

Thai junta holds talks with Chinese military, investors

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A Thai military delegation headed by permanent secretary for defence General Surasak Kanchanarat departed on Wednesday for a five-day visit to China. Surasak told Reuters he would meet the Chinese army's deputy chief of staff Lieutenant-General Wang Guanzhong to discuss how to "increase military training" and "exchange views on regional security."

Beijing has already indicated its support for the new Thai military regime, which seized power on May 22, toppling the elected Pheu Thai Party government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. Facing a concerted US effort to undermine its influence and encircle it militarily throughout the region, Beijing is using the opportunity to strengthen its ties with Bangkok.

Thailand is a long-standing ally of the US, which regards it as an important partner in its "pivot to Asia" against China. However, the Chinese and Thai militaries also have close relations, dating back to the late 1970s, when they collaborated to supply the Khmer Rouge guerrillas fighting the Vietnamese-backed government in Cambodia.

The new Thai junta has no intention of weakening its ties with the US, but is seeking to perform a balancing act under conditions in which Washington has been compelled by US law to impose sanctions, albeit very limited, following the coup.

China is Thailand's largest trading partner. Bilateral trade reached nearly \$70 billion in 2012—up from \$36.2 billion in 2008.

Coup leader General Prayuth Chan-ocha last week met a Chinese business delegation at the army headquarters in Bangkok, including "figures from the IT and communication sectors, electrical appliances companies, car manufacturing companies and mining industries," according to the *Bangkok Post*.

This week, China Mobile agreed to invest \$881 million in an 18 percent stake of Thai telecommunications group True Corp—the first significant deal involving a foreign corporation since the coup.

The junta also met with the ambassador from Vietnam and announced that Hanoi accepted the legitimacy of the new regime. Myanmar's government also stated that it recognised the new regime, while Malaysia's defence minister is due to visit Thailand next week.

Thailand's junta, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), seized power following seven months of protests and political intrigue by the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) and the opposition Democrat Party. The PDRC—which represents Thailand's traditional elites, including the military and the monarchy—effectively paralysed the Yingluck government by blocking elections and through a series of bogus legal challenges.

The junta has delayed elections for at least 15 months, censored the media and imposed curfews. Members of the former government, as well as leaders of its protest arm, the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), have been detained. Most were released after agreeing not to oppose the junta. Thousands of troops have flooded Bangkok and other regional centres, and clamped down on anti-coup protests.

Washington is undoubtedly intently watching the NCPO's talks with Beijing and seeking to ensure continuing close relations with the Thai military.

Washington has made only mild criticisms of the new regime. It described the coup as "unfortunate" and "disappointing," while suspending just \$4.7 million in aid and some joint military exercises. Washington was

undoubtedly informed well in advance of the coup and gave its tacit approval, as it did when the army seized power in 2006 and toppled the government of Yingluck's brother Thaksin Shinawatra.

Washington's overriding aim is to maintain its relationship with the Thai military. Thai and the US forces regularly take part in joint training operations—including the annual Cobra Gold exercises, which are the largest multinational war games in the region. According to a cable released by WikiLeaks in 2009, then-US ambassador Eric John wrote: "Thai air fields and seaports remain vital to our force projection objectives in Southeast Asia."

At a barely reported meeting last week in Yangon, Myanmar, Thailand's Foreign Ministry permanent secretary Sihasak Puangketkaew held talks with US Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel, along with representatives from Russia, New Zealand, Australia, China, Japan, India and South Korea. The meeting was held in preparation for the upcoming East Asia Summit.

According to the *Nation*, Sihasak informed the participants that "Thailand was solving its problems to quickly restore its order... and they understood." The report said Russel "told the meeting that Thailand was an important partner and he hoped that Thailand would return to democracy soon."

Russel visited Bangkok a month before the coup and held talks with Yingluck, as well as Democrat leader Abhisit Vejjajiva and other unnamed "stakeholders." He refused to condemn the anti-democratic campaign by the PDRC. Washington also refused to criticise the Constitutional Court's decision to annul the February election, which was won by the Pheu Thai government, or its decision weeks before the coup to remove Yingluck from office.

The American corporate elite clearly understands that the Obama administration has no intention of imposing economic sanctions on Thailand. According to today's *Bangkok Post*, Vijavat Isarabhakdi, the Thai ambassador to Washington, said "confidence within the US business community about Thailand's policy towards promoting trade and investment ... remains unchanged" by the coup.

The paper also reported: "Marid Sa-ngiampong, Thai ambassador to Canberra, said the Australian government understood Thailand better now as businessmen there are planning to come to Thailand

this month to discuss agriculture ventures. Its commerce minister has also shown a readiness to visit the country soon, despite the coup."

Foreign and local capitalists have generally welcomed the coup. Pakorn Peetathawatchai, spokesman for the Thai Stock Exchange, told the media on Wednesday that foreign ownership of stocks had increased by 17 percent compared with January, saying this showed that investors were confident in the NCPO's policies.



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