



**US-Thailand relations steadily losing warmth?** by Naila Maier-Knapp

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US-Thai relations have been frosty since the May 22, 2014 ousting of the Yingluck Shinawatra government and that chill deepened after the January visit of Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel.

Since the installment of the military-led government in 2014, Western democracies have repeatedly cautioned Thailand about its putative abandonment of democracy. The new Thai government responded by emphasizing its sovereignty and the need for all countries to respect its domestic peace and reconciliation process. At the same time, the government has been actively seeking out stronger relations with external partners that support its position. Assurances that military rule is temporary and the return of democracy is imminent have not appeased the country's most important and long-standing international partners. US diplomatic pressure has been considerable and, in fact, took on new significance with Russel's January visit to Thailand.

At Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Russel expressed public concern about Thailand's human rights situation. While this speech covered considerable ground, his reference to judicial fairness when Thailand was in the midst of legal procedures against former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and other politicians hit a nerve. Although the message was in line with the usual international agenda and domestic expectations of the US, the timing of the visit and speech were unfortunate, and the audience and Thai media highlighted these specific remarks. Overall, during his visit, Russel attempted to avoid taking sides and, for instance, spoke to both former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and her predecessor from the Democrat Party. In addition to Russel's visit, the revelation at the end of January that US embassy personnel have sought fact-finding trips to red shirt leaders in the Northeast of the country looked to Thai officials like US meddling in domestic politics.

Given Thailand's deep political and social divisions, US interference – whether over-emphasized through social media or not – will always be politicized. This time, US actions have been criticized as counterproductive to government efforts to defuse color/political groupings and contributing to political factionalism in the name of democracy. Furthermore, US actions – whether one sees them as tactical or tactless – have been stimulating a standoff between insiders and outsiders and

shifting the political focus. That is, in addition to triggering protests on the official level, US policy toward Thailand since May 2014 and the Russel affair are, to some extent, distracting from domestic woes and feeding anti-Americanism among Thais who oppose the red shirts and the Thaksin clan. The US should be especially troubled by the popular and official gravitation toward China, an orientation that was observable during the diplomatic run-up to *Cobra Gold*.

Originally a US-Thai joint exercise in 1982, *Cobra Gold* has become an important multilateral exercise for the US with Southeast Asia. The 34<sup>th</sup> *Cobra Gold*, which included military forces from Thailand, the United States and 22 other countries, concluded last week after nine days of training that focused on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

Following the ousting of the Yingluck Shinawatra government in 2014, the US suspended several programs with Thailand, including military exchanges and exercises. Thailand's military government was particularly concerned that the US would cancel or request the relocation of *Cobra Gold* outside Thailand. In early communications between the Thai military government and the US, it was evident that the US considered *Cobra Gold* too important strategically to be canceled and that Thailand's orientation toward China would be fuelled if it was scrapped. Thus, the US stalled and avoiding a definite commitment to Thailand's military government in order to avoid any dissonance with US values and principles. In October 2014, the US signaled that it would not cancel *Cobra Gold*, but would only proceed with a scaled-down exercise with a smaller US delegation, focusing on non-lethal activities principally concerned with humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

Against this backdrop, Thailand-China interaction on defense and security matters blossomed and Thailand's push for an active role for China in *Cobra Gold* appeared possible. Cooler US-Thailand relations facilitated China's first active participation in *Cobra Gold*. The announcement of China's inclusion was made minutes after the joint US-Thai press conference on Feb. 1 was cancelled. Although China's involvement is mostly symbolic with only six staff engaged in the *Cobra Gold* civic and administrative desktop exercises, it has elevated China as a strategic partner *vis-à-vis* the US, and boosted defense cooperative dynamics between Thailand and China; China's Defense Minister Chang Wanquan visited Thailand on Feb. 6 to discuss enhanced Thai-Chinese defense cooperation.

The broad brush US view on democracy in Thailand could be playing into the hands of others in the region and is encouraging Thailand's military government to seek greater cooperation with 'understanding' regional partners. Thailand is not Southeast Asia, but the US recognizes its strategic importance and the significance of the *Cobra Gold* exercise to

the region. The US must be more aware of Thai popular and official resentments and attempt to balance contradictory expectations of its diplomatic role on the official level and behind the scenes in order not to undermine US strategic, economic and normative interests in Southeast Asia in the long-run.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.*