

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## The U.S.–Thailand Alliance and President Obama’s Trip to Asia

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President Obama’s visit to Southeast Asia this week will take him to Cambodia, Burma, and Thailand. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) leaders’ meetings in Phnom Penh is the occasion for the transpacific flight, and Burma will generate the most news.

It is Thailand, however, that is the most strategically important part of the trip. The political establishment in Washington, over many years and on a bipartisan basis, has not given Thailand the sort of sustained attention it deserves as a treaty ally. President Obama’s visit to Bangkok is an opportunity to right the alliance ship and chart a clear course for the future.

**Necessary Investments in ASEAN.** The visit to Phnom Penh is all about America’s long-term commitment to an ASEAN-centered

regional diplomatic architecture. As chair of ASEAN this year, Cambodia is merely hosting its annual meetings, including the U.S.–ASEAN leaders’ summit and the East Asia Summit (a gathering of ASEAN heads of government plus eight other regional powers, including the U.S., Japan, South Korea, and China).

Highest on the agenda for these meetings should be America’s interest in freedom of navigation in the western Pacific. The Chinese won the Scarborough Shoal dispute with America’s Philippine allies this summer. They are now calling the U.S. out on the Senkakus in an apparent attempt to erode Japanese administrative control of nearby waters. The difference between civilian and military did not much matter to the outcome at Scarborough, and if the Chinese are allowed to establish a semblance of control around the Senkakus, it will not matter there either. President Obama should be clear in these meetings and in his meeting with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao that current Chinese behavior in the South and East China Seas is unacceptable—regardless of the ship captain’s chain of command.

Beyond tabling the American perspective and seeking broad agreement on principles, however, there is a real

limit to how much the President can accomplish in these meetings.

**Burma’s Complicated Strategic Value.** Many in the Washington policy community and media portray the recent thaw in U.S.–Burma relations as a geostrategic watershed. Indeed, depending on developments on the ground in Burma, it may ultimately live up to its billing.

Often overlooked are the much different interests the sides have in the thaw. The still military-dominated Burmese government’s interest lies in balancing the U.S. and China against one another. Burma needs American engagement because the balance has gotten off-kilter, and neither ASEAN nor India is enough to fix it.

The long-term U.S. interest is in genuine systemic political change in Burma. Locking in democratic reforms would contribute more to Burma’s strategic orientation than short-term U.S. diplomatic jockeying. The real prize is national elections in 2015. The bets the Administration is placing on the current regime are most valuable as inducements to keep reforms on track through 2015 and the inauguration of a truly representative government. As it moves forward, it should keep enough sanctions leverage in the tank to press for free and fair elections. At the current

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pace it is lifting sanctions, it will be empty by then.

In the meantime, U.S. interaction with Burma is more about limiting downsides, not allowing China to run the table. Beyond this, the strategic payoff is in the distance, uncertain and subject to a number of political variables.

**Thailand: Where the Real Opportunity Lies.** Unlike ASEAN and Burma, Thailand has already demonstrated its enormous value to the U.S. It is a U.S. security treaty partner; co-host of the largest annual joint military exercise in the world, Cobra Gold, as well more than 40 other smaller ones; a demonstrated partner in counterterrorism; and a through point for America's military logistics chain into Afghanistan and the Middle East. And it is America's oldest trading ally in the region, dating back to the 1833 Treaty on Amity and Commerce.

Despite all this, since the end of the Vietnam War, Thailand has suffered from American diplomatic neglect. When President Bill Clinton went there in 1996, he was the first President to visit in 27 years. President Bush visited in 2003 and again in 2008. The presidential visits were welcomed, but on the Thai side, they seemed to be more about the region beyond Thailand—APEC, Burma, and China. One can make too much of presidential visits, but in this case, the perception of American disinterest has facilitated drift in the alliance.

President Obama's visit can begin to remedy this problem. In the end, however, if relations are not sustained and substantiated, it will just be another presidential visit, a bump in the road of Thailand's long-term recalculation of its regional alignments—in essence, closer ties with the region's fastest growing reality, the People's Republic of China.

**Follow Through with Bangkok.** Following up on his visit, the President should:

- **Facilitate Thailand's entry into the Transpacific Partnership trade negotiations.** Thai authorities this week have indicated that they are ready to announce an intention to join the talks during President Obama's visit. There are major procedural hurdles to be overcome, both domestically and vis-à-vis the other members of the 11-member free trade pact. Thailand will require continued reassurance and cajoling regarding the deal's value in order to avoid the fate of the U.S.–Thailand Free Trade Agreement, negotiations on which collapsed in 2006. The Thais will also have to come to the table fully prepared to make compromises.

- **Keep broad strategic issues on the back burner.** The 2012 Joint Vision Statement for the Thai–U.S. Defense Alliance, signed by Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and Thai Defense Minister Sukampol Suwannathat in advance of President Obama's visit, highlights some important big-picture priorities, including a crucial commitment to “open access by all to shared maritime, space and cyber domains.” Going much deeper at this point is bound to raise more problems than it solves, particularly over the way the two sides view China's contribution to problems in these very areas.

- **Protect and enhance the U.S.–Thailand military-to-military relationship.** While the U.S. and Thailand navigate the political shoals in Bangkok, the U.S. can

move unilaterally to deepen the relationship. Thailand should receive far more in the win-win assistance categories of I-MET and FMF assistance and secure more slots at U.S. military academies, war colleges, and staff colleges. These programs and the current robust schedule of joint military exercises and deployments are the peacetime glue that holds the military alliance together.

- **Invite the Thai Prime Minister to Washington for an official visit.** Beyond the powerful symbolic value, the Administration could use the visit as an occasion to expand the U.S.–Thailand Strategic Dialogue to a 2 x 2 format that brings together the defense and foreign affairs secretaries of both sides. Political divisions in Thailand should not prevent full, highly visible engagement with its political leadership. The U.S. deals successfully with the rapid rotation of Japanese prime ministers and cabinets. There is no reason that the U.S. cannot do the same with Thailand, especially with sustained bureaucratic contact at lower levels.

#### **Where the Real Value Is.**

Engagement with ASEAN may be critical to an effective approach to the region, but it has very serious limitations, while Burma's strategic value is far from certain. Headlines aside, it is Thailand where the U.S. has real strategic opportunity. The U.S. Administration needs to prioritize the U.S.–Thailand alliance and patiently coax out more of its great value.

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