

US Seeks Thai Opposition for Anti-China Alliance at ASEAN Summit

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Why is the US talking “democracy, human rights and justice” with an opposition who lost recent elections, abuses human rights and works daily to undermine and evade justice?

Time was precious at the 35th ASEAN Summit. Leaders from across Southeast Asia converged on Bangkok, Thailand to discuss economics, diplomacy, defence and a whole host of other issues.

With so much to discuss and do, it was particularly surprising to see the US spend much of its time coercing local leaders to take up its flagship regional crisis centred on stirring up trouble in the South China Sea as well as meet with and promote unpopular opposition parties.

One meeting in particular, headed by US Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs (EAP) David Stilwell, was held with members of Thailand’s opposition party, Future Forward.

The EAP [in a social media post](#) would claim:

Assistant Secretary Stilwell appreciated the opportunity to meet with Members of Parliament in [Thailand] to learn more about their efforts to promote democracy, justice, and human rights.

No mention was made of who these Members of Parliament (MPs) were, what party they came from or anything at all about why they were chosen for the meeting from among Thailand’s 500 MPs.

First, Does the US Even Stand for “Democracy, Justice and Human Rights?”

At face value the US would appear to be upholding noble values; democracy, justice and human rights. That is until even the most rudimentary observation skills are employed in considering Washington’s own contempt and abuse of all three of these principles not only domestically, but worldwide.

The US regularly interferes in the democratic processes of nations around the globe, with entire organisations like the US National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and its many subsidiaries dedicated solely to the purpose of manipulating the internal political affairs of targeted nations, including elections.

The notion of the US standing for or upholding “justice” is also dubious at best, with the US the world leader in both its incarceration rate and the total number of people imprisoned in jails. The US, guilty of serial wars of aggression and all abuses generally related to war, has escaped justice both from within its own justice system and from the so-called “international community.”

Of course, both the US’ industrialised prison system and its global wars of aggression bury any notion at all that the US stands for human rights, rather than merely hides behind them.

With even average people around the globe aware of these facts and the hypocrisy the US would bring to any meeting discussing “democracy, justice and human rights,” why would any member of Thailand’s parliament meet in good faith with the US regarding these matters? What business of Washington’s in the first place is “democracy, justice and human rights” in Thailand?

Why did Future Forward eagerly attend this meeting?

US and Future Forward: Birds of a Feather

Future Forward, like the US, merely hides behind principles like democracy, justice and human rights.

The party is also the eager recipient of US backing in order to do so. Several of the party’s founding members [belong to US NED-funded fronts](#) including Prachatai [whose director is literally an NED fellow](#).

When members of the party are summoned by Thai police for their various criminal activities, US embassy staff [often accompany them](#).

In the 2019 general election, the party came in distant third, with it and its political allies losing the popular vote to the military-aligned Palang Pracharath Party. Despite having no mandate, it continues seeking the rewriting of Thailand’s constitution and justifies its disruptive activities under the pretext of representing the Thai people despite being rejected by them at the polls.

[More recent by-elections](#) have suggest the party is even more unpopular now than when it lost the general elections earlier in the year.

The party is led by nepotist billionaire Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, who before entering politics, busted unions at his family’s Thai Summit autoparts factory. The abuses involved even attracted the attention of international rights watchdogs, including Industri-ALL Global Union [who reported in 2007](#) that:

Thai Summit Eastern Seaboard Auto Parts Company, owned and controlled by Thai Summit Group has drawn fire from the International Metalworkers’ Federation, IMF affiliates, and the National Human Rights Commission in Thailand for committing trade union and human rights violations at their Rayong auto parts plant.

Thanathorn and his Future Forward Party are currently partners with Pheu Thai Party (PTP), another opposition party, run by another corrupt billionaire and also fugitive, Thaksin

Shinawatra. PTP would even nominate Thanathorn as their candidate for prime minister following the 2019 general elections.

Thaksin himself has the worst human rights record in Thai history. His 2003 “war on drugs” alone left over 2,500 innocent people dead in just 90 days. The following year, his instigation of tensions in the nation’s troubled deep south led to protests in which over 80 would die in a single day.

His violent targeting of critics and opponents while in power and since being ousted has left over 100 dead and has even resulted in terrorism, armed violence and city-wide arson. Justice has been slow, owed at least in part to opposition parties like Future Forward failing to call for accountability and even at times defending rights abusers either by omitting their crimes, or spinning them.

Not only does Future Forward omit mentioning any of this as it cites “democracy, justice and human rights” in its own daily condemnation of the current Thai government, its US backers do likewise.

Thus, it makes perfect sense to see two abusive circles of power who share a mutual strategy of hiding behind otherwise genuine principles and rights while trampling them in actuality, meeting on the sidelines of the 35th ASEAN Summit. But to what end?

Rolling Back Thai-Chinese Relations

The current Thai government has spent years cementing Thai-Chinese relations. This includes replacing Thailand’s aging inventory of US military hardware with modern Chinese alternatives. Among recent acquisitions are Chinese main battle tanks, armoured personnel carriers, infantry fighting vehicles as well as naval vessels including the Kingdom’s first modern submarine.

Thailand and China are jointly developing a growing number of weapon systems including mobile rocket launcher platforms.

Thailand is also working with China on its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Key BRI components running through Thailand involve high-speed rail connecting together a China-Laos-Thailand-Malaysia-Singapore network. Highways and bridges to improve connectivity between Thailand and its neighbours including Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos also contribute to the BRI’s overarching goal of stitching together the region through transportation infrastructure and the trade it facilitates.

It should come as no surprise then that an opposition party supported by the US has come out against much of these developments.

Thanathorn himself openly and directly opposed Thai-Chinese high-speed rail lines (already under construction) and proposed Thailand work with the West to build lines using still-nonexistent “hyperloop” technology.

Bloomberg in an article titled, “[Thailand needs hyperloop, not China-built high-speed rail: Thanathorn](#),” would report:

A tycoon turned politician who opposes Thailand's military government has criticised its US\$5.6 billion high-speed rail project with China because hyperloop technology offers a more modern alternative.

An option such as Richard Branson's Virgin Hyperloop One — which is working on building networks of pods traveling at airplane-like speeds — is better for Thailand as it would help the nation to be a technological leader, according to Future Forward Party head Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit.

Thanathorn has also come out heavily against Thailand's defence budget in an oblique attempt to stem growing Thai-Chinese military relations.

Far from merely buying tanks, ships and submarines, Thailand's recent purchases and collaborations with China involve growing levels of cooperation to train Thai personnel on the use and maintenance of its expanding inventory of Chinese hardware both on a tactical level and through joint exercises, on a strategic level.

Thailand's defence spending will only increasingly shift from buying US weapon systems to those bought from or developed with nearby China. While Future Forward's motives in undercutting Thailand's national defence would seem unclear, Washington's motives to do so in order to slow down or reverse growing Thai-Chinese military relations is obvious.

With Washington supporting Future Forward, manifesting itself in this most recent meeting, Future Forward's otherwise inexplicable campaign to undermine Thailand's development comes into clearer focus.

It should be noted that David Stilwel, before taking up his current position and [according to his official US State Department biography](#), served as the Director of the China Strategic Focus Group.

[In one document](#) regarding the Group's activities under a section titled, "Alliances," it claims:

Alliances. This homeland area, coupled with our treaty alliances with Australia, Japan, Republic of Korea, Philippines, and Thailand are the cornerstone of U.S. engagement in the region. We will modernize and strengthen these alliances by enhancing our ability to train and operate together, jointly developing high-tech capabilities, expanding information sharing, and exploring new areas of cooperation.

These "alliances," many of which including with Thailand are in irreversible decline, are aimed at what the US claims is its responsibility to ensure China's military and economic rise is "peaceful."

Thus, Stilwel meeting eager collaborators in undermining Thai-Chinese relations fits in perfectly with much of what he has spent his career doing; preserving US primacy over Asia and attempting to shape China's neighbours into a united front to contain and control its rise regionally and globally.

Again, nothing could be less "democratic" or less conducive to notions of self-determination for Thailand, China or Asia as a whole regarding US influence, interference and intents.

The real danger lies not in Washington's isolated support for an increasingly unpopular

political party in Thailand, but in the synergies the US is attempting to create among multiple campaigns of subversion it is sponsoring across the region; [in Hong Kong](#) and [neighbouring Cambodia](#) for example, all of it ultimately aimed at shifting the dynamics of China's rise.

While the US State Department intended to boost the credibility of Future Forward by organising a special meeting with them at the 35th ASEAN Summit, it should instead serve as an ominous warning that among America's few remaining exports, meddling and chaos are still on the offering.

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