

Bangkok's Pivot to Beijing. The Erosion of US-Thai Relations in Favor of China

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Despite the common misconception that Thailand is one of Southeast Asia's staunchest US allies – the steady erosion of US-Thai relations has been underway for years. Cold War concessions Thailand made to the US during the Vietnam War have ingrained the myth of Bangkok's unquestioning loyalty to Washington in the minds of many. The past decade and a half of Washington-proxy Thaksin Shinawatra holding power has helped bolster this myth, with Shinawatra assigning Thai troops to the US occupation of Iraq, cooperating with the US in its global CIA rendition program, and the privatization of Thailand's resources on behalf of Wall Street.

However with a 2006 coup ousting Shinawatra from power, and a subsequent 2014 coup which ousted Shinawatra's sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, the shattering of this myth has begun.

No single move by the new Thai government has signified the shift away from Washington more than a recent deal with China to purchase 3 Type 039A diesel electric attack submarines. Currently Thailand lacks submarines in its navy. The purchase would put Thailand on par with other Southeast Asian nations including Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam who already possess submarines.

More significantly, the purchasing of Chinese submarines may signal a shift not only in Bangkok's geopolitical alignment, but the alignment of Asia altogether.

How Important is the Thai-Chinese Submarine Deal?

Submarines would not be the first weapons Thailand has purchased from China. It already has 400 Type-85 armored personal carriers replacing aging US-made M113's. However, submarines would require extensive training and cooperation between China and Thailand to prepare the Royal Thai Navy to employ and maintain the weapon systems. And submarines themselves carry greater significance within any nation's defensive capabilities.

The deal represents geopolitical, geostrategic, and military shifts for both Bangkok and Asia.

(1.) The deal is geopolitical because it realigns Thailand's defense posture to one that is Asian-centric. The deal would move Bangkok further from dependence on foreign powers that don't even reside in Asia – namely the United States.

(2.) The deal is geostrategic because purchasing the submarines from China

will by necessity require closer training and cooperation in the near future with the Chinese navy for the Royal Thai Navy to acquire the skills necessary to employ and maintain the submarines. In the future, this may evolve into joint training exercises and even joint security operations. The result would be integrated defense policies that ensured peace and stability in Asia via Asian, not American initiatives.

(3.) The deal would be of military significance because submarines are still currently one of the most effective forms of deterrence against foreign navies. During the Falklands conflict Britain wasn't afraid of Argentina's surface fleet – instead they were afraid of their air assets and one single, aging WW2-era submarine.

Thailand's submarines would add to a regional balance of power that would ensure the cost of conflict exceeded the cost of regional cooperation. Currently, US policy itself seeks to maintain control over Asia by creating dependency on US military force to maintain a balance of power between the nations of Asia collectively, and specifically against the rising power of China.

US Seeks to Trip Up Bangkok's Pivot

While the US claims to be Thailand's "ally," its behavior has been more like an abusive captor. Defense News in its article, "[Thai Chinese Sub Buy Challenges US Pivot](#)," would claim:

Thailand's move to purchase Chinese submarines has exacerbated tensions with the US and poses a challenge to Washington's "pivot" to the Pacific.

The military junta, which declared a coup in May 2014 and created the National Council for Peace and Order, could turn to China for political and military support and cooperation, analysts said. The junta-led Cabinet approved the purchase of three Type 039A (Yuan) attack submarines in early July.

The International Business Times in their article, "[Thailand-China Submarine Deal Suspended Following Concern Over Jeopardizing Ties With Washington](#)," would report:

The Royal Thai Navy announced Thursday that the government has suspended action on the high-profile one billion dollar submarine deal with China, which was still seeking final approval from the cabinet. The decision to put the deal on hold came after domestic and international experts expressed concern over how the deal with Beijing would affect Bangkok's relations with the U.S.

Officially, Thailand's suspension of the deal was to *"conduct research on the suitability of the deal and weigh the costs and benefits to the country."* The temporary suspension may be in response to a concerted campaign to derail the deal – spearheaded by the US itself, and carried out by US-funded media organizations, both international and within Thailand itself.

The US State Department through its National Endowment for Democracy (NED) [funds annually over 1 million Thai Baht to the Thai propaganda network "Prachatai."](#) Prachatai poses as an "independent" check and balance to government corruption despite its

immense foreign funding, and regularly works to undermine Thailand's traditional institutions, while covering up for or promoting those backed by the US – including the regime of Thaksin Shinawatra and his political supporters.

Prachatai has claimed the Chinese submarine deal is simply a means for the military to pad its pockets. It has also attempted to claim that the deal signifies Thailand's growing ties with China, a trend it clearly portrays as negative. [A recent Prachatai "interview"](#) with "anonymous" Thai naval personnel attempts to frame the US State Department's talking points. Prachatai's narrative parrots that of the US State Department itself, and is repeated by other media outlets in Thailand sympathetic to US-proxy Thaksin Shinawatra.

Violence and Coercion

With [the Augst bombing in Bangkok](#), it is feared that Bangkok's growing ties with Beijing have prompted Washington to escalate its campaign of coercion.

Just days after the bombing, US Embassy [Chargé d'affaires Patrick Murphy](#), a National War College graduate and leader of a US [Provincial Reconstruction Team](#) during the US occupation of Iraq, met with senior Thai officials to first offer "condolences" for the bombing, then press for immediate elections. It is a move perceived by many as the issuing of demands under threat of continued violence. The demand for elections is made on behalf of ousted US-proxy Thaksin Shinawatra who Washington is eager to return to power.

The prospect of elections has been all but indefinitely postponed until Shinawatra and his political networks have been permanently removed – prompting increasingly desperate acts of violence both by Shinawatra's remaining networks in Thailand, and by his foreign sponsors abroad.

Thailand's Choice

It is clear, even by America's own admission, that its grip on Asia is slipping. Policy toward Asia focuses not on partnerships based on mutual benefit, but a myopic obsession over containing China and maintaining American "primacy" over all of Asia – even at the cost of America's alleged "allies."

These "allies," Thailand included, are asked to sacrifice both short-term and long-term peace, stability, and prosperity to invest in Washington's losing proposition. It is no surprise then that many across Asia have begun to carefully divest instead.

As Bangkok pivots toward Beijing, attempts by Washington to disrupt Sino-Thai relations will increase. Bangkok capitulating to Washington now will not result in long-term benefits to Thailand as Washington's grip over Asia will inevitably continue to slip. That Washington has resorted to coercion and engineered conflicts already is a sign of irreversible weakness. However, some may push for capitulation in pursuit of short-term peace and stability. This is also unlikely, as capitulating now to Washington will mean the return of Shinawatra to power – a scenario that is seen as unacceptable by the vast majority across both the Thai public and throughout Thailand's business and political circles.

As it is clear Thailand will suffer short-term instability regardless of its choice, it must thus decide upon a foreign policy that will offer the best prospects in the intermediate and longer-term future. Its pivot toward Beijing is exactly that.

Asia stands at the edge of an era where North America and Europe no longer dictate the region's destiny. By creating a geopolitical order driven by Asian states – maintaining a balance of political and military power throughout the region without foreign interests – namely the United States – the resources both human and natural of this region can be enjoyed by the people that actually reside there.

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