

Political crisis in Thailand and its effects on foreign relations

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Summary

While the main purpose of the protest movement is to end Thaksin Shinawatra's influence and expose corruption, the sense of animosity and mistrust towards other countries among the Yellow Shirts and Democrat Party supporters is the by product that is severely affecting Thailand's external relations with the US, other key partners, and its overall position in Southeast Asia.

There is still no end in sight for Thailand's political crisis that has lasted for more than seven years since the government of Thaksin Shinawatra was toppled by a military coup in September 2006. Without the intervention by the Thai military, the judiciary or other decision-making forces, Suthep Thaugsuban's "Shut down Bangkok, Restart Thailand" campaign, which started on January 13, will merely prolong the present political deadlock. Indeed, it may last even after the February election as the Democrat Party and its anti-government supporters boycott the national poll.

But the side-effects of the years-long attempt to root out Thaksin's influence from Thai politics goes beyond domestic political instability and polarization. On the international front, Thailand's relations with foreign countries are being jeopardized by political scams aiming to discredit Thaksin and his party-led government. For some countries, engaging with Thailand without being drawn into the existing political game is becoming increasingly difficult.

The Shadow of Preah Vihear Temple

The classic case is the Thailand-Cambodia dispute over the Preah Vihear Temple that flared up in 2008. Following the joint communique in which Thailand expressed support for Cambodia to list Preah Vihear as a UNESCO World Heritage site, The People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), or the so-called Yellow Shirt movement, accused the People Power Party's Foreign Minister Noppadon Pattama of ceding the 4.6 square kilometer area surrounding the Temple to Cambodia and abandoning Thailand's right to reclaim the Preah Vihear in exchange for business concessions in Cambodia.

The Democrat Party, the then main opposition party, repeated the PAD's charges against Noppadon in the no-confidence debate despite the Foreign Minister's insistence that Cambodia had agreed with Thailand to list the Temple's vicinity in accordance with the 1962 Thai Cabinet's Resolution which would not alter the existing territory. It also ignored the fact that Thailand can no longer request the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to reverse its 1962 verdict to award Preah Vihear to Cambodia. With the Democrat's push, the Thai Administrative Court and Constitutional Court both ruled against the validity of the joint communique. Noppadon resigned from the post and Cambodia went on to register the Temple with the UNESCO but the relations between the two countries significantly deteriorated due to the nationalist fervor being stirred up on both sides. From 2008 until the end of Democrat Party's government in July 2011, the Thailand-Cambodia border had witnessed several alleged incursions, diplomatic tensions and military skirmishes.

Thaksin has close personal ties with Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen and may even have used that to benefit his family business in Cambodia but the Preah Vihear case has proven to be a wrong move of the anti-Thaksin forces which vows to protect their national territory. In May 2011, Cambodia finally requested the ICJ to interpret its 1962 rule on

Preah Vihear and claimed its right over the 4.6 square kilometer area. The verdict was announced last November entitling Cambodia to the whole area of the Temple's promontory. While the Thai government insists that Cambodia did not succeed in taking what it had claimed, it is certain that Thailand will lose some of the area it has occupied for more than 50 years.

With the Cambodian government being considered by the Yellow Shirts and Democrat supporters as Thaksin's collaborator and a threat to Thailand's national integrity, the future territorial settlement over ICJ's ruling between the two governments can possibly stoke further political tension.

The America Conspiracy

The US is another country that has become a target of the royalist cum nationalist Yellow Shirts. Last month, a thousand protesters belonging to the Network of Students and Citizens for Reforms (NSCR), one of the alliances that form the current anti-Yingluck Shinawatra government movement, marched to the US Embassy and demanded that US ambassador Kristie Kenney be transferred. According to the NSCR leader, Nitithorn Lamlua, the US sided with the Yingluck government by requesting the protesters to respect democracy and the election. He also accused the US of supporting the corrupt and tyrannical government so that it can exploit Thailand's oil reserve and set up a military base to contain China.

Nitithorn is a lawyer and political advisor of PAD whose main leader Sondhi Limthongkul owns the influential Manager Daily newspaper and ASTV, the Yellow Shirt's political mouthpiece. Just a week before the march, Manager Daily reported the scandal on social media that the Thailand Ministry of Foreign Affairs had hired Davenport McKesson Corporation to lobby the US government to set up a naval base in Thailand. The report cited the confirmation of the news validity from Korbsak Sabhavas, the Deputy Chairman of the Democrat Party, who also posted on his Facebook that the government is 'selling out the country' to the US. The scandal went viral and was widely shared among the anti-government supporters but the Thai Foreign Minister responded quickly enough to prove no association with Davenport.

In fact, this is not the first time that the US is mentioned while the Yingluck government is accused of trying to sell out Thailand for personal interest. In June 2012, NASA's request to use U-Tapao airbase for atmospheric studies in Southeast Asia was suspected by the Yellow Shirts to be a deal in which the Thai government would allow Washington to use its military airbase for strategic purpose in exchange for a US visa for Thaksin. The concerted pressure from the Yellow Shirts and Democrat Party on the government's decision resulted in NASA's cancellation of the plan. Ironically, it was under the Democrat Party's government that the U-Tapao had been offered by Thailand to be the base for the research.

Nitithorn's accusation of the US role and interest in Thailand is not new. The 'Ugly America' discourse has been spreading for a while through Sondhi's talk show on ASTV and Manager Daily which from last April to September published 21 episodes of the articles by Chatchawan Chatsuthichai who tries to paint out the US conspiracy to take over Thailand and the world. In the propaganda-like talk shows and articles of these pseudo-foreign policy analysts, the US cooperation with the Thaksin regime is projected as being behind Thailand's high oil price and CIA funding behind the Red Shirt movement and the insurgency in Thailand's Deep South. According to them, the US pivot to Asia is a threat to Thailand and the whole Asia as the superpower is against Asian solidarity and creates China's conflict with Japan and Taiwan.

Deciphering the double speak

The Democrat Party and the Yellow Shirts' hostility towards the US is puzzling. Even in the latest political crisis, many countries, including even China, issued statements in support of the upcoming election and encouraging an early resolution of the conflict under the constitutional framework and rule of law. Although the US sanctions against the 2006 military coup were widely criticized by the anti-Thaksin forces, it was later revealed that the US had known in advance and given the green light for the Thai military. The sanction on Thailand under the Bush administration was routine rather than serious and the Bush government also avoided criticizing the Thai military regime.

What explains this behavior could be the US taking a proactive role in Thai politics and its changing position towards military coup under the Obama administration. During his Thailand visit in May 2010, the US Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell met with some leaders from Thaksin's party and called on both sides to resolve the conflict. Earlier, the US ambassador to Thailand Eric John also held a few rounds of discussion between all parties involved in the political crisis. But this move from the US was strongly criticized by Kasit Piromya, the Foreign Minister of Democrat Party's government as an attempt to intervene in Thai domestic politics. When the Thai Army considered another coup in 2010 and consulted with the US defence representatives, they received the answer that the US had no choice but to employ a stronger measure against the coup. Last month, when Nitithorn announced the plan to seize the US embassy on stage, the anti-government alliances had just failed miserably to convince the Army to stage another coup.

All this has naturally led to further American concern about the negative trend in US relations with one of its five treaty allies in Asia, as expressed by Ernest Bower, an American expert on US-Southeast Asia relations at CSIS. One immediate approach has been to reduce disengage and backtrack. To avoid being accused of taking sides and getting further entangled, US senior officials have recently started to skip Bangkok, and prefer to visit other Southeast Asian countries over its oldest ally.

China and Thailand's Deep South

As for China, despite allowing Thaksin residency and closely engaging with the Yingluck government in many projects, the Asian great power had managed to stay free from being a victim of Thai political polarization for a long while. However, this seemed to end last October when Sondhi started to call for his supporters to take a strong stand against China's plan to colonize Thailand with its business and Chinese immigration which will be easily facilitated by the future rail connectivity and the impending visa exemption. He also warned that Chinese capitalism is a bigger evil than the American. This came as a surprise as Sondhi and many of PAD followers were always proud to be 'the Chinese descendant who loves Thailand'. China is a main partner in Thailand's plan to construct high speed rail links across the country with the 2.2 trillion baht loans which is heavily criticized by the anti-government movement.

The political divisiveness in Thailand creates conditions in which any country having a business with Thaksin's family or Thaksin-backed government could be considered by the anti-Thaksin forces to be complicit with Thaksin alleged scheme to take over Thailand. Singapore faced that charge early on when Thaksin sold his Shin Corporation to Temasek Holdings and was exempt from capital gains tax.

Another example related to Thaksin's talks with Najib Razak and Malaysia's agreement to assist Thailand by facilitating talks between the Thai government and the Deep South separatist group Barisan Revolusi Nasional. Sondhi and the Democrat Party politicians accused Malaysia's move as part of a grander plan of Kuala Lumpur to support the insurgents' plan to gain independence and convert Thailand's Deep South into a friendly buffer state.

Politics and geopolitics

While the main purpose of the movement is to overthrow Thaksin's power, the sense of animosity and mistrust towards other countries among the Yellow Shirts and Democrat Party supporters is the by product that is severely affecting Thailand's external relations with the United States, other key partners, and its overall position in Southeast Asia. In the short term this fits well with the populist discourse of 'restoring the nation' largely held among the mobilized middle-class protesters who keep sharing information from media outlets and the social networks of their political camps. However, in the long run, the Thai public's inability to access alternative information sources and positions from different international sources, their lack of understanding about current international politics, coupled with the inculcated national history which centered on how the royal family has saved Thailand from internal and external threats, can all generate an unhealthy and uncontrollable nationalism.

This trend in Thai politics does not bode well for Thailand's ambition to be the center of cooperation and connectivity in Indochina linking with different countries and regions. It carries the potential to disrupt or damage any project Thailand collaborates with other countries and seriously affects Thailand's foreign relations at every level.

Thailand is a key country in ASEAN which occupies a significant geostrategic location in Asia and Southeast Asia. For major powers like the US, China, India and Japan, Thailand serves as a gateway for further economic and political engagement with Indochina. While engagement with the Thai government is necessary, it is equally important that external actors avoid becoming a target of Thai public resentment. For now, there is no better way than keeping transparency and accountability in all projects and maintaining good will.