



THAI-US RELATIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC ERA

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When US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo stops in Bangkok for a three-day visit at the end of this month, he will find that good old ally Thailand is ready to tango. Relations will no longer be based on reaction and counter-reaction to the cycle of coups. Over the past five years, Thailand has survived Western-led sanctions. Now, with a civilian government in place, the Kingdom's economic and political dynamism will no longer be curtailed by what was perceived as democratic backsliding and increased authoritarianism.

The dynamic of the 201-year-old Thai-US relationship has already shifted from security to economic transactions as preferred by President Donald Trump. Whether Thai-US ties, underpinned by the 1954 Manila Pact, will be further strengthened or stagnate remains to be seen. US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell is currently in Bangkok to assess the latest mood after the May election and lay the groundwork for Pompeo's first trip to Thailand.

As the current ASEAN chair, Thailand also wants to see stronger ASEAN-US relations. Despite the Trump administration's efforts to dismantle the foreign policy's legacy of his predecessor, Barack Obama, Thailand is still hopeful that the US will continue existing policies and programs that have made ASEAN-US ties so unique. The Prayut government is also entertaining the idea that Trump might come to Bangkok in early November for the East Asia Summit.

Some of the groundwork has been worked out including the convening of the Indo-Pacific Business Forum. The Trump administration has not yet named its ambassadors to ASEAN or Thailand. Washington's ties with Thailand and ASEAN will be twin objectives that dominate Pompeo's agenda, which will include his participation in the ASEAN Post Ministerial Meeting and ASEAN Regional Forum.

Secretary Pompeo's trip is highly significant, as it comes at a time when the trade war between the US and China has greatly affected overall development in the ASEAN region. The US-China dispute was seriously discussed when ASEAN leaders met last month in Bangkok. They wanted to know what would be the endgame – most of all, what would be the new US objectives in Southeast Asia.

In the past two years, Washington has sent mixed signals to ASEAN, warning its members not to get too close to China, especially under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Washington's message is clear: Do not trade national sovereignty for economic incentives.

Similarly, the US Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, released on July 1, was succinct in its intention to respond to the BRI and other Chinese initiatives in this region with high-end and open-ended cooperation in much-needed areas, including infrastructure investment. When President Trump first proposed the FOIP in Danang, Vietnam, in November 2017, ASEAN realized that the new US administration was trying to muster the grouping's further support as Washington has targeted Beijing. By that time, the US had already identified China as a revisionist power.

In early 2018, Indonesia urged ASEAN to come up with its own proposal that would place the bloc at the center of the Indo-Pacific strategy. At first, the idea did not fly due to divergent views, with some members arguing that there was no need to respond to the US initiative as long as ASEAN remained strategic partners with the US. However, as the US-China strategic competition intensified, as seen through the increase in protectionist measures from both sides, ASEAN started to foresee the unintended consequences that would befall them.

When Thailand assumed the ASEAN chair this year, Bangkok and Jakarta immediately started working to convince other ASEAN members to concur with the necessity for the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). As Thailand was still struggling with its scheduled election in May, some Western commentators quickly belittled the Thai chair, calling it a hyphen between Singapore (the previous chair) and Vietnam (the next chair). Nobody expected that Thailand would successfully conclude the AOIP, especially when reports surfaced ahead of the summit of a disagreement between Singapore and Cambodia.

Thailand must impress on Secretary Pompeo that the AOIP is not aimed at the US or at subsuming the FOIP. Each Indo-Pacific vision is unique and has its own complementarities. ASEAN welcomed the FOIP, as it demonstrated a stronger US commitment to regional stability and prosperity. The US has been the main security guarantor of the region for the past 65 years and will remain so. With a clear cooperative framework and undying principles, the AOIP will be able to interface with the FOIP and other visions, such as those of Japan, India and Australia.

Strictly speaking, for the Thai-US alliance, the FOIP will allow Thailand to strengthen overall cooperation with the US. The 37-year-old *Cobra Gold* military exercises between Thailand and the US, the largest in the Pacific, have succeeded in bringing together troops from, at last count, 29 countries to increase their interoperability. This has benefited greatly US maneuverability and power projection in the region. Both the FOIP and AOIP provide challenges and opportunities for future joint cooperation in new areas, especially in managing maritime resources as well as disaster and humanitarian assistance.

In the FOIP report, the 285-word section on Thailand praised the intrinsic values of the Thai-US alliance. For once, Washington has also been very forthcoming in responding positively to Thai armed forces' modernization efforts, especially on their intention to update its Brigade Combat Team construct centered on the US *Stryker* vehicle. A senior defense official even said it is a US charm offensive for Thailand. The Thai armed forces ordered 60 refurbished US Army M1126 *Stryker* Infantry Carrier Vehicles (ICV) under a 2.96 billion baht package that includes 23 vehicles

free of charge. The first batch is expected to be delivered in September. The US Congress has yet to give the green light. Once delivered, Thailand will become the first country outside the US to operate this vehicle.

The current solid Thai-US defense ties were partly the outcome of Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Gen. Prawit Wongsuwon's visit to the US last April, following the oft-cited criticisms of his pro-China stance in the media. During his trip, he managed to intensify defense cooperation with the US, including undisclosed purchases of weapons and communications systems, logistic support, spare parts, training to support localized maintenance and repair, and the basing facilities. In a nutshell, the Thai-US alliance, long-neglected, is now up and running.

Another pivotal issue of US concern will be its role in the development of the Mekong subregion. Given the current geopolitical and geoeconomic shift, the mighty Mekong River with its six riparian countries in the heart of Southeast Asia has already become a battlefield for major powers near and far. In comparison with extensive programs and activities initiated by China, Japan, and South Korea, the US role is still found wanting. The Lower Mekong Initiative, launched with much fanfare under the Obama administration a decade ago, will need more than a verbal commitment from the Trump administration to make any difference.

Thailand has an unequivocal opportunity to revitalize the Thai-US alliance and at the same time build bridges with all the major players through ASEAN-led mechanisms as well as its own. The new Cabinet under Gen. Prayut shows Thailand's traditional role of providing a balance to the great powers to prevent any of them from being a hegemon for the sustainable security in the region.

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