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Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations

Overview

Thailand is a long-time military ally and economic partner of the United States. Despite these enduring ties, more than a decade of political turmoil in Thailand, including two military coups, in 2006 and 2014, has complicated U.S.-Thai relations and erased Thailand's image as a model democracy in Southeast Asia. In October 2016, Thailand's political landscape was further rattled when Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn became the country's new sovereign. He succeeded his widely revered father, King Bhumiphol Adulyadej, who was, when he died, the world's longest reigning monarch and considered a stabilizing force.

Thailand has been run by a military government since the 2014 coup, and its leaders, under Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, have rewritten Thailand's constitution in ways that protect the military's political influence in the future. Many observers have criticized the regime's human rights record, including its harassment of government critics and restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly. After more than four years of military rule, the government has called for nationwide elections on February 24, 2019, and lifted some of the harshest restrictions on assembly for the campaign, but many believe the political changes of recent years will limit the nation's return to democracy.

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

As one of the region's more developed nations, Thailand has the potential to support U.S. initiatives in the region, such as broadening regional defense cooperation. However, Bangkok's domestic problems and the resulting damage to U.S.-Thai relations have diminished opportunities for new bilateral coordination. An October 2017 visit by Prayuth to Washington, DC, which included a meeting with President Trump, produced little concrete result, although it indicated that the Trump Administration hopes to maintain steady relations with the military regime.

Thailand's Political Crisis

Thailand's political turmoil has involved a broad clash between the nation's political establishment (a mix of the military, royalists, senior bureaucrats, and many urban and middle class citizens) and backers of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was deposed in the 2006 coup and who resides overseas. Thaksin was popular, particularly with the rural poor, because of his populist policies—some of which have been adopted by the military regime. Yet,

Thaksin was, and still is, a divisive figure, and his critics accuse him of corruption and human rights abuses. Since 2001, Thaksin and his supporters have won all six national elections, but their leaders have repeatedly been removed from office, either by military coup or court order. (The 2014 coup deposed an acting prime minister after Thaksin's sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, was ousted from the premiership by a Constitutional Court decision that many observers saw as politically motivated.) During this period of instability, Thailand has seen numerous large-scale demonstrations, and some have turned violent. In 2010, clashes over several weeks killed 80 civilians in Bangkok.

Thailand

Capital: Bangkok

Size: Slightly more than twice the size of Wyoming

Population: 68.4 million (July 2017 est.)

Infant Mortality: 9.2 deaths/1,000 live births

Fertility Rate: 1.5 children born/woman (U.S. = 1.87)

GDP (official exchange rate): \$437.8 billion (2016 est.)

GDP per capita (PPP): \$17,800 (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World Factbook, 2017

The 2014 coup was Thailand's 12th successful coup since 1932. It installed then-Army Commander Prayuth as prime minister and head of the military junta known as the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO). Although Prayuth declared an end to martial law in April 2015, the junta has retained authoritarian powers, including under a new Constitution approved by Thai voters in 2016 that was later signed into law, with a few revisions, by the new King. The new Constitution limits the power of political parties. It also gives the military the ability to indirectly appoint members to an upper house that will, along with an elected lower house, select the country's prime ministers. International observers will likely scrutinize the upcoming polls for any irregularities or suppression. Over the past two decades, Thailand has held mostly free and fair elections, although corruption and vote-buying have been prevalent.

After the 2014 coup, the United States immediately suspended military aid to Thailand, including \$3.5 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and \$85,000 in International Military Education and Training (IMET) funds. However, the United States has not suspended non-military aid, and humanitarian assistance to the country largely has continued. In February 2018, USAID committed \$10 million to curtail human trafficking in Thailand. The annual Cobra Gold military exercise also has gone ahead. In the years immediately after the coup, fewer U.S. troops participated in the exercise than in previous years, but the scale of U.S. participation grew in 2018, and in another sign

of warming relations, Defense Secretary James Mattis met with Prawit Wongsuwan, Thailand's Defense Minister, twice in 2018, in April and October.

Royal Succession

The monarchy is one of Thailand's most powerful political institutions. It has few formal authorities, but during King Bhumiphol Adulyadej's reign, the institution enjoyed popular support and, in turn, political influence. In October 2016, King Bhumiphol passed away, ending a 70-year reign that had made him the world's longest serving monarch. After his accession to the throne, Bhumiphol's son Maha Vajiralongkorn, officially known as King Rama X, has been more actively politically, opposing some parts of the 2016 Constitution, particularly the requirement that he appoint a regent if traveling overseas, and taking control of the bureau managing the throne's fortune in July 2017.

King Bhumiphol rarely interfered in politics in his later years, but had generally been seen as a moderating force who sought to foster stability among the country's different political actors. The new king is much less popular than his father, and his political inclinations less certain. If the palace becomes a weaker institution, many political observers believe that competition between other powers, including the military, elected leaders, and the bureaucracy, may lead to further political instability. The military, in particular, has played a major role in supporting royal legitimacy, and it may continue to do so. Since the 2014 coup, as the military government has sought to limit political criticism, it has enforced Thailand's lese-majeste laws, which forbid insults to the monarch, more broadly.

U.S.-Thailand Security Relations

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

Before the most recent coup, U.S. military leaders touted the alliance as apolitical and praised the Thai armed forces for exhibiting restraint amidst the competing protests and political turmoil. However, the coup put the Thai army at the center of politics, in spite of years of U.S. training about the importance of civilian control of the military. After the United States suspended military assistance and cancelled some exercises, several analysts noted that U.S.-Thai security ties could weaken, and that Sino-Thai ties could expand. In June 2017, the Thai government announced it would buy 34 Chinese armored personnel carriers, perhaps in an attempt to reduce its reliance on U.S.-made weapons.

U.S.-Thai Trade and Economic Relations

Thailand is an upper middle-income country, and trade and foreign investment play a large role in its economy. In 2018, Thailand's GDP is estimated to grow at 3.6%, continuing a period of comparatively slow growth. The United States is Thailand's third largest trading partner, behind Japan and China. In 2017, Thailand was the United States' 21st largest goods trading partner; its 26th largest goods export market; and a source of \$42 billion in total two-way goods trade. In 2017, the United States ran a \$20 billion trade deficit with Thailand, ranking Thailand as the country with the 11th largest bilateral surplus with the United States. In 2017, USTR placed Thailand on its Priority Watch List because of the country's poor intellectual property rights protection and enforcement.

Thailand's Regional Relations

Thailand's importance for U.S. interests in Southeast Asia stems from its large economy, its good relations with its neighbors, and, until the coups, its relatively long-standing democratic rule. However, because of Thailand's ongoing political turmoil, the government has been preoccupied with domestic politics and has not played a leadership role in regional initiatives, especially those relating to human trafficking and mediating maritime disputes. Historically, Sino-Thai ties have been close. Unlike several of its Southeast Asian neighbors, Thailand has no formal territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea. Thai imports from China have boomed under the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement, which came into effect in 2010.

Human Rights and Democracy Concerns

International groups, some Members of Congress, and U.S. officials have criticized Thailand's alleged human rights abuses, including arbitrary arrests and the lack of protections for trafficking victims, laborers, and refugees. International groups have also identified human rights violations in the Muslim-majority southern provinces where there is an ongoing insurgency that has killed over 7,000 people since 2004. In its 2018 Trafficking in Persons report, the State Department ranked Thailand as a Tier 2 country, an improvement over recent years. Thailand has argued that human smuggling, not trafficking, is the main cross-border issue. Although there is a distinction (smuggling involves illegal, but voluntary, cross-border movements), undocumented migrants are often vulnerable to exploitation by smugglers—which may be tantamount to trafficking.

Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol and does not have a formal national asylum framework. In 2016, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported that Thailand hosted 599,459 refugees, asylum-seekers, and stateless people, among others.

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