

At the Crossroads: Thai-American Relations during the Time of Covid-19

Apisake Monthienvichienchai^{1*}

(Received: January 22, 2022; Revised: March 1, 2022; Accepted: March 7, 2022)

Abstract

This academic article aims to examine and analyze current trends in Thai-U.S. relations in the context of its historical development and recommend general approaches to improve bilateral relations in the political, security, as well as the economic and social dimensions. These suggestions take into account China's regional role and the impact of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. In the political realm, the article suggests that the U.S. focus on economic cooperation rather than entanglements in internal politics. To enhance security cooperation, it suggests an emphasis on cultivating a new network of sympathetic officers, similar to those seen during the Cold War. Finally, in the economic and social dimensions, it suggests the emulation of China's approach to outreach and to synergize American expertise with the requirements of Thailand's 20-Year National Strategy.

Keywords: Thai-American Relations, China, 20-Year National Strategy, Covid-19

บทคัดย่อ

บทความวิชาการนี้มีจุดประสงค์ในการศึกษาและวิเคราะห์แนวโน้มความสัมพันธ์ไทย-สหรัฐฯ ปัจจุบันในบริบทของพัฒนาการด้านประวัติศาสตร์และเสนอแนวทางในการยกระดับความสัมพันธ์ทวิภาคีในมิติการเมือง ความมั่นคง อีกทั้งเศรษฐกิจและสังคม โดยคำนึงถึงบทบาทในภูมิภาคของจีนและผลกระทบจากการแพร่ระบาดของโควิด-19 ในปัจจุบันด้วย ในส่วนของการเมือง บทความเสนอว่า สหรัฐฯ ควรเน้นการเสริมสร้างความร่วมมือทางเศรษฐกิจมากกว่าการเข้าเกี่ยวในการเมืองภายในของไทย ส่วนมาตรการในมิติของความมั่นคง ควรเน้นการสร้างเครือข่ายเจ้าหน้าที่ซึ่งมีความเข้าใจสหรัฐฯ ดังที่เคยมีในช่วงสงครามเย็น สุดท้ายในมิติเศรษฐกิจและสังคม สหรัฐฯ ควรเลียนแบบวิธีการของจีนในการเข้าถึงประชาชนและพิจารณาวิธีสร้างความสอดคล้องระหว่างความชำนาญของสหรัฐฯ กับเป้าหมายของยุทธศาสตร์ชาติ 20 ปีของไทย

คำสำคัญ: ความสัมพันธ์ไทย-สหรัฐฯ จีน ยุทธศาสตร์ชาติ 20 ปี โควิด-19

¹ Department of History, Academic Division, Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy, Tambon Phromanee, Mueang District, Nakhonnayok, 26001 Thailand.

* Corresponding Author Email: apisake.mo@crma.ac.th

Introduction

Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States of America.

To His Majesty Somdetch Phra Paramendr Maha Mongkut,

King of Siam,

Great and Good Friend,

Preamble of President Lincoln's letter to King Mongkut (Rama IV) of Siam,
February 3, 1862 (Merrion & Smith, 2018, p. 223)

The United States of America's official relationship with the Kingdom of Thailand is its oldest with any nation in the Far East, commencing with the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Commerce in 1833 during the reign of King Nangklao (Rama III) of the Kingdom of Siam and the presidency of Martin Van Buren (Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2021). Throughout this centuries-old relationship, the dynamics between the two countries have ebbed and flowed. A notable incident that reflected the dynamics during this period was King Mongkut's (Rama IV) offer of elephants to President James Buchanan, the 15th President of the United States, to aid the Union's war effort during the American Civil War. Although the offer was graciously declined by President Abraham Lincoln, who was the 16th President of the United States and Buchanan's successor, Lincoln forever inscribed the monarch as his "Great and Good Friend" in the history of bilateral relations. In the absence of colonial designs and conflicting interests, relations continued on a friendly course, culminating in Siam's entry into the First World War on the side of the Entente, following the U.S. commitment to the conflict. Subsequently, the U.S., through its legal advisors, led the successful effort to revise the unequal treaties that Siam had been subjected to during the colonial period. For example, the U.S. was the first western nation to abandon extraterritoriality rights for its citizens in December 1920 that had been the standard provision since the signing of the Bowring Treaty with the British in 1855. With the Americans setting this precedent, the Europeans eventually had to follow, albeit with much hard negotiations, some of which were facilitated by American advisors. One of these included Francis B. Sayre, a son-in-law of Woodrow Wilson, the 28th President of the United States (Norland et al., 1997, pp. 64-66).

These bonds frayed as Siam underwent constitutional changes in the 1930s, including the national name-change to Thailand, and forged an alliance with the Japanese Empire that led to a declaration of war against the United States during the Second World War. Nevertheless, this official hostility did not prevent the U.S. from supporting the Seri Thai Movement's clandestine resistance operations and from rendering its post-war support against the vengeful European powers in favor of a "free, independent Thailand, with sovereignty unimpaired, and ruled by a government of its own choosing" (Reynolds, 2004, p. 370). This protective policy, as well as the convergence of both nations' interests to contain the spread of communism, led to the second peak of Thai-U.S. relations. It was during this period that Thai-American

relations seriously influenced Thailand's development, not only in terms of the effects of the massive financial aid that the U.S. Government rendered to the Royal Thai Government (Zawacki, 2017, pp. 35-36), but also through the impact of Thailand's involvement in the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the founding of regional organizations, such as SEATO and ASEAN, the latter of which continues to exert influence on regional politics. The peak of economic aid occurred in 1966, when the U.S. Government rendered USD 60 million in financial support to Thailand (Zawacki, 2017, p. 36).

Yet, as the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and the remaining communist nations scrambled to adapt to the market economy, relations between the two "Great and Good Friends" drifted apart, as the common interests that had bound them together dwindled. From the 1990s onwards, the focus of successive U.S. governments became the Middle East, especially after the tragic events of 9/11. As the U.S. expended its blood and treasure in a futile attempt to remake the Middle East, the rest of Asia was left open for China to reassert itself especially in Southeast Asia. Subsequently, Thailand and other countries in the region have been drawn closer into the Chinese political and economic orbit. This attraction was compounded by the U.S.' failure to treat its close friend and treaty ally as such. The Clinton administration's handling of the 1997 Tom Yum Kung Financial Crisis stood in stark contrast with the comprehensive assistance it rendered to Mexico earlier in 1994. When Mexico experienced the peso crisis that year, the U.S. Government quickly spearheaded an IMF aid package amounting to USD 50 billion, 20 billion of which was made up by direct U.S. contributions. In contrast, when Thailand experienced its own financial crisis in 1997, it received a total aid package amounting to only USD 17.2 billion (International Monetary Fund Staff, 2000; Lustig, 1995, p. 20).

While Thailand was designated as a major non-NATO ally in 2003 (Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, 2021), this was largely a symbolic gesture to reward Thailand for its support of the unpopular war in Iraq, and did not halt the drift. The 2010s reads like a litany of diplomatic failures, characterized by the inability to comprehend the dynamics of the internal Thai political conflict, coupled with a rigid adherence to a shallow democratic dogma where elections were seen to be the panacea to all of Thailand's problems. In the face of this American failure, China moved in to fill the vacuum in force throughout the 2000s and 2010s, agreeing to strategic partnerships, ever closer economic ties, through a free trade agreement in June 2003, new military cooperation projects, and establishing new regional architecture, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative, that rival those founded by the U.S. during the Cold War. Subsequent U.S. efforts to redress the balance, such as the Pivot to Asia, was not only a tacit admission that they had been pivoting elsewhere earlier, but many initiatives, in particular the Trans-Pacific Partnership, were seen as, at best, a failure to make use of regional opportunities (Green, 2016) and, at worst, abject failures.

The advent of the Covid-19 pandemic has also thrown all sides off balance. While Beijing may have won early gains through its expeditious vaccine diplomacy, it had to contend with increased global distrust due to the lack of clarity regarding the disease's origin, as well as the consequences of its crackdown on Hong Kong and saber-rattling against Taiwan. Its current Zero-Covid Strategy has also meant that all but the most essential exchange programs have been shut down, as entry to and exit from China has become virtually impossible. The U.S., with its more liberal entry-exit policy, has the potential to exploit this gap. However, its internal political problems, the loss of international prestige due to the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, and distractions elsewhere, particularly in the Russia-Ukraine dispute has cast severe doubt as to whether the U.S. has the vision and the capability to exploit the diplomatic opportunities opened by the pandemic.

Objectives

This academic article aims to examine and analyze Thai-U.S. relations in the context of these historical developments and recommend general approaches to improve relations in the political, security, as well as the economic and social dimensions. These suggestions do not occur in a vacuum and cannot be discussed without reference to the policies and impact of China's return as a regional power and the impact of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Implementing these suggestions may not necessarily lead to a third peak in Thai-U.S. relations, but may perhaps work to redress the increasing imbalance in Sino-Thai-U.S. relations, which would be in the long-term interest of both Thailand and the U.S.

Political Considerations

While we value our long friendship with the Thai people, this act will have negative implications for the U.S.-Thai relationship, especially for our relationship with the Thai military.

Statement on 2014 Coup in Thailand by John Kerry, Secretary of State
(Department of State, 2014)

The major roadblock to the progress of Thai-U.S. relations for more than a decade has been internal Thai politics and misperceptions of the U.S. role in this domestic conflict. Since 2006, Thailand has been stuck in a vicious cycle of elections, government corruption, mass street protests, and coup d'états. Throughout this process, U.S. government policies, through its embassy, have met with varying degrees of success but, more often than not, with failure. Notable incidents that have inflamed hostility include the embarrassing leak of private high-level conversations in the 2010 Cablegate scandal, official visits to Red Shirt Villages (Front Page News Team, 2015), Ambassador Davies's intervention with regard to the lèse-majesté law (Agence France-Presse, 2015), and the complete lack of a resident ambassador for a considerable period of President Trump's term. In the 1 year and 5 months between September 29, 2018,

when Ambassador Davies vacated his post, and the appointment of his successor, Ambassador DeSombre on March 2, 2020, the U.S. officially did not have a resident ambassador in Thailand. This pattern is not unique to the Trump administration, however. Since the departure of Ambassador DeSombre on 20 January 2021, and as of February 2022, the Biden administration has yet to nominate an ambassador to Thailand. These incidents stand in stark contrast with the Chinese approach that has been much more circumspect: side-stepping unnecessary entanglements in Thai internal politics, and exploiting the vacuum left in the wake of U.S. disengagement to further their concrete interests.

Many of these unfortunate incidents could have been avoided, had the American ambassadors been experts on Thailand or, in lieu of their expertise, supported by a staff with a good grasp of current dynamics. The last of this generation was Ambassador Boyce (2004-2007), who had more than a decade of political experience in Thailand and fluency in the Thai language and culture (Kanchanalak, 2015). Yet, the efficacy of Ambassador Boyce's tenure was limited by his lack of influence in Washington in the face of the capital's disinterest in Thai affairs. The reduction of the terms of State Department personnel from 4 or 5-year terms to 2 years have further eroded American capabilities (Zawacki, 2017, p. 202). Two years is hardly enough to build meaningful contacts, which are especially important in a society that operates, for better or worse, on the basis of social networks and personal relationships. Here, the Chinese also have an advantage as Chinese society also is heavily dependent on the similar concept of "Guanxi" (关系) or "Relationships" (Ann, 2013), an understanding that can easily be adapted for use in the Thai context.

It is expected that the American capability to conduct effective diplomacy in Thailand and elsewhere will continue to deteriorate as the State Department is systematically hollowed out (Corrigan, 2018). This deficiency may not matter so much in other times, but given the fierce competition for influence that Washington faces from Beijing, it may prove to be calamitous – for both Thai and American long-term interests. In contrast to American indifference, Beijing appears to have made its relations with Thailand a priority, routinely dispatching personnel with extensive training and experience in the Thai language, culture, and affairs who can fluently and, oftentimes unobtrusively, move throughout Thai society.

While Beijing appears to be interested in almost all facets of the kingdom, aspects to which it remains indifferent are the areas of democracy and human rights. If played right, these are areas where the U.S. can exercise considerable advantage. However, in the past, the U.S. has taken an overly ham-fisted and dogmatic approach, demanding elections at the expense of every other issue, when pragmatism may have better served long-term interests. This pragmatic approach is clearly an option, in spite of the U.S. Government's stated policy to support human rights and democracy, as reflected in the U.S.' continuing and close engagement with Saudi Arabia's absolute monarchy (Wald, 2018) and Egypt's military regime under General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, among others, whose democratic and human rights

credentials are far more questionable than that of the recent Thai military regimes. When General el-Sisi seized power from the democratically-elected government in Egypt amidst a mass civil uprising in 2013, John Kerry, the Secretary of State, defended it as a move to restore democracy (British Broadcasting Corporation News, 2013). It can be imagined that many in Bangkok saw this position as a clear instance of double standards (Strangio, 2020, p. 123).

Furthermore, this inflexible approach has been compounded by an unhealthy focus on personalities, be it on the government side or on the opposition, as exemplified by the overt presence of “observers” at the court procedures of opposition figures. This is not to say that foreign diplomats cannot or should not follow political developments in person, but there were arguably better and subtler ways of doing so than getting involved with photo opportunities that can be easily misconstrued, sometimes on purpose, for the benefit of one side or the other (Associated Press, 2019). No doubt other countries, notably China, are also keeping pace with these developments; but they have not done so in such an overt and provocative manner.

The tenure of Ambassador DeSombre has gone some way to correct this approach. DeSombre was conspicuously quiet when it came to Thai politics, but considerably more active when it came to furthering economic cooperation. This approach has kept Thai-U.S. relations on an even keel and seems to suit both sides – the Americans avoid entanglement in internal politics and can further their economic interests, while the Thais are spared political lectures and can build their capacity. What is still lacking, however, are measures to support the strengthening and effectiveness of political institutions, particularly those that act as checks and balances. Arguably, the political crises that have afflicted Thailand for the last two decades could have been prevented by a more robust, efficient, and trustworthy system of checks, which would have kept the problems of civilian politicians within the system rather than allowing it to spill out chaotically onto the streets, thereby providing the standard pretext for a military takeover to “restore order.” The U.S., with its tradition of the separation of powers, is arguably one of the countries with the expertise in these checks and balances, and it was a pity that it was unable to exert some useful influence over the latest iteration of Thailand’s constitution due to the policy of disengagement. Nevertheless, there is still considerable room for the reform of existing mechanisms that will contribute more towards democratization in the long term. If the U.S. is serious in promoting sustainable democracy, it should focus its efforts on facilitating the reform of these institutions and leave the daily political dramas to the Thais.

The Security Dimension

So let us work together for a peaceful, prosperous, and free Indo-Pacific. I am confident that, together, every problem we have spoken about today can be solved and every challenge we face can be overcome.

President Donald Trump, Da Nang, Vietnam, November 10, 2017

(The White House, 2017)

Even in the midst of political turmoil, Thai-U.S. security relations appear to have maintained some dynamism. Major exercises, such as Cobra Gold, continued during the period of military rule, albeit on a reduced scale, while, at present, other exercises, such as Lightning Forge are proceeding apace, in spite of the pandemic. The Royal Thai Armed Forces are also sticking with the longstanding trend of being heavily inspired by American doctrine and armaments, as reflected in its acquisition of Stryker vehicles (Olson, 2019), which will be supported by a new brigade structure. At the same time, the Chinese are also making headway in this area with joint blue water and special forces exercises, increases in exchange programs for military personnel, as well as the procurement of military equipment. The issue for the U.S. in this area, therefore, is not so much how to revitalize relations, but how to maintain its leading influence.

A key area in the interest of both sides is the professionalization of the military. This means encouraging a non-political mindset among the existing and new generations of officers and also increasing the capabilities and effectiveness of the armed forces through training assistance and the acquisition of modern equipment. A professional armed force would be far less willing to commit a coup d'état and be more capable of maintaining public trust through their proven capabilities. If these capabilities can also be demonstrated on visible missions, such as international peacekeeping or humanitarian assistance, the procurement of appropriate modern equipment could also be more easily justified to the public. Procurement of modern equipment would also contribute to addressing imbalances in Thai-U.S. trade relations and support interoperability. Thus, success in this area has the potential to synergize with efforts in the political, economic, and social dimensions that should ensure that Thailand can contribute to the relevant aspects of the U.S.' Indo-Pacific Strategy.

In this regard, an area in which the U.S. can expand its influence is the training of mid-level officers. It is undeniable that the past and present good relations between the U.S. and Royal Thai Armed Forces have been greatly facilitated by the common experiences of officers who trained and served together during the Cold War. The oldest of this generation are fading out, while the youngest is on the verge of retirement. Their tragedy is that in the face of U.S. disengagement from the region, there is no new generation to continue the legacy that they have built. Although there are a significant number of Thai civilian graduates from the U.S., the majority do not choose the armed forces as a career. For overseas graduates that do, their profiles tend to be more multinational than previously, having graduated from both European and Far Eastern institutions. Many of them are also developing the capability of moving in western and eastern societies with equal alacrity. A civilian example is Joe Horn-Phathanothai, a half-British, half-Thai Oxbridge graduate and businessman with close ties to Britain, as reflected in his receipt of the Order of the British Empire in 2018, and to the Chinese leadership through his mother, Sirin Phathanothai, who lived for a time in China as a ward of Premier Zhou Enlai (Phathanothai, 1994). Sirin herself is the daughter of Sang Phathanothai,

an important figure in both of Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram's governments (Wilde, 2019). Thus, aligning with the U.S. is no longer the default option.

In the absence of a far-reaching joint campaign along the lines of those seen during the Cold War, the situation as it stands indicate a continuing drift in relations. This drift can be mitigated to an extent through an expansion of exchange programs, particularly for mid-level Thai military officers to go to the U.S. These programs can be military or civilian in nature, but their aim should be to cultivate not only deeper professional knowledge, but also the sort of personal relations and goodwill that can facilitate understanding and cooperation as these officers progress in their careers. Throughout this progress, the U.S. could also learn from the Australian approach in maintaining contact with their military alumni through groups, as well as regular social events. Not only does this allow the embassy to maintain links and disseminate information and news, but it also promotes networking among different generations of Thai alumni, who can then use these connections to support projects of mutual interest and benefit. The Chinese also ran vigorous exchange programs, but the closure of the country due to the pandemic offers the U.S. an unprecedented chance to catch up to, if not surpass these efforts.

Economic and Social Ties

My background has been helping American and Western companies expand and invest in Asia for the last 20 years. I plan on continuing to help American and Western companies expand into Thailand as United States' Ambassador to Thailand.

H.E. Michael DeSombre, U.S. Ambassador to Thailand (Raksaseri, 2020)

Unlike the bilateral security relations, there is no denying that the U.S. is falling behind its competitors in the areas of economic and social relations. According to the World Bank's 2019 data, China has become the top origin of imported goods, and is second only to the United States as the top destination for Thai exports (World Bank, 2022). Previously, this position had been occupied by the United States or Japan. Simultaneously, Chinese cultural influence is also making some significant headway with the opening of Confucius Institutes across the country and the increasing popularity of Chinese cultural offerings. As of 2020, there are currently 16 Confucius Institutes and 11 Confucius Classrooms in Thailand (Chongkittavorn, 2020), compared to 4 American Corners (United States Embassy and Consulates in Thailand, 2022). Some of this popularity can be attributed to the longstanding presence of a significant Sino-Thai community, but arguably it is a consequence of the meteoric rise of China, its increasing regional influence, and the new economic opportunities it represents. In these areas, the U.S. is at an obvious geographical disadvantage, but it still holds some significant advantages that it can leverage to maintain its economic and cultural influence.

The first advantage that can be leveraged is the U.S.' creative and innovative industries, particularly in the digital sector. Even prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Royal Thai Government had identified the digital economy as a priority area for development under its 20-Year National Strategy (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, n.d.) and it is likely that this sector will continue to grow in importance as the government implements the strategy. In the wake of the pandemic, it is also likely that many companies and institutions will aim to expand their digital platform operations. Therefore, any nation that can involve themselves in the infrastructure and systems of this emerging digital economy will have significant national influence in the future. The Chinese have clearly envisioned this development and are notably investing in 5th generation mobile networks. Like elsewhere, Huawei is receiving active encouragement to engage in this area (Post Reporters, 2019). To compete, the U.S. will need to project the future, identify its niches in this projection, and provide competitive options in terms of pricing, quality, and innovation in these areas. The digital economy is only one of many sectors that has been designated as priority; other areas that the U.S. can engage in, given its expertise, include standards, logistics, research and development, and energy. Examining and identifying synergies between U.S. expertise and Thai priorities should be a viable way to maintain and expand partnerships in a concrete manner for both sides' mutual benefit. Once identified, these synergies should make use of new cooperative frameworks, such as the Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development or the BUILD Act under the Indo-Pacific Strategy (Department of Defense, 2019).

Secondly, despite the growing popularity of Mandarin, English will remain as the most important international language, as it will continue to be the second or third language of the majority of the global population, including in China. There is an obvious opportunity to exploit here, but the U.S. have failed to do so in Thailand and elsewhere. This failure can be attributed in part to the fact that most U.S. embassies have retreated behind walls akin to fortresses since 9/11, curtailing much of their outreach abilities. This is not to say that the Chinese competitors have open embassies; far from it. However, the Chinese are still able to extend their outreach through the Confucius Institutes, which effectively act as the embassy's accessible and active cultural arms across the country. There have been allegations that Confucius Institutes are more than the Chinese government's cultural arm, but may also be involved in espionage activities. (Golden, 2017). If this is the case, then their ability to increase unofficial outreach undoubtedly facilitates these activities. In the past, the U.S. equivalent had been the American Corners and American Studies departments and clubs – these have since atrophied and are far too few in number to compete effectively with their expanding Chinese counterparts. The approach then, is to revive and expand the activities of these organizations so as to build awareness of the American Story and what modern America has to offer. A potent boost to the revitalization would be to invite the symbolic involvement of an appropriate member of the Royal Family in the project, which will also serve to reinforce ties.

In doing so, the U.S. should eschew the approach taken by the European embassies in Thailand, where outreach is restricted to central organizations, such as the British Council, Alliance Française, and the Goethe Institute. While provisions at these institutions are impressive, they have limited reach and capacity, especially beyond the capital area. Therefore, the U.S. should build upon the Chinese approach and have substantive and proactive representative institutions or, at the very least, have concrete collaborative programs with Thailand's higher education institutions. Alongside this revival should be the revitalization and expansion of organizations such as the Peace Corps and exchange programs to build lasting people-to-people friendship among the new generation that will reinforce bilateral ties in the years ahead.

Conclusion

American assistance is to enable the Thai to achieve their objectives through their own efforts. Indeed, there is a precept of the Lord Buddha which says: "Thou are thine own refuge". We are grateful for American aid; but we intend one day to do without it.

His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej to the Joint Meeting of U.S. Congress,
June 29, 1960 (United States Embassy Bangkok, 2016)

In conclusion, with the possible exception of their security ties, Thai-U.S. relations could be said to be at one of its lowest ebbs due mainly to neglect, a lack of understanding of fast-changing conditions on the ground, and the consequent inability to leverage the legacy of a longstanding and special relationship. Further exacerbating the situation is the rise of China as the U.S.' strategic competitor and complications arising from the pandemic. This is not to say that the relationship is beyond salvage. There are plenty of existing organizations and frameworks that can be easily revived and/or expanded, such as the Peace Corps, the Fulbright Scholarship Program, military exercises, and training programs, as well as numerous bilateral projects, such as those with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. To do so does not require that many additional resources, but a more consistent focus on long-term goals, guided by experts on the ground with extensive experience and contacts, as well as active support from Washington to do so. Thus, Thai-American relations are truly at a crossroads, where the U.S. has the choice as to whether to steal the initiative from the Chinese during this time by expending some modest resources, or to continue on its past course and let this opportunity slip away.

Indeed, the regaining of this focus is in the interest of both Thailand and the United States. Throughout its history, Thailand's times of greatest peril have always been when it relied on one partner, be it France in the 1680s, Britain in the 1890s, and Imperial Japan in the 1940s. It is, therefore, in Thailand's interest to maintain a balanced relationship between China and the United States, even as its economic interests draw inexorably ever closer to

the former. However, to be able to do so, it must have the choice in the first place – this is where the U.S. comes in. For the U.S., beyond the continued use of strategic military facilities, notably at U-Tapao, and the assurance that the Chinese will be unable to establish a physical military presence in the kingdom, there may be no immediate or urgent security interest to renew its focus on Thailand. Nevertheless, as China grapples with the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic on its image in the short term, as well as the internal problems with Hong Kong, and renewed conflicts over territorial claims with its neighbors, the U.S. has a chance to retake the initiative in Thailand, as well as the region. If it fails to do so, it stands to lose a long-time ally not due to a divergence of interest or mutual hostility, but through sheer negligence. In light of ruptures with other traditional allies in the region who are experiencing similar issues in balancing relations with the U.S. and China, notably the Philippines, the U.S. should take this loss seriously. To paraphrase Oscar Wilde: to lose one ally may be regarded as a misfortune, to lose two looks like carelessness.

In this renewal, the United States should adopt a more subtle and informed approach, with its eyes on long-term results rather than involvement in short-term political dramas. Short of an unforeseen and unlikely incident that results in a catastrophic breakdown in Sino-Thai relations, it will be impossible for Thailand to decouple from China, due to its economic and historic social links. As such, in pursuit of its interests, the U.S. should not think of Sino-Thai-U.S. relations as a zero sum game, but try to find ways to work around it – to “be like water,” as some opponents of Beijing have it. Similar to the pressure to accelerate democratization, insisting on Thailand’s decoupling from China, especially in public, would most likely lead to the opposite happening. The key, therefore, is meaningful engagement in the right focus areas to ensure that while Thailand may not be willing to risk getting involved overtly in a Sino-American conflict on America’s side, neither will it actively aid Chinese efforts from its strategic geopolitical position. The absence of such pressure will not only enable this policy, but it will also ensure the Royal Thai Government’s lack of rancor towards the U.S. and allow new options and avenues for the long-overdue meaningful re-engagement between the “Great and Good Friends” to flourish anew.

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