thailand's Alignment Choices," 101.

[127] Zawacki, Thailand: Shifting Ground Between the U.S. and a Rising China, 311.

[128] Zawacki, 300.

China's advancement as the United States demurred did not stop at public statements. The PRC increased arms sales to Thailand in 2014, for the first time surpassing the United States.[129] While the Thai military had previously expressed concerns about the reliability of Chinese equipment, even rejecting past submarine purchases, the availability of Chinese support began to shift the Thai opinion.[130] With U.S. sales decreasing following the 2014 coup, Thailand conducted several major equipment purchases from China, including "advanced equipment like Main Battle Tanks (MBT) and Yuan submarines."[131] The submarine purchase in particular led military affairs scholars like Paul Chambers to the conclusion that the submarine contracts with China "served to send out the message that Thailand did not need to depend on Western countries."[132] Thailand continued along the path of Chinese arms purchases until 2022 when Germany refused to supply the engines for the submarines the Chinese constructed submarines. After refusing Beijing's offer to transfer two Song-class submarines as a "stop-gap," until a solution could be found, Prime Minister Prayut threatened to cancel the deal unless Chine resolved the problem.[133] The two countries had not yet come to a new agreement as of 2023.

As the United States stepped back from joint military training, China stepped forward. The vague Thai threat regarding Dragon Gold happened for a reason. Following the coup, China immediately sought to take advantage of American disengagement and began planning with their Thai counterparts. 2015 saw a record increase in Sino-Thai military cooperation, with the countries participating in one bilateral and four multilateral exercises together.[134] Unwilling to relinquish its gains, China maintained the pace in 2016,

[129] Bischoff, "Chinese Security Cooperation in Southeast Asia, 2000–2017," 57.

[130] Storey, "China's Bilateral Defense Diplomacy in Southeast Asia," 301.

[131] Bischoff, "Chinese Security Cooperation in Southeast Asia, 2000–2017," 14.

[132] Yohei Muramatsu, "Thailand's purchase of the first Chinese submarine runs aground," *Nikkei Asia,* 12 April 2022, https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Thailand-s-purchase-of-first-Chinese-submarine-runs-aground.

[133] Ian Storey, "Will the Thai Military Ever Get its Submarines and Stealth Fighters?" *Fulcrum Analysis on Southeast Asia*, 23 August 2022, https://fulcrum.sg/will-the-thai-military-ever-get-its-submarines-and-stealth-fighters/.

[134] Bischoff, "Chinese Security Cooperation in Southeast Asia, 2000–2017," 58.

again conducting five joint exercises with Thailand.[135] China has only increased cooperation since, a clear signal that they intend to remain a major partner to Thailand.

D. RELEVANT CONCLUSIONS

This chapter sought to examine the U.S.–Thai relationship over the course of three distinct periods of time, considering three specific variables. For each time period it outlined the changing levels of U.S. access in Thailand before examining the impact of historic agreements and the convergence or divergence in U.S. and Thai threat perceptions. The analysis led to the following conclusions. In the first time period from 1954 to 1970, the two countries had a history of cooperation and converging threat perceptions. Accordingly, U.S. access increased. In the second time period from 1970 to 2000, historic agreements maintained the relationship between the two countries, but as threat perceptions diverged, U.S. access decreased. In the third time period from 2000–2023, historic agreements again maintained the relationship between the two countries, but threat perceptions continued to diverge. The result was minimal change in levels of U.S. access despite naming Thailand as a major non-NATO ally.

While U.S. desire to engage with Thailand played a significant role in ensuring U.S. access to the country, the most significant variable is threat perception. When the two nations' threat perception aligns, cooperation increases significantly. When perceptions diverge, access either stagnates or decreases. As the U.S. and Thai views of China continue to diverge, the U.S. should be increasingly concerned about the potential of losing access to its historic partner.

[135] Bischoff, 58.

III. CONCLUSION

The U.S.–Thai relationship has experienced significant changes over the course of time. From the economic agreements of the early 1800s to the full defense alliance that facilitated the U.S. conduct of the Vietnam War, the U.S.–Thai partnership has included a wide spectrum of commitments. Understanding the drivers that pushed the two nations to create, or in some instances curtail these commitments can help us to manage expectations moving forward. Examining the impact of legacy agreements, underlying threat perception, and the levels of U.S. engagement during different time periods provides a framework to determine whether the United States is likely to continue to enjoy access to its Thai partners as the two nations' threat perceptions begin to diverge.

The period from 1954 to 1970 marked the closest that the U.S.–Thai relationship had ever been. Building on the 1833 Treaty of Amity and Commerce and the 1954 Manila Pact, the two nations had over a century of friendly cooperation and a recent MDT to justify expanding the military alliance in the early 1960s. As the growing communist threat from Vietnam and Laos increased regional tensions, the two nations' threat perception aligned. For the United States, Thailand was a lynchpin that could help prevent the spread of communism and the collapse of the region. For Thailand, the United States was a powerful partner that could help secure Thailand's borders and prevent communist challenges from spreading into the country. As both countries sought to build the U.S. presence in Southeast Asia, U.S. access to Thailand increased dramatically. The construction of permanent bases, positioning of forces, sharing of facilities, overflight permissions, and beginning of joint operations all highlighted that the United States had nearly unfettered operational access throughout Thailand. Both countries clearly articulated that they wanted and needed the partnership, so it expanded accordingly. Throughout this period, legacy institutions facilitated cooperation, threat perceptions converged, and both countries actively pursued strategies designed to increase cooperation. The result was a significant increase in U.S. access to Thailand.

The period from 1970 to 2000 saw the commitments of the previous twenty years significantly curtailed. Nearly two decades of close cooperation proved insufficient to overcome a rapid divergence in threat perceptions. While the legacy agreements from the

MDT and the Thanat-Rusk communiqué helped rebuild the partnership in the 1980s, they failed to prevent the near dissolution of the partnership in 1975. From the American perspective, the U.S. conclusion of the war effort in Vietnam left Americans ready to reduce their international commitments. Tired from the years of war, they sought to counter the communist threat through more flexible and less expensive means, pulling their forces out of Southeast Asia. The picture was worse from the Thai perspective. Not only did the U.S. withdrawal leave them exposed to threats from their communist neighbors, the continued relationship with the United States proved to be an unnecessary irritant as Thailand sought to stabilize relations with neighboring Vietnam and China. The result of this divergence was the complete U.S. withdrawal from Thailand, and an almost total loss of access by 1976. Throughout this period, legacy institutions facilitated the continuation of the relationship despite significant divergence of threat perception between the two nations, and limited U.S. engagement in the region. The result was a continuation of the partnership, but significant reductions in U.S. access to Thailand until threat perceptions converged again during the conflict between Vietnam and Cambodia. It was concerns that the conflict could spill into Thailand and effect both Thai and U.S. interests that led to increased U.S. access via the COBRA GOLD exercises and the War Reserve Stockpile agreement. When the conflict ended the two new institutions remained to sustain the U.S.–Thai alliance.

The period from 2000 to 2023 marked a relative stabilization of the U.S.–Thai relationship. During this time the two nations remained committed to the legacy institutions that were established throughout the 1980s and recognized the value of retaining the relationship. U.S. threat perceptions identified the challenge of a rising China and began to shift U.S. focus in a pivot to Asia and the Pacific. Accordingly, the United States attempted to regain access to Thailand through expansion of BPC operations and an increase in bilateral and multilateral training exercises. Thailand welcomed the increased training opportunities and financial assistance from the United States but did not perceive the same threat. Rather than a seeing China as a growing enemy to be countered, Thailand continued to build close economic and military ties with its largest trading partner. While Thailand did not perceive China as a threat, it recognized the potential opportunity presented by maintaining its relationship with the United States. In addition to the financial and technological benefits of

the relationship, Thai leaders recognized that courting the United States as a partner allowed Thailand to maintain leverage in its dealings with China. Throughout this period legacy institutions continued to facilitate U.S.–Thai cooperation, Thailand remained content to maintain the alliance despite the diverging perspective on China, and the U.S. actively engaged in the region once again. The result was a continuation of the partnership with no significant changes to the level of U.S. access in Thailand.

Examining the U.S.–Thai relationship leads to several relatively clear conclusions. The first is that the legacy institutions established to facilitate cooperation help to maintain the alliance regardless of changes in the two countries' threat perceptions or engagement strategies. While these institutions do not directly build access themselves, they set conditions for its upkeep. The second is that when threat perceptions converge, U.S. access to Thailand increases; but when threat perceptions diverge, it decreases. The more convergent or divergent the perception, the greater the change in access. The conclusion is that increased engagement and reliance on legacy institutions can help to mitigate the loss of access, but that U.S. engagement strategies alone are not sufficient to overcome divergent threat perceptions in order to build increased access.

There is no simple answer in response to questions about whether the United States will be able to retain or build additional access to Thailand in the future. Historic observations highlight that when threat perception and engagement strategies align access increases, with the inverse also true. Additional observations have shown that as they diverge, loss of access can be mitigated by legacy institutions and agreements designed to facilitate cooperation. While the United States and Thailand do not perceive the same threat from a rising China, the divergence is significantly less pronounced than it was in 1975. Having executed continued bilateral exercises since the early 1980s, and maintained the war stockpiles since 1987, it is a reasonably safe proposition to maintain that the United States is likely to enjoy the same levels of access barring a significant shift in the two nations' perspectives. That being understood, it is further likely that as the United States and Thailand both actively seek to engage with each other, U.S. access to Thailand is more likely to increase than decrease.

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