

# Thailand's junta leader welcomed at the White House

**Our reporter**  
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Thailand's Prime Minister General Prayuth Chan-ocha visited President Trump at the White House on Monday night. The meeting marked the first time the Thai junta leader has been welcomed to the United States since the 2014 coup, indicating an open embrace of the repressive military regime.

Their conversations centered on strengthening military and trade relationships. Commenting before the private meeting, Prayuth stated the need for "security defense cooperation," referring both to the junta's expansion of the domestic military apparatus and Washington's need for regional alliances.

Thailand officials reaffirmed their support for Washington's aggressive confrontation with North Korea, including the crippling UN sanctions. The Trump administration has been pressing the Thai regime to end all financial and trade relations involving North Korea. The mounting confrontation with North Korea is part of broader efforts throughout the region to undermine the influence of China, including in Thailand.

US officials have called for boosting economic relations with Thailand. Thai diplomats and corporate representatives have presented investment plans aimed at expanding financial ties and trade. In line with "America First" protectionism, Trump called for Thailand to import more US goods, extracting a promise from Prayuth to boost annual purchases of coal to 50,000–60,000 tonnes.

Trump and Prayuth barely touched issues of democratic rights, including the junta's ongoing political repression and the military's ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya minority in neighbouring Burma (Myanmar).

In its three years of power, the Thai junta has imposed its own "constitutional rule" which

undermines the rights to assembly and free speech, limits access to information criticizing the government, and hands unlimited powers to the cabinet. Prayuth's government has continued to delay promised national elections, while suppressing opposition and dissent.

Since the coup, at least 80 people have been tried for peaceful assembly, 27 have charged with criticizing the regime and another 56 for criticizing the royal monarchy. Over the past month, the pro-junta courts have protected those responsible for the 2010 military crackdown on protesters while imposing a five-year jail term on former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra on trumped up corruption charges. Yingluck fled overseas before the guilty verdict was handed down.

Trump's dropping of any, even nominal, criticism of the Thai junta's repressive methods and his welcoming of Prayuth to the White House will only encourage the regime to intensify its crackdown on critics and opponents. Defending Trump's actions, the right-wing think tank Heritage Foundation declared, "We need to be concerned about human rights and democracy, but it can't dictate our relationships with our allies."

Trump described Washington's relationship with Thailand as "very strong... [and] getting stronger in the last nine months." The White House regards Thailand as a critical element in pulling Southeast Asian nations away from China and more firmly into the US camp. In August, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson visited Thailand, the Philippines and Malaysia to initiate the discussions on military and economic alliances. Trump plans to attend the Association of South East Asian Nations summit in November.

Trump's strengthening of ties with the Thai junta is a continuation of the policy of the previous Obama administration. During the political turmoil in 2014, the US government maintained its support of the military

even as it prepared to oust Yingluck Shinawatra and her elected government.

When General Prayuth seized power and cracked down on all opposition, the Obama administration issued limited criticisms and reduced but did not cut off military ties.

The US announced an immediate suspension of \$3.5 million in military aid and a reduction in military exercises, but left the most vital programs intact. Economic relations remained untouched, and, in fact, were strengthened over the last two years of Obama's time in office. Although the former administration never invited the junta leaders to the White House, it aimed to maintain and develop military relations in all possible ways.

The Obama administration's expressions of concern for democratic rights and calls for a new election were utterly cynical. As part of the "pivot to Asia" against China, Obama was above all concerned to assert US geostrategic, political, and economic interests in a counter-offensive against China's growing economic and military influence.

Like other countries in the region, Thailand has sought to balance between the US and China. The Thai military, however, has longstanding connections with the US. In the wake of the reduction in American military aid, Thailand increased its military ties with China, causing concern in the United States, Japan, and ASEAN.

Trump has dropped the cosmetic facade of "human rights" and cautious language as he seeks to strengthen relations with the Thai military regime. His welcoming of the coup leader Prayuth to the White House underscores the administration's embrace of authoritarianism and militarism both at home and abroad.



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