

CHAPTER 7

Thailand: Securitizing Domestic Politics

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Introduction

Thailand's second military coup in just eight years—this time on 22 May 2014—bears far-reaching ramifications for the country's armed forces and defense sector. The military is once again triumphant and ascendant in Thai politics. It is as if Thailand's political clock has been turned back to the 1960s-80s when the army dominated political life during a long stretch of military-authoritarian rule, punctuated by a short-lived democratic interval in the mid-1970s. The latest putsch came after six months of street demonstrations against the government of Yingluck Shinawatra, led by erstwhile Democrat Party senior executive, Suthep Thaugsuban. The street protests paralyzed central Bangkok and eventually paved the way for the coup, led by General Prayuth Chan-o-cha, then the army commander-in-chief.

Since the coup, Thai politics has been eerily quiet, partly owing to the indefinite imposition of martial law and tight control on civil liberties and civil society activism. The ruling generals, under the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), immediately abolished the 2007 constitution, initially governing through military decrees before promulgating an interim constitution after two months. After that, it ascended a clutch of governing and legislative organs to rule, including the appointment of Gen. Prayuth as prime minister. This was the kind of hard coup and direct military-authoritarian rule Thailand has not seen in decades. But interestingly, the reactions to the coup both at home and abroad were mixed. Within Thailand, the forces belonging to former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, Yingluck's deposed and self-exiled brother have not taken to the streets as anticipated. In fact, the Thaksin-Yingluck side has been decidedly accommodating and tame towards the coup-makers. International reactions from Western countries were unsurprisingly critical as democratic rule came to an end and human rights and civil liberties were infringed upon. Most Western voices, such as the European Union members and the United States, remain tough on the coup, still calling for an early return to democratic processes. China, however, was receptive of the military regime, and received visits by coup-makers early on. Japan was critical at first and called for the

return of democracy but later tweaked its position for greater engagement for fear of losing out to China. Apart from early noise from the Philippines and Indonesia, the responses of Thailand's ASEAN neighbors have been generally muted, a sort of par for the course in ASEAN's intramural dealings and cardinal rule of not interfering in each other's internal affairs.

The immediate implications of Thailand's coup suggest the country is still on an inward-looking trajectory. The NCPO and the Prayuth government have essentially securitized Thai domestic politics during a grand transition period in the twilight of King Bhumibol Adulyadej's 68-year reign. This means Thailand will continue to be in a holding pattern for some time amidst a once-in-a-lifetime royal succession. During this period, internal security—or one might say the securitization of the royal succession—will trump all other considerations. As a result, Thailand's role in regional security will be hemmed in by existential internal security imperatives. The Thai army will be the guardian of the state, a midwife of the succession at minimum, to maintain what they see as continuity and stability. To examine Thailand's role in Asia Pacific security, this paper discusses the roots, dynamics and prospects of Thailand's coup, teasing out implications for regional security and for Thailand's defense sector.

Thailand's military-authoritarianism in context

A long view is necessary to come to terms with Thailand's long crisis. One portrait is a contentious rise of government overseen by a few, to a pluralistic rule by the many; an era of mass politics in the 21st century that is no longer dictated by traditional power brokers, but is susceptible at the same time to abuse and manipulation by newly vested power holders. It is a story of Thai democracy that dates back a century, perhaps to the 1912 rebellion by young army officers against feudal absolutism. Democratic rule cannot be denied, but it will be resisted as long as a new balance is not found to bridge the old order and new power arrangements. A decade ago, Thaksin was riding high. Earlier, he had squeaked through an assets concealment trial on an 8-to-7 vote after nearly winning a majority in the January 2001 election, the first under Thailand's highly touted 1997 constitution. A consummate politician and former police officer, who hailed from a new capitalist group that exploited a giddy stock market to great wealth with an expansive telecommunications conglomerate,

Thaksin enjoyed extensive networks in business and bureaucracy, including the police and army. In politics, his Thai Rak Thai party became a juggernaut. Its architects came up with a popular policy platform that featured affordable universal healthcare, debt relief and microcredit schemes. It won over most of the upcountry electorate and even the majority of Bangkok at the time. Thai Rak Thai also absorbed smaller parties and virtually monopolizes party politics in view of the weak opposition.

Thaksin penetrated and captured what were designed as independent agencies to promote accountability, particularly the Constitutional Court, the Election Commission and the anti-corruption commission. His confidants and loyalists found their way into steering these agencies. His cousin at one point became the army's commander-in-chief. His police cohorts naturally were fast-tracked to senior positions, including his brother-in-law, who skipped the queue and lined up to be national police chief. And Thaksin's business allies and associated partners secured plum concessions and choice government procurement projects. He was on course to be the first prime minister to complete a four-year term. After his landslide victory in February 2005, Thaksin also became the first prime minister to be re-elected and to preside over a one-party government. His virtual monopoly of Thai politics, and the attendant hubris, inevitably got the better of him. His approach of making a lucrative business out of politics, of cultivating Thailand Incorporated for the Shinawatra Corporation, led to his demise in the September 2006 military coup. Thaksin's rule was democratic on paper but authoritarian in practice.

However, the Thaksin legacy is strong. His subsequent proxy governments from the ballot box, from Samak Sundaravej and Somchai Wongsawat in 2008 to Yingluck in 2011-14 were repeatedly destabilized by anti-Thaksin street protests and never had a chance of lasting a full term. When Yingluck survived past the midway mark and looked poised to complete her term, Thaksin's Pheu Thai party came up with a blanket amnesty bill that upended her government, assisted by the same independent agencies that earlier supported Thaksin but turned against him since the 2006 coup. The putsch on 22 May 2014 was merely the knock-out blow on an ineffectual administration.

Now the pendulum is at the other authoritarian end. Gen. Prayuth has been spearheading an outright authoritarian regime with no democratic pretenses, ruling with absolute power. The tone and texture of the 22 May coup made it a foregone

conclusion that the military would dominate politics. This was an all-in coup, not like the half-baked putsch in 2006. Gen. Prayuth's coup allies under NCPO have taken up key cabinet posts, including ministries of commerce, education, transport, and foreign affairs. The structure of power under the NCPO is clear. After seizing power, the NCPO rolled out an interim constitution after two months and appointed a National Legislative Assembly soon thereafter. The NLA is filled not with business cronies and spouses of politicians like the Thaksin period but with military classmates and siblings. In turn, the NLA chose Gen. Prayuth as prime minister and he selected a cabinet. After that, a National Reform Council came into place, followed by the Constitution-Drafting Committee (CDC). The NCPO is thus the nexus of this interim governing structure, comprising the NLA, the cabinet, the NRC, and the CDC.

Thailand in 'lockdown' mode

As the military dominates politics, Thailand has seen a deceptive calm in the wake of the coup. Near-term prospects are characterized by anxiety and apprehension over what is to come. Indeed, Thailand is in a kind of a 'lockdown' for the foreseeable future, where a resurgent but outmoded political order must come to terms with new power arrangements. The hitherto elusive balance between old powers and new politics, between Thailand circa 1960s-1980s and its offspring in the early 21st century, will continue to underpin and determine political outcomes next year and thereafter. Thailand's relative lockdown has been as astonishing as unsurprising. With a military regime under the NCPO ensconced in power after the putsch and governing the country directly as opposed to delegating to technocrats and policy professionals, it was a matter of time before the ruling generals' mindset, organizational culture and values and preferences would become entrenched.

To be sure, most matters outside political life are still business as usual. Those not engaged in politics will still find Thailand to be hospitable, permissive and forgiving. But the military's role in politics and society will become increasingly salient and controversial. More manifestations of the military's resurgence during the grand transition and the royal succession are likely to dominate 2015, with a build-up of consequences spilling over into a reckoning of sorts in 2016. Several trends and dynamics seem clear.

First, the ticking clock for a return to democratic rule by early 2016 will put pressure on the military regime. It is clear now that the ongoing constitution-drafting process will stem from the 2007 charter template, which was drawn up in the September 2006 coup. Like the current draft that is being debated, the 2007 version was crafted in a top-down fashion and ultimately ended with the same problem of allowing Thaksin's party machine to win the vote. Unless the authorities and the major players during the coup period accept that Thai politics henceforth will have to be more focused on the electorate than about the elite, we will keep going around in circles. Another top-down charter, without public participation and inclusiveness, is likely to spell more political difficulties down the road. Moreover, the return to electoral democracy after a new constitution will depend on what happens to the political arena. The NCPO is unlikely to hold open elections unless it has a say in the post-election outcomes. The probability of a military-aligned party will heighten in the months ahead, perhaps in combination with a ban on some of the erstwhile elected politicians to level the playing field in the generals' eyes.

Second, the economy will be consequential for the military's legitimacy and support from the pro-coup coalition. If the economy tanks into a recession of any sort, it is likely that pro-coup support would erode. The military government's challenge is how to steer an economy when the ruling generals are not trained for the job. Fundamentally, the military's command-control culture is ill-suited for economic management. Third, corruption will be the military's Achilles' heel. Corruption also involves nepotism, collusion, and cronyism, rolled up into downright hypocrisy. For example, if Gen. Prayuth's brother, Gen. Preecha Chan-ocha, were to become army chief, many would see it as blatant favoritism.

Fourth, if there is going to be outright opposition to the military government, it is likely to come from the pro-coup coalition, particularly the former People's Democratic Reform Committee and its precursor the People's Alliance for Democracy. The Thaksin side, including Pheu Thai party and the leadership of the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship, has kept quiet because it has much to lose and little to gain by rising up at this time. But if the PDRC and PAD feel sufficiently disillusioned with the coup period after all the heavy lifting they did in the past, then the military government can expect trouble. Other civil society groups will also have a louder voice but unlikely to be enough to destabilize the military government as compared to the PDRC/PAD overlapping columns. Finally, Thailand's transitional

endgame during this lockdown period will require compromise and accommodation. The established centers of power and the newly empowered forces of electoral democracy will need to come to terms with new rules of the game that place the electorate at the front and center of political outcomes. The old centers of power will have to give up some to keep much of the prerogative and privilege they have enjoyed, and the newer sources of power in people's representatives must show more integrity and better policy performance. As in recent years, this compromise is imperative for Thailand to move on. There is no better gift for the Thai people for the coming year than to see glimpses of this compromise.

Thailand's mixed post-coup international relations

Thailand's military coup reoriented Thai-Cambodian relations with surprising effects. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen's overt enmity and confrontation towards Thailand over the past several years became decidedly conciliatory and accommodating. As Thailand's military authorities made it clear from the outset that they mean business, the Cambodian prime minister has gone out of his way not to antagonize the neighboring ruling generals. Hun Sen's new posture is counterintuitive because this is the same Thai high command that oversaw military skirmishes vis-a-vis the Cambodian army in early 2011 in the vicinity of Preah Vihear temple, a longstanding territorial dispute between the two countries. The clash claimed more than 20 lives on both sides, and at the time was ASEAN's only significant military showdown between member states in many years.

It would have been unsurprising if Hun Sen had stepped up his belligerent rhetoric, bolstered his armed forces, secured Cambodia's borders, and hunkered down in preparation for self-defense when Thailand's military commanders seized power. But Hun Sen treaded softly instead, breaking from his previous pattern of behavior. It appears he knew that this time his opponents in the NCPO were a real deal. Retribution against him for having sided with Thaksin and thereby intervened in Thailand's internal affairs was not unimaginable. Incurring the wrath of the Thai army when Thai generals hold absolute power in view of a bad history vis-a-vis the Hun Sen regime was simply inadvisable. A war veteran and one of the world's longest-lasting rulers, Hun Sen is smart, with certifiable survival instincts. For example, he publicly rejected a potential Thai government-in-exile on Cambodian

soil early after the coup, despite having provided a refuge for a host of pro-Thaksin red-shirt leaders over recent years.

When he did speak up during the sudden and mass exodus of more than 200,000 Cambodian migrant workers after the coup, it was measured and devoid of his usual aggressive rhetoric. Hun Sen apparently depends on jobs in Thailand more than Thailand depends on migrant workers from Cambodia. After initial confusion and controversy, migrant workers trickled back, and a new normal of more stringent procedures in the migrant labor industry is setting in. Such a maneuver is partly attributable to Hun Sen's loosening grip of electoral authoritarianism at home. Cambodia's election in July 2013 still hangs over him. His Cambodian People's Party prevailed but the opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party more than doubled its number in the national assembly. As allegations of vote fraud emerged, the opposition party called in vain for a recount and has boycotted the assembly since. That the writing is on the wall for Hun Sen at home constrains him from brash and ill-considered moves in his relations with a much bigger neighbor.

Farther afield, the Thai coup poses implications for the geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China and for the broader prospects of democratization in developing Asia. If Thailand's military-authoritarian rule entrenches itself, it may embolden other militaries and reinforce the retreat of democracies elsewhere, such as Myanmar. In its preceding coup in September 2006, Thailand arguably got off lightly. The US perfunctorily suspended its International Military Education and Training program and chastised the coup-makers to return to elections and democracy as soon as possible. In response to the May 2014 coup, the US took a different tack after repeated reassurances that a putsch was not on the cards. Apart from the IMET suspension of 4.7 million USD, Thailand was kept out of the multinational Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) naval exercise. Senior US officials both in Washington and Bangkok sent strong messages that the entire bilateral relationship was under review pending the restoration of democratic rule and attendant individual rights. This warning has been quietly repeated. Even Cobra Gold, a longstanding annual multinational defense exercise that is the bedrock of the Thai-US military-military relationship, which is the backbone of the overall bilateral alliance, is in limbo. The US is going ahead with Cobra Gold in 2015 but will emphasize non-combat military cooperation.

Australia and the European Union chimed in with similar warnings, imposing visa bans on junta leaders and suspending a clutch of cooperative programs and senior-level bilateral visits. So did Japan, which publicly called for a return to elections and democracy as soon as possible. As the responses of developed democracies converged against the coup, the NCPO looked to other Asian neighbors for recognition and support. Chief among the Asian reactions was China. Although Thailand is not China's formal ally, Beijing is as diplomatically and geopolitically close to Bangkok as any great power. Thailand has benefited over the centuries for being China's virtual next-door neighbor without a common border. The Chinese government recognized Thailand's latest coup, as it did to the preceding putsch in Bangkok, within several working days. Coup leaders officially visited Beijing and received a high-level Chinese business delegation. As 2015 marks the 40th anniversary of Thai-Chinese relations, Beijing has invited former army chief and current president of the Privy Council General Prem Tinsulanond for an official visit. Over the years, the Chinese have warmly received Thailand's royal family, particularly Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. In contrast with the West, China's political stand becomes more conspicuous when Thailand takes authoritarian turns, as in September 2006 and since 22 May 2014. But when Thailand's democratic rule prevails, Beijing has also been close and supportive. In other words, the Chinese have found ways to be Thailand's all-weather friend because it carries no democracy-promotion baggage.

For Beijing, Thailand is now a pivotal country in its geostrategic outlook. Myanmar's opening and reforms have led to a loss of Chinese dominance, and Cambodia's see-saw election in July 2013 weakened the pro-Beijing regime of Prime Minister Hun Sen. In the maritime domains both vis-à-vis Japan in the east and the Philippines and Vietnam in the south, China's assertive territorial claims are fiercely contested, somewhat constrained by the US' military presence. Losing influence in Myanmar and Cambodia can be offset by gaining leverage over Thailand's resurgent authoritarianism. If China's southern maritime flank is unstable, its southern mainland tip must be secured. Thailand is thus a key piece of China's geostrategic jigsaw. Not surprisingly Australia and Japan have adjusted their positions to engage more with Thailand's military regime for fear of losing out to China.

In addition, Thai-Myanmar relations also have become mutually accommodating after the coup, similar to the trends in Thai-Cambodia reorientation, featuring high-level visits and cooperative projects. On the southern front, Thai-Malaysian relations

have improved with top-level engagements, although this has not ameliorated Thailand's southern Malay-Muslim insurgency. The other ASEAN governments have reacted permissively towards Thailand's coup. The ruling generals in Bangkok have shrewdly leveraged Thailand's assets and resources for accommodating relations with the outside world.

Much of what happens on Asia's geopolitical canvas will depend on how post-coup Thailand plays out. If genuine democratic rule is restored after a period of pervasive and systematic military control over politics and economy, Thailand may regain its geopolitical balance. But if authoritarianism solidifies at the expense of democratic legitimacy, Thailand may be forced to increasingly lean on Beijing for regime support and geopolitical lifeline.

Thailand's strategic dynamics in Mekong mainland region

As Thailand's prolonged navel-gazing meanders from crisis to crisis, one of the leading questions facing the country is whether it will eventually emerge intact and able to overcome its proven propensity to shoot itself in the foot. While foreseeable internal dynamics are fraught with tension, uncertainty and volatility, Thailand possesses built-in attributes and resources that its own people cannot take away from themselves. Chief among them is Thailand's central location in the Mekong mainland region of Southeast Asia. To appreciate Thailand's location, it is necessary to recognize the role of geography as the paramount determinant of international outcomes. In the 18th and 19th centuries, colonial powers erected borders and configured the international system around them. For much of the 20th century, the global system was shaped not by territories, but by a battle of ideologies and conflicting ideas of socio-economic organization. By the second decade of the 21st century, we are seeing a reversion to the distant pre-colonial past when borders matter less and the mobility of the masses, money and means is expanding inexorably. In this context, Thailand's geographic position in the Mekong mainland is an immeasurable asset.

When it includes the southern Chinese provinces of Yunnan and Guangxi, along with Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam, as the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), this mainland half of Southeast Asia harbors more than 300

million potential consumers and a combined GDP of more than 1 trillion USD. Over the past two decades, extensive road construction has enabled infrastructural corridors from north to south and east to west to connect, broaden and tighten cross-border trade and investment flows among these countries. It is now possible to drive from southern China to Thailand's deep south, and from Myanmar across the mainland all the way to Vietnam. Railway development lags substantially behind road linkages, but this means there is a vast space for rail expansion. Undoubtedly, the Mekong mainland is up and coming. Its collective growth trajectory is likely to be up and up for at least the decade ahead. And Thailand is the nexus of it.

When the Japan-backed Asian Development Bank initiated and propelled the GMS back in the early 1990s, it presumably did not foresee that the region would develop and evolve into a vibrant backyard of China. As the Mekong mainland countries fall increasingly under China's influence in trade, investment, aid, tourism, and Beijing's growing soft power projection, Japan feels that the region is slipping away from it, even though the Japanese have poured huge investments and resources into the GMS over the years while banking on its development success for Japan's future economic security.

The geopolitical competition on the Mekong mainland has consequently intensified. China is naturally the resident superpower, with growing confidence and global leadership ambition. A major power in economic terms but a middle power in most other respects, Japan is heavily invested in this region and intends to maintain and expand its regional role. At a peak point during President Barack Obama's first term, the United States upped its game in mainland Southeast Asia, including a modest but significant funded program known as the Lower Mekong Initiative to promote regional mainland development and maintain America's influence. Since then, however, US exertion in the Mekong mainland is perceived to have waned and been overtaken by domestic distractions and foreign policy preoccupations in the Middle East, Ukraine, and elsewhere. Washington's sea power is still immense and necessary for regional peace and stability but its role in mainland Southeast Asia is not what it used to be. As for India's highly touted eastward foreign policy focus, its weight and role are nowhere close to China's and Japan's.

Thus the China-Japan relationship is most crucial to what happens in the Mekong mainland in the years ahead. If these two major Asian powers and neighbors can iron out latent hostilities from decades past and constructively manage territorial tensions, such as the islands dispute in the East China Sea, it would conduce to the prosperity and security of the Mekong mainland countries. But if tensions persist and outright conflict arises, the Mekong mainland will suffer from greater geopolitical competition and regional divisiveness. Here again, Thailand is better placed than its neighbors. The Bangkok-Beijing axis is nuanced, deep and dense. Thailand is also too big an economy with critical mass to come under China's domination, as compared to Laos or Cambodia, for example. However China's influence in the Mekong mainland grows, Thailand is likely to benefit from it relatively more than its immediate neighbors.

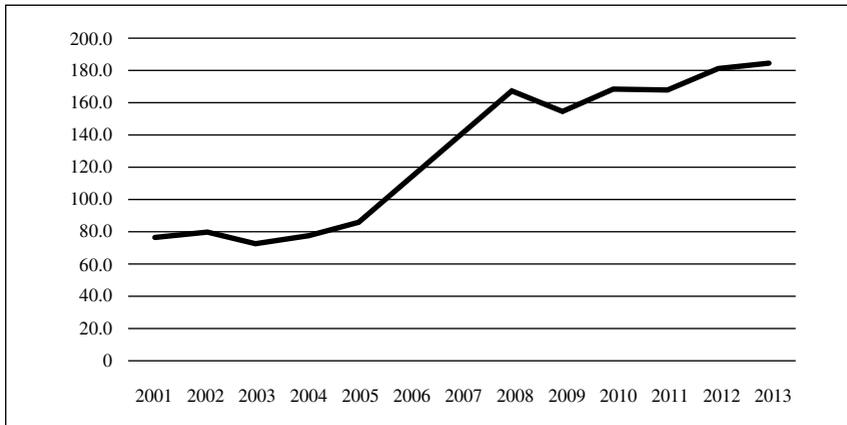
At the same time, Thailand is Japan's most special friend and partner in Southeast Asia. This bilateral relationship is not hostage to bitter wartime memories, as is the case with most other countries in East Asia. Japan is the largest investor in Thailand, and Thailand is the linchpin and launch-pad of Japanese business presence in the Mekong region. If it can get its act together at home, Thailand in fact can play a bridging and coordinator role for the contentious China-Japan relationship, and perhaps even a foundational role in setting up appropriate institutional framework and rules for regional governance towards peace, order, and stability.

To be sure, it is not all rosy and robust in the Mekong mainland. Environmental degradation is widespread, especially concerning dam construction in upstream countries. An array of non-traditional security challenges, such as human trafficking, transnational crime, mistreatment and exploitation of migrant workers, natural disasters, and ethnic conflicts are rife. Water security is a growing concern, as tensions between upstream and downstream Mekong countries have grown. While these problems and pitfalls will hamper the Mekong mainland countries, they are unlikely to stop the region's growth story. At issue for Thailand is not whether its self-inflicted opportunity costs at home will mount but how strong its natural and nurtured shock absorbers will be. Thailand's domestic difficulties will likely exacerbate but its resilience and resourcefulness may ultimately pull it through because of favorable and serendipitous circumstances from being located in a thriving and rising corner of the map.

Implications for the Defense Sector

It should go without saying that Thailand's coups—both in 2006 and 2014—have been a boon for the defense sector. As can be seen in the figure below, Thai military expenditure has risen considerably, more than doubling in the decade from 2001, from the Thaksin years to the September 2006 coup. While the expenditure figures for 2014 are not yet available, these are expected to be on an upward trend. For instance, these are the military procurement projects that have already been approved and proposed:

Thai Military Expenditure



Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, <http://www.sipri.org/> Currency unit: Thai Baht.

Approved:

- 4 replacement jets for Royal Thai Air Force for their training fleet – 113 million USD
- Rocket launcher developed by DTi MoA with the Royal Thai Army – Unpriced
- 9 Airbus Lakota UH-72A helicopters from the United States – 89 million USD, requested, with six on order. Additional choppers will be ordered from 10 January 2015.
- 2 Mi-17V-5 helicopters from Russia – 40 million USD ordered
- 2 EC 725 SAR helicopters from Airbus Helicopters – Order but price yet to be disclosed.

- 5 EC 645T2 helicopters from Airbus Helicopters – 77 million USD ordered
- ARTHUR Weapon Locating System for the Marines from Saab – Contract Signed
- 1 reconnaissance aircraft from Italian Company Piaggio – Contract signed, cost unknown.

Proposed:

- 2 submarines – 330 million USD
- Upgrades to existing F-5 fleet – unpriced
- Medium range SAM systems – 80 million USD (considering: no new news)

Source: The Bangkok Post database.

These are mainly modernization procurement projects that do not point to signs of an alarming arms build-up. However, under civilian governments, the defense expenditures would have been unlikely to have risen as much. Moreover, military officers have taken over myriad bureaucratic and ministerial posts at the expense of civilians and elected politicians. Accordingly, as mentioned at the outset of this paper, Thai government and politics have been increasingly militarized and securitized during this critical transitional period of royal succession.