

CHAPTER 7

Thailand After King Bhumibol: Foreign and Security Policy Implications

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Introduction

Thailand and the world at large are concurrently going through a political malaise that comes with the transitional end of any long era. For the world, this period is known as the post-war liberal order that was constructed and led by the United States in the aftermath of the Second World War. As constituent states in the international system have benefited immensely and risen to challenge and rival traditional U.S. power and prestige, Washington appears intent on shirking its global leadership role. The unfolding result is a fluid and precarious global canvass, underpinned by tectonic power shifts and maneuvers and geopolitical tensions and volatility. As the U.S. is distracted at home and unable to deliver its geostrategic aims in Southeast Asia, China has been the main beneficiary. China is increasingly gaining the upper hand in Southeast Asia and its belligerence in the South China Sea and elsewhere can only be checked by regrouped allies of the U.S., led by Japan. Otherwise China will be the indisputable pre-eminent new major power in the region.

This same period that has run its course in Thailand coincided with King Bhumibol Adulyadej's long and remarkable reign that shaped the country's socio-political setting and economic development for more than 70 years since 1946. The late monarch's passing on 13 October 2016 necessarily entails a reset of the Thai socio-political landscape, ushering in new politics under the new reign of King Maha Vajiralongkorn, King Bhumibol's only son. The constituent actors of the new reign, in turn, have to come to terms and agree on a new *modus vivendi* as to how Thailand should function and operate. This process cannot be done overnight. It requires a spirit of mutual accommodation and compromise for the country's longer-term interest and will be ultimately answerable to popular opinion. How Thailand's domestic political reconfigurations take place and shape, in turn, will determine its foreign and security policy orientation.

The end of Thailand's glorious reign

Navigating out of Thailand's internal morass means a return to the political normalcy of having government from popular rule with public accountability. More often than not, Thailand is not a straightforward place. It has had a government from a military coup that the vast majority of Thai people – as measured by the 7 August 2016 charter referendum which passed by a convincing margin with a large turnout, for example – have more or less accepted during their once-in-a-lifetime royal transition. As the coup-makers who seized power in May 2014 under the National Council of Peace and Order (NCPO) have successfully facilitated the royal transition into a new reign, more questions have focused on a return to “open politics” and elected representation. Thus the paramount question in Thailand – and there are parallels for the global system – is how the rest of this decade helps define the first half of the 21st century. Thailand is in the midst of a roughly two-decades-long transformation that will determine how the country will be for the subsequent three decades. For 15 years after Thailand's political change from absolutism to constitutionalism in 1932, for example, Thai politics was topsy-turvy and swung wildly until King Bhumibol's reign got underway and became consolidated in the 1950s-70s. Thai politics was never smooth thereafter but it spawned a political order that people accepted, embraced or became accustomed to, revolving around the monarchy, military and bureaucracy.

It was during the Cold War in the 1950s-80s that King Bhumibol made his mark when Thailand had to make its way in a treacherous neighborhood, at once challenged by the threat of communist expansionism. Understanding the Cold War context and conditions and Thailand's place in them is necessary to appreciate how and why Thais have a deep affection for and bonding with their late King. At the time, the pillars of the Thai state – nation, religion and monarchy – struck a collective chord. The resulting unity and stability enabled economic development and kept communism at bay. Challenges to the established order, with the military-monarchy-bureaucracy triangulation as its anchor, were put down, including the left-leaning student-led movement in the mid-1970s. In that long period, Thai schoolchildren sang martial songs each morning in addition to the national anthem, an orderly time when Thais knew what to expect and where their places in Thai socio-political hierarchy were situated, reinforced by socialization and indoctrination in classrooms and living rooms where only state-run media could enter. Back then, running water was limited

to certain hours, electricity blackouts were common, and television was available only during weekday prime times and weekends. It was a lonely and foreboding, yet clear-cut, time when we saw Indochina being engulfed by communism and Burma turning inward. Apart from the defense treaty alliance with the Americans, the Thai people had nobody to turn to but themselves.

At that time when Thailand needed strong and steady state institutions and Thais in need of national guidance, King Bhumibol became the individual uniquely fit for the task. He went all over the country to promote education, healthcare, water management, infrastructure development, and many projects for public welfare. Such a role would not have been so important had it not been desperately needed. And any other individual put in that role may not have worked so hard simply because he did not need to and because there were more comfortable and convenient choices to choose from. But King Bhumibol did it anyway. The Thai people saw and appreciated it since. After having done so much for so long, the late King earned and accumulated so much moral authority that the Thai people placed him at the apex of their society. There are views and arguments that the political order set up around the late monarch on the back of the military-monarchy-bureaucracy axis has impeded democratic development and stunted democratic institutions, that economic development over the long reign was unfairly distributed, that Thailand is left with a military dictatorship and a much weaker monarchy to carry itself forward. These points are not invalid and will be the grist for historians for many years to come.

But how Thailand has been should be viewed in comparative terms. By the standards of its near abroad, Thailand has not fared so badly. Turbulence and tumult are not uncommon when countries transition out of a 70-year-old political order, and Thailand is unlikely to be an exception. Having weathered imperialist aggression, two world wars, and the Cold War, Thailand now stands as a 70-million market with a 400 billion-dollar economy, with gifted geography as the center of mainland Southeast Asia. It has so much going for it now that derives from the Cold War years. The late monarch's lasting legacy may well be the critical mass that has accrued over his reign, where there are too many stakeholders and vested interests in Thailand's viability and survival for it to fail.

Thailand’s “roadmap” going forward

To be sure, Thailand’s political settlement is still some distance away. To make progress, much has focused on the election roadmap, which has been postponed time and again. An election is unlikely until there is a proper royal cremation on 26 October 2017 that befits King Bhumibol’s glorious era. The cremation of King Bhumibol may be viewed in conjunction with the coronation King Vajiralongkorn. The two major events put the poll date in mid-2018 at the earliest.

Thailand’s political future is uncertain because it is unclear whether the new monarch would be willing to go along with a military-dominated constitution written by a small military-appointed committee with military objectives to supervise Thai electoral politics, featuring a one-third quota of the legislature reserved for military personnel and proxies. King Bhumibol’s relationship with the military was symbiotic, two sides of the same coin in ruling Thailand throughout the Cold War. The new king and a new reign will likely spell changes to Thailand’s political configurations and dynamics, a changing of the guards whereby some former handlers and advisors under King Bhumibol have been and will be replaced by King Maha Vajiralongkorn’s preferences. Already the newly appointed Privy Council under the new monarch has been composed of newer figures, although the 95-year-old General Prem Tinsulanond remains its chairman.

In view of Thailand’s political divide between pro-establishment conservative royalists – broadly the “yellow” side – and the pro-electoral democracy “red shirts” many of whom are supportive of ousted and exiled former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the pattern in Thai politics has been that the pro-Thaksin red shirts would win election time and again (in 2005, 2007 and 2011) only to be overthrown by way of street protests that led to judicial interventions and military coups. In doing so, the “yellow” side mobilized and acted against corruption and abuse of power and cited morality and ethics as their motivation. The yellows were at once loyal to the throne and to the late monarch, which to them was one and the same. The reds insisted that they too were loyal to the monarch but some of them perhaps felt that their nemesis exploited the name of the monarchy against them. Now the table has been turned under the new king. The yellows are certainly loyal to the monarchy and supportive of the new monarch but the complete symbiosis between the two may no longer hold as much sway as in the past. On the other hand, the reds may still be skeptical of

the monarchy but they perceive the new monarch as never having been used by the other side against them. So if the next election goes to yet another pro-Thaksin party, despite former Prime Minister and Thaksin's sister Yingluck Shinawatra's escape from a court case on 25 August 2017, with the Democrat Party at the losing end because it has not been revamped after repeated poll losses, the "yellow" side may not be able to carry out anti-government protests in much the same way as in the past. To this extent, Thai electoral politics may be a fairer game. In this fashion, it is imperative for those who oppose Thaksin's corruption and abuse of power to win by beating him at his own game, namely by winning the election.

All things being equal, Thailand's election would likely take place in 2018. The longer polls are put off, the more electoral forces, particular the main Pheu Thai and Democrat parties and their party machines, will agitate. The natural beneficiaries of a later rather sooner election are the members of the National Legislative Assembly, the Constitution Drafting Commission, the National Reform Steering Committee, and members and advisors of the cabinet and the NCPO, who all earn executive-level monthly salaries (sometimes multiplied by their additional public sector roles), with many perquisites and little accountability. In case of unexpected poll delays, one caveat would be the civilianization of the military government, with a civilian leader at the helm, which may engender sufficient international legitimacy and credibility to move ahead with the coronation. How Thailand's popular rule will be shaped and formed under the new reign and vice versa will determined the country's way forward.

President Trump and the geopolitics of Southeast Asia

While Thailand's domestic scene remains unsettled, the global situation is unclear and volatile. The controversial rise to power of U.S. President Donald Trump against the odds is likely to hasten the end of the seven-decades-old postwar liberal order and reorient Southeast Asia-America relations onto a new footing that privileges interests over values. As a maverick and newly inaugurated U.S. president from outside the political establishment brandishing an "America First" agenda, a four-year Trump term conjures up the specter of a more inward-looking superpower that will no longer shoulder the traditional burdens of global leadership. To navigate and secure their regional neighborhood, Southeast Asian countries will need to rely more

on America's middle-power allies, particularly Japan but also Australia to a lesser extent, in their dealings with a brooding China. U.S. support for regional stability and a more balanced security environment may become more complementary and crucial rather than indispensable and decisive.

Yet America's diminished role in the region has been in train before Trump's presidential ascent. The "Asian pivot" and "rebalance" strategy of the former administration of President Barack Obama, instrumentally crafted under ex-Secretary of State and presidential runner-up Hillary Clinton, ultimately proved shallow and unreliable, underpinned by rhetorical footwork with little substantive thrust. The Obama pivot was akin to the inkless "red lines" drawn in the Middle East where U.S. leadership was confined to "leading from behind", eschewing boots on the ground in favor of remote-controlled drone attacks. Leading from the back often meant not leading at all. Obama is a popular leader because of his personal appeal but his policy record is mixed. His administration too often walked loudly but carried a meek stick. Such lack of demonstrable leadership was conspicuous in Southeast Asia, and no regional state is more cognizant of it than the Philippines. The Obama pivot partly aggravated China's regional belligerence. China got away with its seizure of Scarborough Shoal in 2012 and a dozen of reefs and rocks up and down the South China Sea thereafter, mostly at the expense of Philippine interests. When Manila eventually won a landmark decision against China's trespassing and theft at the Permanent Court of Arbitration last July, Beijing naturally defied the ruling in a chest-thumping fashion. Washington harped on about the need to comply with the PCA and abide by international law. Yet the U.S. is still not a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. The most muscle-flexing Washington has done to check China's aggressive maneuvers is to conduct Freedom-of-Navigation Operational Patrols (FONOPS).

Newly elected President Rodrigo Duterte saw through America's superpower status on the cheap and bit the bullet by dealing with China directly without preconditions, even putting the favorable PCA ruling on the side. Had Duterte courted China alone, he would have been ill-advised and susceptible to manipulation by a giant neighbor. But when Duterte sought succor from Japan after China, it was clear he knew how to dance in the regional geopolitical arena. He came back with \$43 billion development pledges in total from China and Japan in a well-hedged 60:40 split. His government has found more accommodation from Beijing but also has Tokyo

on board as a counterweight. But Duterte was merely following in the footsteps of Thailand's military leaders after they seized power in May 2014 ahead of an existential royal transition that culminated with King Bhumibol's passing and the ascension of King Vajiralongkorn. Ostracized and criticized by U.S.-led Western democracies, the government of Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha received early support and recognition from Beijing. A flurry of high-level bilateral visits led to concrete plans for Chinese infrastructure investment in Thailand. But when the Chinese presented harsh loan and technical terms with comparatively high interest rates and short repayment periods with land-use rights for two major rail megaprojects, the Thai government made overtures to Japan. By February 2015, Prime Minister Prayuth officially visited Tokyo. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's deftly got his Thai counterpart to reiterate a roadmap to return to democratic rule and nabbed major piece of Thailand's rail upgrading.

If it is equipped with a bigger stick, it matters less how the U.S. walks in Southeast Asia. A cursory glance around the region indicates that Washington risks losing Southeast Asia to China. The smaller states – Brunei, Cambodia, and Laos – are all beholden to Beijing. So are the Philippines and Thailand, who happen to be formal U.S. treaty allies. Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak and Indonesian President Joko Widodo also have wooed Beijing's largesse and infrastructure support. Notwithstanding recent tension with China, Singapore is inevitably omnidirectional. Myanmar cannot achieve a lasting internal peace between the central government and ethnic minorities without Chinese acquiescence. Vietnam cannot afford to stand up to Beijing because of economic imperatives. While President Trump is an unknown quantity because he is a complete political outsider with virtually no policy track record, his personal background, campaign pledges, and inauguration address indicate an "American First" program featuring immigration curbs, re-shoring America's global manufacturing, and an overall re-prioritization of America's interests over its values. A Trump administration may even strengthen and rebuild U.S. hard power but its geopolitical engagement in Southeast Asia will be on America's terms, spearheaded by transactional commercial interests with less emphasis on human rights and democracy.

The U.S. under President Trump might well get on better with Southeast Asia's mix of democratic and authoritarian regimes. But the U.S. may be re-entering a nativist and navel-gazing phase, not seen since the interwar years almost a century

ago, to preclude a wider regional role after the disappointing Obama pivot. Trump's best strategy would be to bring up Japan and Australia to shore up America's lost preeminence and secure a realigned and more balanced region. Japan may have to become the new America in Southeast Asia's security landscape. Southeast Asian governments would welcome a more assertive Japan as a counterbalance to China, whereas much of the Japanese future is inextricably tied up with Southeast Asia's fate and fortune. On its own, no Southeast Asian state can afford to stand up to Beijing. The only way to see President Duterte's gamble and Southeast Asia's concessions to be justifiable is if China were to reciprocate by agreeing to a credible and comprehensive Code of Conduct on the South China Sea.

The Obama pivot is finished but Southeast Asia is still looking for a genuine rebalance, which can be effected by the combined strengths and commitment of the U.S. and its major allies, led by Japan and Australia to a lesser extent. If President Trump's tough-talking rhetoric about taking China to task for currency manipulation and unfair trade practices, even reviewing the "one-China" policy – proves shallow and ineffectual like the Obama pivot, then China will capitalize on the U.S.' lack of wherewithal. But if President Trump follows through with his hardline posture, with increased U.S. naval presence and maneuver beyond the Obama administration's FONOPs, then we will see more intensifying confrontation between Washington and Beijing. Here is where the ASEAN governments are watching the first months of the Trump administration and its Asia policy team. If the Trump administration plays hard ball against China, Southeast Asia will suffer as the arena of great-power rivalry and confrontation. But while this scenario is alarming, it provides more leverage to the ASEAN states more than if Washington were to talk tough and turn up empty, which would essentially cede the region to China. Moreover, President Trump's relative embrace of Russian President Vladimir Putin plays into this mix. President Trump may catalyze a tectonic shift among the major powers if he courts Putin in realignment at China's expense. Either way, ASEAN should brace for more tension.

Thailand Security Outlook in the Regional Mix

At the outset of the Trump presidency, the Thai military government has taken a Trump-neutral stance. As Thai-U.S. relations under the Obama tenure were practically at their nadir, President Trump may well recalibrate and re-prioritize

values and interests that affect the bilateral alliance. Human rights and democracy as the Obama values agenda will not be abandoned altogether but interests may become more front and center. President Trump is a transactional deal-maker, after all, not necessarily wedded to core principles and ideals. A Trump administration may be more accommodating of Thailand's profound transitional and adjustment requirements under a new reign and a new constitution. Thailand's electoral roadmap still matters but it may be more determined and demanded from within by the Thai electorate than from outside by Western democracies. If President Trump pulls out a new geopolitical playbook vis-à-vis China, Thailand's role in the regional mix will be more pivotal for U.S. interests.

The regional mix, to be sure, has been alarming owing to a growing arms build-up. According to the global arms tracker Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Asia now accounts for almost half of the world's arms expenditure, more than twice that of the Middle East and four times greater than Europe. Vietnam, an ASEAN member with contentious maritime claims against China, spent eight times more in arms procurement in 2011-15 compared to the previous five years, including a clutch of submarines. The Philippines is playing catch-up by acquiring a squadron of fighter from South Korea and beefed up naval capabilities with Japan's and the U.S.' assistance. Even Thailand, a non-claimant in the South China Sea, has purchased three Chinese submarines despite its shallow waters in the Gulf of Thailand. China, on the other hand, has flexed its muscle with a newly minted aircraft carrier group, with more on the way. Chiming in is Japan, which under the Shinzo Abe government has reinterpreted Article 9 of the constitution to allow for the country to come to the defense of its allies. The Abe government has also revised security laws to allow exports of weapons technology to its partners in the region, thereby buttressing their defense capabilities.

Thailand's security outlook is thus shaped by two main determinants, internal and external. At home, with a military government that has gained political power over civilian leadership with two military coups in 2006-2016, Thailand's defense budget has risen more than 45 percent over the same period.¹ Moreover, the 2017 budget from October 2016 to September 2017 allotted \$6.1 billion for the military, a two

¹ See Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (<https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Milex-constant-2015-USD.pdf>).

percent year-on-year increase.² This is unsurprising because the military securitized the royal succession and brook no dissent domestically. National security became entirely domestic, and the transition of the throne became the paramount objective of the generals. Along the way, the Thai military also expanded its scope of operations and personnel, periodically marred by corruption scandals. If the top security priority was the continuity of the crown and the military government's second concern was to keep domestic dissent under control, the third priority became securing foreign relations vis-à-vis the Western democracies. Since the military coup in May 2014, Thailand was left alienated from its Western partners, especially the U.S. which is a superpower and treaty ally. As a result, Thai military leaders aligned with China but kept its balance by keeping Japan in the mix. In terms of arms acquisitions, this meant that Thai military hardware was procured more from China than the U.S., including the navy's purchase of three Chinese submarines as mentioned above. However, other arms sellers such as Russia, France and Sweden were also in the mix.

Now with the new reign under a new king, with a reconfiguration of domestic political landscape, and in light of President Trump's rise and his emphasis on national interests and business transactions, Thailand may well recalibrate. The U.S. is likely to regain some of its lost weight in the Thai security outlook, and Thai leaders may hedge against China more openly by courting other U.S. allies like Japan and Australia as well as ASEAN neighbors. Much depends on President Trump's strategic intentions vis-à-vis China in Southeast Asia and equally much depends on Thailand's domestic situation. If the new reign settles while Thailand returns to electoral rule, with a reasserted U.S. under President Trump, such a scenario could see a more balanced Thai security outlook and Thailand's pivotal role as a major player in the regional equation. But if Thailand cannot get its house in order under a new reign and an inexorable electoral rule, then the country will continue to be out of action, punching below its weight and having to answer to regional dynamics and imperatives beyond its wherewithal.

² "The Truth About Thailand's 2017 Defense Budget 'Hike'", *The Diplomat*, 10 September 2016.