

Thai junta seeks more open recognition from Washington

Tom Peters
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General Prayuth Chan-Ocha, head of Thailand's National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), used a televised address on Friday to appeal for "cooperation" from the "international community," particularly the US.

According to the state-run National News Bureau, Prayuth, who led a coup on May 22, ousting the elected Pheu Thai government of Yingluck Shinawatra, said Thailand was "the oldest ally in Southeast Asia of the United States and of many other Western countries." He called on Thailand's "friends" not to "constrain the constructive role of the military or NCPO" and to "allow Thailand to continue to participate in the global stage."

The junta is promoting its value as a US ally as tensions escalate between Beijing and Washington's other regional allies, particularly Japan and the Philippines, over territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas. Washington views the Thai military as an integral part of its "pivot" to Asia, aimed at encircling China and undermining its regional influence.

At the same time, Prayuth's call for recognition by the US and other governments indicates that the junta plans to hold onto power for a lengthy period. The NCPO has stated that it plans to hold elections in October 2015, but this timetable is far from certain.

The military, supported by the state bureaucracy, the monarchy and sections of big business, backed a coup in 2006 which overthrew Thaksin Shinawatra, Yingluck's billionaire brother. Thaksin had cut across the interests of the Bangkok-based elites by opening the economy to more foreign investment and implementing limited reforms, including micro-loans and cheaper healthcare. But when the military regime stood down in 2007 the Thaksin-linked People's Power Party was re-

elected.

The military and its backers are determined to make it impossible for the Shinawatras and their allies to return to power. The NCPO will rewrite the constitution ahead of any election in order to further erode democratic rights and increase the power of the military in government.

Meanwhile the military is continuing to censor the media and public gatherings are banned. More than 300 activists, students, academics, journalists and supporters of the former government have been detained and forced to sign agreements not to criticise the NCPO.

The junta has scrapped subsidies for rice farmers and is preparing other austerity measures targeting the working class, while whipping up nationalism and xenophobia. The military has cracked down on undocumented immigrants from Cambodia, prompting 200,000 people to flee the country out of fear, and is threatening to send another 130,000 refugees back to Myanmar.

The US tacitly supported the 2006 coup and undoubtedly gave the green light for the army to seize power on May 22. The Obama administration formally denounced the coup, suspended some military training and cut a token \$4.7 million in aid—actions it was required to take under US law—but military ties between the two countries remain extremely close.

The US has remained an official ally of Thailand since 1954, including during numerous military-backed dictatorships. It used the country as a base during the Vietnam War and the war in Afghanistan. The US embassy in Bangkok is one of the largest in Asia, with 3,000 staff representing over 60 different agencies. The US National Security Agency collaborates closely with Thailand's intelligence agencies and has placed

monitoring devices on the internet and telecommunications cables linking Thailand with the rest of the world.

On June 24, Scot Marciel, Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, told the House Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific that the US was legally obliged to cut some ties with Thailand after the coup. But he stressed that “mindful of our long-term strategic interests, we remain committed to maintaining our enduring friendship with the Thai people and nation, including the military”.

Marciel confirmed that Washington was “reviewing” whether to go ahead with next year’s Cobra Gold military training exercise, which has been held in Thailand every year since 1982. He described the exercise, one of the largest in Asia, as “hugely important” for the US, Thailand and “the entire region.”

Congressman Steve Chabot, who chairs the subcommittee, downplayed the Thai junta’s repressive measures, saying they “pale[d] in comparison to some other countries”. But he expressed concern that it could “send the wrong message if we allow [Thailand] to participate in Cobra Gold,” and suggested moving the exercise to Australia.

The NCPO’s deputy chief and head of the air force Prajin Juntong told the media it was “no problem” if Cobra Gold was relocated. Colonel Sirichan Nga-thong told the *Bangkok Post* on July 5 that other military exercises were proceeding. Officers from the army’s Directorate of Intelligence trained with US and Australian troops in May and June.

On July 9, US ambassador Kristie Kenney met Thai air force chief Prajin Juntong, deputy chief of the NCPO, and confirmed that Washington would go ahead with a scheduled service update for some of Thailand’s F-16 fighter jets. According to the *Bangkok Post*, she said “relations between Thailand and the US were continuing smoothly, especially those concerning the Thai air force.”

On July 14, the *Nation* quoted a senior military source, who exposed the hollowness of the US threats to downgrade relations. The source claimed: “The US has submitted a letter saying it will resume Cobra Gold jointly with Thailand, but we have not responded to it. We have asked the US to explain in a written statement why [it wants to resume the exercises].”

The source said if the US chose to withdraw Cobra Gold from Thailand, the junta would conduct exercises with ASEAN countries, Myanmar, China and India. US embassy spokesman David Whitted told the *Straits Times* on July 16 that “the United States has not made a final decision about conducting the Cobra Gold exercise.”

The leak to the *Nation* was an apparent attempt to secure a more open endorsement from Washington by threatening a closer alignment with China. A July 5 editorial in the newspaper stated that “Bangkok has been pushed toward China thanks to Western condemnation of the coup, a stark contrast to Beijing’s empathy.”

Beijing last month held talks with a Thai military delegation, and this month invited Sihasak Puangketkeow, permanent secretary of the Thai Foreign Ministry, to discuss trade and investment. China is Thailand’s largest trade partner, while Thailand is China’s third largest. The two countries also have long-standing military ties dating back to the late 1970s, when they collaborated to supply the Khmer Rouge guerrillas fighting the Vietnamese-backed government in Cambodia.

While Washington will undoubtedly closely monitor Bangkok’s talks with Beijing, the Thai junta has clearly indicated that it has no desire for a loosening of the alliance with the US. Rather, it appears to be using the prospect of closer ties with China as a bargaining chip to strengthen the alliance. At the same time, the military is proceeding cautiously, well aware that Washington could quickly turn the regime into a pariah if it too openly embraces Beijing.



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