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AN OLD ALLIANCE FOR THE NEW CENTURY

Reinvigorating the U.S.-Thailand Alliance

By Catharin E. Dalpino

THE NATIONAL BUREAU *of* ASIAN RESEARCH

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FOREWORD

Officially inaugurated in 1833 with the Treaty of Amity and Commerce, U.S.-Thailand relations are one of America's oldest strategic relationships. They are also one of the most durable, having successfully weathered several significant changes to the international security environment. During the Cold War, the U.S.-Thailand alliance was one of the most vital bulwarks in America's strategy to contain Communist expansion in Asia. Since the end of the Cold War, Thailand has been a tremendously helpful and effective ally in the world's struggle against terrorism.

I personally have had numerous strong working relationships with Thailand's leadership, both as a senior military officer and after my retirement, as the John M. Shalikashvili Chair in National Security Studies at The National Bureau of Asian Research. When the Boxing Day Tsunami devastated Southeast Asia, our Thai partners, based on these long-standing relationships and prior work together, immediately provided access to Utapao and Bangkok and facilitated the stand-up of a coalition task force to deal with the immediate requirement for humanitarian relief. We were able to respond without delay because of our well-developed habits of cooperation.

Despite these productive interactions and successes, however, the U.S.-Thailand alliance has unfortunately been slow to evolve with the more recent, rapidly changing international security environment. As the Asia-Pacific emerges as the world's most strategically vital region, and the United States accordingly rebalances its strategic focus, the alliance has been hamstrung by political instability in Thailand and a lack of strategic attention from Washington. This needs to change.

As U.S.-Thailand relations near their 180th anniversary, Washington and Bangkok have a historic opportunity to revitalize the alliance for the emerging challenges that both sides face in the 21st century. This report, by the exceptional Catharin Dalpino, presents a compelling argument for just such a revitalization and offers a robust operational framework to guide both countries. With President Obama scheduled to visit Southeast Asia in late 2012, and leaders in Bangkok ready to move forward, such an opportunity should not be missed.

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An Old Alliance for the New Century: Reinvigorating the U.S.-Thailand Alliance

Catharin E. Dalpino

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines U.S. and Thai perspectives on the U.S.-Thailand alliance with a view to reinvigorating the alliance and, in doing so, strengthening cooperation between the two countries in the Asia-Pacific region and around the world.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Although the U.S.-Thailand alliance made a successful transition out of the Cold War framework of the Vietnam War era to a more flexible arrangement, it has stagnated in recent years. This has been caused by domestic distractions on both sides, differences in threat perceptions, and the expansion of both countries' political, economic, and security relations in the region.

Changes in the alliance, however, offer opportunities for new forms of cooperation. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have expanded U.S.-Thailand security cooperation beyond the Asia-Pacific region, while the proliferation of nontraditional security threats after the Cold War—including terrorism—has broadened the base of the alliance. Moreover, the expansion of Asian regional frameworks, most of them based on ASEAN structures, has given the U.S.-Thailand alliance a more regional orientation. Seizing these opportunities to strengthen relations will require more frequent dialogue between the U.S. and Thailand.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The report recommends six policy initiatives to revitalize the U.S.-Thailand alliance:

- Raise the profile of U.S.-Thai relations with frequent visits from senior leaders of both governments
- Establish a bilateral dialogue on China and the impact of rising powers in the Asia-Pacific region
- Support Thailand's objective to reclaim a regional role in ASEAN
- Develop a regional hub for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief at the Thai military base in Utapao
- Expand, where appropriate, regional membership in Cobra Gold while maintaining a strong bilateral base in the exercise
- Identify mechanisms to expand and liberalize both bilateral and regional trade

Driven by the recognition that the Asia-Pacific is now the world's most strategically significant region, the U.S. "pivot" toward the Asia-Pacific has invigorated efforts by the United States to modernize its five Asian security alliance treaties—those with Australia, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand. While these alliances trace their origins to the Cold War, those in Southeast Asia have moved beyond their original rationale. The end of the Vietnam War, and the eventual normalization of relations between Communist and non-Communist countries, transformed the Southeast Asia region and the alliances as a result. In Northeast Asia the persistence of Cold War tensions—particularly on the Korean Peninsula—requires greater continuity in the alliances. However, rising power dynamics have created new security challenges that bridge Northeast and Southeast Asia, as recent tensions in the South China Sea demonstrate.

Yet despite this renewed focus on the Asia-Pacific, the U.S.-Thailand alliance has often been neglected by both sides. This neglect has created an alliance that is stagnant, even if both sides view it as stable. To consider paths to a more dynamic alliance, The National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) embarked on a two-phase project in 2010 on "The U.S.-Thailand Alliance: Reinvigorating the Partnership." The first phase, which focused on U.S. views of the alliance, was launched in April 2010 with a workshop co-sponsored by Georgetown University and produced two reports.[1] The second phase, made possible with generous support from the Henry Luce Foundation, focused on Thai perspectives and the intersection of Thai and U.S. views and concerns. This phase was organized around a workshop held in Bangkok in March 2012, co-sponsored by the National Defence Studies Institute of the Royal Thai Armed Forces and the Faculty of Political Science of Thammasat University.

This report is the culmination of the project's second phase and is largely drawn from the March workshop in Bangkok. The workshop agenda included a review of the alliance history; assessment of the strategic environment in the Asia-Pacific region; analysis of the role of regional institutions, particularly the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN); evaluation of the challenges and opportunities in the present-day U.S.-Thailand alliance; and recommendations on options to strengthen cooperation. Discussion was conducted under Chatham House rules. As a result, neither the views of Thai and American participants—nor any other statements or opinions—in this report should be attributed to specific participants or their institutions. The selection of material in this report is the sole responsibility of the author.

The Evolution of the U.S.-Thailand Alliance

Although Thailand is the United States' oldest diplomatic partner in Asia, with 2013 marking the 180th anniversary of the relationship, the framework of the modern alliance was set during the Cold War, when both Washington and Bangkok were committed to the defense and strengthening of Thailand against the Communist threat in Southeast Asia. This strategy was ultimately successful—Thailand was the "domino" that did not fall after the three countries of Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos) became fully Communist in 1975. Credit for this achievement is a point of some contention, since Thailand's fight against Communism was a two-stage process: the "American

[1] See "The United States–Thailand Alliance: Reinvigorating the Partnership," National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), Workshop Report, 2010, http://www.nbr.org/Research/activity.aspx?id=88; and "The United States–Thailand Alliance: Issues for a New Dialogue," NBR, Special Report, no. 33, October 2011, http://www.nbr.org/publications/element.aspx?id=546.

period," from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s, when U.S. military and economic support underwrote Thailand's defense; and the years immediately following the fall of Saigon, when the United States reduced its presence in Southeast Asia and Bangkok diversified its relations in the region (particularly with China) to balance against the fear of Vietnamese expansion.

Nevertheless, sources at the time suggest that this shift in the alliance—from a robust U.S. military presence in Thailand to a role as a more indirect security partner—was viewed by both sides as desirable and inevitable, despite some friction regarding U.S. withdrawal from the joint bases, which focused around unilateral U.S. use of the Utapao base to rescue the U.S. merchant ship *Mayaguez* from Cambodian seizure. Declassified White House documents from the administration of President Gerald Ford indicate that Thai security officials were inclined to view a continuing U.S. military presence as "a thumb in the Vietnamese eye," with the implication that the joint bases exacerbated the threat to Thailand.[2]

A U.S. government interagency study in 1976 led to President Ford's approval of changes to the U.S.-Thailand relationship that formed the basis for the current bilateral structure. The elements of this policy shift included a security assistance program; a strengthening of U.S.-Thai trade and investment; counternarcotics cooperation (a harbinger of joint efforts on nontraditional security threats); and the continuation of people-to-people programs, such as the flagship Peace Corps program. Ford also directed that the United States "not hinder the Thai in their efforts to adjust to new relationships with their Communist and non-Communist neighbors."[3] This statement was implicit U.S. support for Thailand's return to a more omnidirectional foreign policy and movement away from the strong centrality of the U.S.-Thailand relationship that had characterized the early Cold War years. In this regard, Thailand opened a diplomatic window to Beijing and gave ASEAN greater weight in its defense strategy toward Indochina.

Causes of Alliance Stagnation

Since the end of the Cold War and efforts of the United States to rebalance its military presence in the Asia-Pacific, the U.S.-Thailand alliance has been somewhat stagnant. This stagnation in the alliance often obscures the high level of cooperation in several areas. For example, Thailand grants the United States flyover rights and access to bases for refueling, both critical contributions to ongoing U.S. military operations in Southwest Asia and the Middle East. Bilateral cooperation on counterterrorism has intensified since 2001 and remains robust. The United States and Thailand also cooperate daily to address numerous nontraditional security threats and promote regional security through the co-sponsorship of the International Law Enforcement Academy in Bangkok.

Nevertheless, the depth of U.S.-Thailand military cooperation has certainly diminished since the end of the Cold War. Indeed, an oft-expressed nostalgia for the Cold War era of the alliance is expressed on both sides as an implicit criticism of the current state of the relationship. The primary reasons for this drop are twofold: shifting U.S. security priorities in Southeast Asia in the wake of September 11 and tensions in the South China Sea, and domestic dynamics on both sides.

Since the end of the Cold War, both Bangkok and Washington have to a degree allowed countervailing priorities to distract them from maintaining the alliance's vibrancy. Some Thais

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[2] "U.S.-Thai Relations and Thailand's Prospects," Gerald R. Ford Library, Memorandum of Conversation, September 16, 1976, http://www.ford.utexas.edu/library/document/0314/1553538.pdf.

[3] "National Security Decision Memorandum 327: U.S. Policy toward Thailand," Gerald R. Ford Library, April 21, 1976, http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0310/nsdm327.pdf.

bemoan the fact that other Southeast Asian countries often receive greater attention from Washington even though they are not treaty allies of the United States. The strengthening of U.S. security relations with Singapore; the high profile given to U.S.-Indonesian relations in the Obama administration; and Washington's significant interest in an enhanced relationship with Vietnam all add to Thai perceptions that Washington has downgraded relations with Bangkok.

Additionally, U.S. professional military education and training for Thai military officers have decreased significantly from the high point of the "American period." Although U.S. arms and equipment are considered highly desirable by the Thai military, their cost and the legal hurdles to a sale are often prohibitive, driving Thailand to other vendors—especially China, Sweden, and Ukraine—and harming the interoperability of U.S. and Thai military forces in the process.

Some of this perceived lack of attention has been alleviated by the Obama administration's more vigorous approach to ASEAN, including signing the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, helping establish the U.S.-ASEAN Leaders Meeting, and entering the East Asia Summit (EAS). In addition, the inauguration of the Lower Mekong Initiative has helped rebalance U.S. attention to mainland Southeast Asia, which had lagged in the previous decade when counterterrorism strategies focused more on the maritime states of the region.

Conversely, some Americans chafe at the broad spectrum of relationships evident in Thai foreign relations, which they interpret as evidence of divided loyalties. Tension over the U.S. request to extradite Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout, which placed Thailand between Washington and Moscow, is one recent example, although it is significant that Bout was ultimately extradited to the United States.

This is especially true regarding Thailand's burgeoning relationship with China, which has expanded from trade to include increasing political and military contacts. Although extensive polling on domestic perceptions of this issue is lacking, some Thai academics report that surveys of their university classes reveal that as many as 75% of their students view China as a better partner for Thailand than the United States. In general, more Thais than other Southeast Asians appear to believe that China will achieve superpower status in the next twenty years. A 2007 Gallup poll found that 40% of Thais polled thought that China would be a superpower in two decades, compared to 20% of Vietnamese and Filipinos and 30% of Singaporeans polled.[4]

The Threat Deficit

Unlike during the Cold War, the United States and Thailand do not share an overriding traditional security threat that drives them toward cooperation. While this is without a doubt a positive development in a strategic sense, it raises questions on both sides for the alliance's current *raison d'être*. U.S. foreign policy is crisis-driven—often described as a "fire engine approach"—and the severity of a threat and its impact on core American interests tend to drive policy priorities. Of the five U.S. treaty allies in the Asia-Pacific region, three have current threats to their security that energize the alliances. Foremost is South Korea and the multifaceted dangers posed by North Korea. Japan is affected by instability on the Korean Peninsula, but also has tensions with China that occasionally erupt into low-level conflict, as happened in the disputed Senkaku Islands in 2010. Similarly, clashes between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea have sparked a new phase of cooperation in maritime security between Manila and Washington.

[4] Ian T. Brown and Tao Wu, "China and the U.S.: Fighting for Political Influence," Gallup, May 22, 2009, http://www.gallup.com/poll/118591/china-competing-political-influence.aspx.

Like Thailand, Australia has no immediate threat to its vital national security at this time. However, Canberra and Washington have a similar strategic vision of the impact of rising powers in the region, particularly China and India, which has helped create a new rationale for the alliance.[5] In addition, the Bali bombing of 2002, which targeted Australian tourists, quickly pulled Australia into the global war on terrorism and gave the country a common cause with the United States.

As with most Southeast Asian countries, Thailand is watchful, even wary, of China's rise but has a strategic vision of rising powers in the region based on its own geostrategic and economic position, history with China, and membership in ASEAN. This vision often translates into less outward concern over China's rise than is heard in the U.S. and Australian policy communities.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to assume that Thailand is without threats to its security. Like the United States, Thailand is vulnerable to terrorist threats, from groups based in the region and beyond. In 2004 a high-ranking operative of the Jemmah Islamiyah, Hambali, was arrested in Thailand. In early 2012 the discovery of a cache of munitions in Bangkok revealed the presence of an Iranian group believed to be linked to Hezbollah. This common threat has been a significant new driver in the U.S.-Thailand alliance over the past decade. Terrorism is the most prominent in a range of nontraditional, transnational threats to Thailand's security. Other threats include environmental degradation, human trafficking, narcotics, and the use of Thailand as a transit point for smuggling illegal arms and other contraband. Countering these threats requires regional and even global coordination and cooperation. Not every nontraditional threat requires a military response, but the U.S.-Thailand alliance provides a structure for intelligence-sharing and other forms of cooperation that are not as easily managed in other countries of the region.

The alliance is less relevant, however, for addressing two other threats to Thailand's security. The borders of mainland Southeast Asian countries are porous and poorly defined, and minor skirmishes are an occasional subregional hazard. The most serious of these in recent years has been the episodic conflict on the Thai-Cambodian border over issues related to the Preah Vihear temple. A second, more serious conflict for Thailand has been an internal one—the persistent communal violence in the Muslim South, which has claimed over five thousand casualties since 2004. The United States has called for a peaceful resolution to both conflicts, but an alliance approach would be problematic because the intervention of a superpower in either could exacerbate rather than calm tensions.

Domestic Political Dynamics

The maintenance of the U.S.-Thailand alliance depends on the political will of both sides to sustain a high level of cooperation, as well as on the perception in both the U.S. and Thai publics that the alliance is worth continuing. In the latter respect, the U.S.-Thailand alliance differs from the other U.S. alliances in the region, because it is not based on an ongoing status-of-forces or visiting-forces agreement that must be periodically renewed. Instead, the alliance is founded on the 1954 Manila Pact and the 1962 communiqué between U.S. secretary of state Dean Rusk and Thai foreign minister Thanat Khoman. As a result, the U.S.-Thailand alliance continues on the basis of precedent and mutual understanding rather than a negotiated renewal. While this foundation arguably offers greater stability, it also tends to keep the alliance below the public radar and preclude opportunities for regular public input into alliance management.

In recent years, both governments have been more internally than externally focused—Bangkok on the political crisis and Washington on the economic recession—making it difficult for both sides

[5] For further discussion of this topic, see Sarah Serizawa, "An Australian Perspective on U.S. Rebalancing toward Asia: An Interview with Rory Medcalf," National Bureau of Asian Research, April 30, 2012, www.nbr.org/research/activity.aspx?id=242.

to attend to the relationship. The recession has also discouraged new U.S. policy initiatives in such areas as free trade. Southeast Asian diplomats report that members of the U.S. Congress have been more difficult to engage on foreign policy issues, and that many of the caucuses formed to promote bilateral relations in recent years have dissolved or become dormant. Assuming that both situations are easing, there may be new opportunities to strengthen the alliance in the coming years, although some momentum may be lost as the United States undergoes national elections later this year.

An added complication is the historic role of the Thai military in Thai politics, given that U.S. law mandates a specific response in the event of a military coup. The Foreign Assistance Act requires that the United States withhold economic assistance to a country in which an elected government is forcibly removed.[6] This provision was invoked both in 1991 when a military faction overthrew Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan and in 2006 when Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was deposed by a coup. In each case, International Military Education and Training (IMET) funding was suspended and the bilateral (and later multilateral) Cobra Gold exercises were delayed. Thai politics appear to have gained some degree of traction with the country's 2011 election, but the possibility of a future disruption, even hypothetical, is an implicit constraint in alliance planning.

New Dimensions for an Old Alliance

The U.S.-Thailand alliance has undergone significant redirection since the Cold War era. Some analysts have suggested that in order to modernize the alliance fully, the United States and Thailand should in fact abandon the search for an overarching mutual strategic vision. They argue that in an increasingly multilateral world, such a vision is not a prerequisite to the continuation of a treaty alliance.[7] This flexible approach may be more appropriate to the post–Cold War world, but it raises questions of whether a treaty alliance is still relevant. Bangkok itself raised that question in 2006, when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs convened a conference of Thai and American analysts to consider whether U.S.-Thai relations would be better served with a "strategic partnership" than a formal alliance. No conclusion was reached, and the alliance structure has continued, while evolving to reflect changing regional and global dynamics. Some signs of this evolution are discussed below.

The Alliance Has Extended Beyond the Asia-Pacific Region

During the Vietnam War, one logical extension of the domino theory was that the United States and its allies should work together to ensure that dominoes did not begin to fall. As a result, four of the five U.S. treaty allies in Asia—with Japan being the exception—sent troops to Vietnam. (Thailand also contributed forces to the Korean War.) As the United States' only ally on mainland Southeast Asia (apart from South Vietnam), it was not difficult for Bangkok to justify having Thai troops in Vietnam in terms of Thailand's own defense.

However, following the events of September 11, the United States called on its Asian allies to contribute contingents of troops, however small, to its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. This has opened a new and more global window to the alliance, but one that is driven primarily by the United States. The rationale for these requests in terms of Thailand's own defense was less obvious and

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[6] For a discussion of this and other provisions of the Foreign Assistance Act, see Dianne E. Rennack and Susan D. Chesser, "Foreign Assistance Act of 1961: Authorizations and Corresponding Appropriations," Congressional Research Service, CRS Report for Congress, R40089, June 16, 2010, www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R40089.pdf.

[7] See, for example, Walter Lohman, "Reinvigorating the U.S.-Thailand Alliance," Heritage Foundation, Backgrounder, no. 2609, September 26, 2011, http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/09/reinvigorating-the-u-s-thailand-alliance.

more difficult to justify to the Thai public. Prime Minister Thaksin initially declared Thailand to be neutral at the beginning of the Iraq War, but he later reversed his position under pressure from Washington and provided troops in Iraq as well.

As the bilateral bond has loosened, Thailand has become more assertive and no longer automatically supports U.S. positions on global issues.[8] Given the proliferation of threats around the globe and Thailand's more omnidirectional foreign policy, this shift in Thai perspective was probably inevitable. However, it should not be overstated. Thailand and the United States often act in close parallel to one another in international efforts, such as antipiracy activities in the Gulf of Aden. Afghanistan and Iraq notwithstanding, U.S.-Thailand cooperation beyond the Asia-Pacific region enables both countries to strengthen their global positions.

Southeast Asian Regionalism Is Expanding, and the U.S.-Thailand Alliance Has Become a Base for Regional Security Cooperation

As one of the founding members of ASEAN, Thailand has been an architect of Southeast Asia regionalism for 45 years. The United States has encouraged ASEAN's development from its inception, initially as a hedge against Communism. In the 1980s, U.S. policy on Indochina supported ASEAN's position on Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. In the 1990s, ASEAN served not only as an instrument for regional normalization but also as a mechanism for encouraging external powers to engage with the countries of Southeast Asia as a group.

ASEAN's focus has traditionally been diplomatic and more recently economic. Security has been added to the group agenda very cautiously, in view of the traditional ASEAN principle of noninterference in the internal affairs of member states. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), established in 1994, was the first region-wide security forum and the first mechanism to draw in external powers; in recent years, ASEAN has provided the base for closer cooperation among defense sectors through the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM-Plus, which includes eight external partners. The ADMM-Plus process seeks to promote cooperation through expert working groups in five areas: counterterrorism (co-chaired by Indonesia and the United States), peacekeeping (co-chaired by the Philippines and New Zealand), maritime security (co-chaired by Malaysia and Australia), humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (co-chaired by China and Vietnam), and military medicine (co-chaired by Singapore and Japan).

The strategic significance of this emerging regional approach to security should not be overstated at this juncture, but over the long term it could present a challenge to the traditional hub-and-spokes configuration of U.S. alliances in Southeast Asia. For the time being, most Thai analysts believe that participation in regional security regimes and the maintenance of a treaty alliance with the United States are not incompatible, one reason being that the United States also participates in much of the regional security framework (e.g., ARF and ADMM-Plus). Indeed, ASEAN's new security structures may provide new opportunities for U.S.-Thailand security cooperation. For example, the two countries might in the future co-chair the ADMM-Plus working groups for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief or counterterrorism.

There are, however, political tensions inherent in this dual track. China was an early advocate of the ADMM framework. Moreover, Beijing has occasionally used its relationship with ASEAN to signal its displeasure with joint exercises between the United States and Southeast Asian security

[8] For a further discussion on this topic, see Lewis M. Stern, "Diverging Roads: 21st-Century U.S.-Thai Defense Relations," Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, Strategic Forum, no. 241, June 2009, http://www.ndu.edu/inss/docuploaded/Lew%20Stern_USThaiRelations_SF241.pdf.

partners. For example, in negotiating the 2002 China-ASEAN Declaration on a Code of Conduct on the South China Sea, China attempted to insert language banning joint exercises with external powers not signatory to the declaration.

As Thailand attempts to move beyond the political crisis of the past five years, many Thai analysts believe that the country lost regional standing during those years and now seeks to regain it. Thailand's eighteen-month chairmanship of ASEAN in 2008–9 came at the midpoint of the crisis, with one ASEAN meeting famously disrupted by demonstrators in early 2009. The conflict on the Thai-Cambodian border, which has coincided with the Thai political crisis, further affected the country's image in the region.

However, Thailand's impact on ASEAN has not been confined to its role as a member government. During these turbulent years, the ASEAN secretary-general has been former Thai foreign minister Surin Pitsuwan. Pitsuwan's long-standing reputation in ASEAN—as foreign minister he proposed that the group move from its tradition of noninterference to a policy of "flexible engagement"—and his current role as secretary-general helped maintain some Thai presence in ASEAN. However, his term will expire at the end of 2012, creating a further deficit in Thailand's regional capital if Bangkok does not move quickly to fill the gap.

These shifting regional trends have had a clear impact on U.S.-Thailand relations and have expanded the bilateral base of the alliance. Originally a bilateral exercise, the annual Cobra Gold exercises, now in their 30th year, also include Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia as formal partners. Running an average of two weeks, Cobra Gold is the largest military exercise in the world and has laid the groundwork for regional cooperation on a number of natural disasters, such as the 2004 tsunami. Activities are typically divided between conventional military exercises (such as amphibious landings) and humanitarian assistance and other population-based exercises. The United States has also encouraged Thailand to participate in subregional exercises, such as the Malacca Strait Patrols.

The Threats That the Alliance Addresses Are Increasingly Nontraditional

Thailand's geostrategic position on mainland Southeast Asia places it in the path of several nontraditional security threats. Thailand has suffered one of the larger epidemics of HIV/AIDS in the region and was also a country of concern for avian flu. It has been a turnstile for illegal small arms, narcotics, and human trafficking. And, as noted above, terrorism has affected Thailand. However, evidence to date suggests that mainland Southeast Asia is not a permanent base for terrorist cells or training camps but rather a transit point or temporary haven for radical groups. Recently, Thailand has become more concerned with the impact of regional environmental problems, including climate change and the ecological effects of new dams and other alterations to the Mekong River. The United States and Thailand not only cooperate on a bilateral basis to stem these threats but also work together though subregional, regional, and global groups. These include the Lower Mekong Initiative and the Container Security Initiative.

Joint U.S.-Thailand efforts to address nontraditional security threats that do not lend themselves to military action have enabled the two countries to expand intelligence-sharing and police coordination. However, the 2011 floods in Thailand were a reminder that large-scale natural disasters are often best answered with a military response. Using structures developed in counterinsurgency campaigns during the Cold War, Thai armed forces were able to deliver flood relief more effectively than their civilian counterparts and, in doing so, boosted their public image in the country.

Recommendations for a Reinvigorated Alliance

The two countries should look for ways to raise the profile of U.S.-Thailand relations. Despite fluctuations in U.S. attention to Southeast Asia and Thailand's domestic political crisis, Thai perceptions that the U.S.-Thailand alliance is not given sufficient due in Washington have some credibility. Asymmetry between the United States and Thailand leaves Bangkok vulnerable to the perception that it is regarded as a lesser power by Washington, a condition that is probably permanent. Nevertheless, a treaty alliance does carry with it some expectation of equality and the need for each partner to grant special treatment to the other. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has visited Thailand several times, most recently in late 2011, when she expressed sympathy for the country's struggle against severe flooding.

But the maintenance of a treaty alliance also requires attention from the top levels of the U.S. defense sector, and this has been lacking in recent years. For example, Admiral Robert F. Willard did not visit Thailand at all during his entire tenure as commander of the U.S. Pacific Command. There are recent indications that this trend is reversing, and such a change of course should be supported to the fullest extent possible. For example, the U.S.-Thailand strategic and defense dialogue scheduled for summer 2012 is an opportunity not only to strengthen bilateral dialogue on issues of common concern but also to highlight the relationship within the Washington policy community.

A visit to Thailand by the U.S. president would be another opportunity to raise the profile of the alliance. The newly established U.S.-ASEAN Leaders Meeting provides an unprecedented occasion for annual bilaterals at the top levels, but a visit to the country by the president would have exponential value. In his tenure to date, President Barack Obama has twice visited Indonesia and visited Singapore once. He has not yet traveled to either Thailand or the Philippines, the two U.S. treaty allies in Southeast Asia. When the president attends the 2012 EAS in Cambodia in November, he should include a visit to Thailand in his itinerary, preferably before he arrives in Phnom Penh.

The United States and Thailand should engage in more direct dialogue on China. In closed-door dialogues, Thai and American analysts and policymakers often express differences in their strategic assessment of rising powers in the region, particularly China, although these differences are usually a matter of degree. However, the discourse between allies could and should be more direct on the impact of new powers in the region. This would help harmonize U.S. and Thai views of the threat environment in the region and may also suggest new possibilities for cooperation.

For example, Thai officials and analysts have suggested over the past decade that Bangkok could promote triangular cooperation among the United States, China, and Thailand. The United States, as a superpower, and Thailand, as a middle power, approach China from different vantage points, and the prospects for this triangulation are not as clear to Americans as to Thais, although U.S. policymakers have recently expressed interest in strengthening U.S.-China-ASEAN cooperation. In a more focused strategic dialogue, Thais should be forthcoming on these possibilities.

The United States should support Thailand in its efforts to reclaim a regional role in ASEAN. One important precondition of Thailand's return to the regional stage is a resolution of tensions on the Thai-Cambodian border. Some hopeful signs have emerged in the past year in that regard. Bangkok has pledged to follow the 2011 ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to establish a demilitarized zone around Preah Vihear, and Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra visited Cambodia as her first trip abroad in her new role. However, further ICJ rulings on the conflict are expected in 2012 and may spark new frictions, in Bangkok and on the border, that could destabilize the situation again. As noted above, the United States should not seek to play a military role in

resolving the conflict but should continue diplomatic efforts to encourage an enduring resolution acceptable to both sides.

Burma's political and economic reform—and the country's opening to the world—presents opportunities for Thailand to enhance its regional role. American companies interested in operating in Burma are likely to find the lack of financial infrastructure there to be daunting. Thai financial services could thus play an intermediary role. Thailand is also a likely hub for education and training for Burma in the near future, as well as a transportation link for international access to the country.

However, the locus of concern in Southeast Asia is moving east, to the South China Sea. If Thailand is to strengthen its regional role, Bangkok cannot confine its efforts to mainland Southeast Asia. In contrast to Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei, Thailand is not involved in claims disputes in the South China Sea. This makes Bangkok, like Jakarta, a potential mediator in this issue area.

The United States and Thailand should increase their efforts to develop a regional hub for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and more broadly to address transnational, nontraditional security threats. A priority area of discussion at the 2011 EAS in Indonesia was the need to develop regional capacity to respond to major natural disasters and other humanitarian crises. In 2009, eight of the world's ten deadliest disasters occurred in EAS member countries; in 2010, five of the ten most serious natural disasters were in these countries.[9] At the time of the summit, Thailand itself was undergoing its most severe flooding since the early 1970s.

A significant step toward developing this regional capacity is the recent discussion between the United States and Thailand on the development of the Utapao base in Thailand's upper south as a permanent regional disaster-response center.[10] Both countries used Utapao as a base for relief following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in 2008, and the 2011 floods in Thailand. While such a center would probably not cover the entire Asia-Pacific region, Thailand's geographic position would make Utapao a significant staging ground for relief operations in much of Southeast Asia. Moreover, the Utapao center could serve as a model for the development of similar centers at other points in the broader Asia-Pacific region.

However, developing a framework for regional humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR) is a long-term, multifaceted undertaking. It requires training, legal and procedural codes to facilitate rapid deployment of forces, the ready availability of equipment and supplies, information-sharing, and the organizational ability to coordinate multiple governments and private groups. The increasing number of proposals for humanitarian hubs risks overlap and even competition in this policy area. The United States and Thailand should take care to coordinate development of Utapao as an HADR center with other regional efforts.

Bangkok and Washington should consider additional ways in which Cobra Gold can be used to strengthen multilateral security cooperation and confidence-building in the region. As noted above, the annual Cobra Gold exercises have become a flagship activity for the U.S.-Thailand alliance and increasingly a channel to encourage multilateral security cooperation. The military exercise has adapted to reflect new regional political dynamics (by the incorporation of such observers as China and Vietnam) and new security concerns (such as humanitarian assistance). How Cobra Gold will fit into future regional security cooperation is not yet clear, but it is likely to remain the

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[9] White House Office of the Press Secretary, "Fact Sheet: East Asia Summit," November 19, 2011, http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/texttrans/2011/11/20111119151041su0.2769434.html#axzz1tlnbOA5q.

[10] "U-Tapao Earmarked as Disaster Centre," *Bangkok Post*, April 14, 2012, http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/transport/288775/u-tapao-earmarked-as-disaster-centre.

preeminent multilateral exercise in the near term. When political conditions permit, the United States and Thailand should consider extending invitations to a new tier of participants (or observers) that have been previously excluded. For example, observer status for Burma might be appropriate for the 2013 exercises if the country's reform movement continues. China is an unlikely candidate for full membership in Cobra Gold in the near future—not least because of Beijing's perception that the exercises are intended to rattle China on its own doorstep—but Vietnam may be receptive to full participation.

The United States and Thailand should work together to identify mechanisms that can expand and liberalize bilateral, and regional, trade. Although the U.S.-Thailand alliance has focused primarily on military-to-military cooperation since the end of the Vietnam War, it is important to strengthen other aspects of the relationship if the alliance is to flourish. A key policy area is bilateral and regional trade liberalization. Since the 1980s, trade issues have often been a major source of bilateral friction, with some major downturns, such as the suspension of negotiations on a U.S.-Thailand free trade agreement (FTA) in 2006. There is evidence that Washington and Bangkok are still not in sync on this issue. Some Thai analysts have advocated a resumption of negotiations on a bilateral free trade agreement. However, there appears to be little support for this option in the U.S. government at present, not because political will for trade liberalization with Thailand is lacking but because bilateral FTAs in the region are discouraged in favor of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

To date, Bangkok has not expressed an intention to accede to the TPP, although government officials have indicated that they are considering this option. Pressure from the United States on Thailand to join the trade group is likely to increase if the Philippines does so. As U.S.-Philippine cooperation has intensified over maritime security issues, Manila has expressed a stronger interest in entering the TPP.

An intermediary issue is that of a U.S.-ASEAN FTA, or a significant expansion of the U.S.-ASEAN Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA). The United States is the only major external partner of ASEAN that does not engage in discussions in principle on a regional FTA, if not actually in negotiations. The prospect of such an agreement has been a political impossibility until recently because of strong opposition in the United States to engagement with Burma. However, with warming U.S.-Burma relations, this obstacle has been lowered, although by no means eliminated. There is little evidence to suggest that Washington would seriously consider a U.S.-ASEAN FTA at this point. However, if the TPP proves to be too ambitious an undertaking for some ASEAN states—only half at present have entered or are formal candidates for entry—the United States may eventually drop its opposition to discussing a regional FTA with ASEAN. There is little evidence to support this scenario at the present time; however, were the U.S. position to change, Thailand could play a pivotal role in negotiations.

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