

How to Move the Thailand-U.S. Strategic Alliance Forward

Dr. Darnp Sukontasap

The Thailand-U.S. Strategic Alliance is often framed by the connections established across the almost 190 years of diplomatic relations between the two countries, including (1) Thailand being the first country in Asia to sign a Treaty of Amity and Commerce with the United States, (2) how American political support facilitated Thailand's speedy admission into the United Nations at the end of World War II, (3) the Thanat-Rusk communique of 1962, (4) the four decades of the Cobra Gold military exercise begun in 1982, and (5) Thailand's designation as a major non-NATO ally (MNNA) in 2003 by President George W. Bush.

These accomplishments are indeed an impressive testament to the long and close relationship between Thailand and the United States. But history, at its best, can only serve as a foundation for bilateral relations. At times, it can also serve as a good indication of the trend for the future relationship. However, it will take a concerted effort by the two countries to ensure that the Strategic Alliance maintains strong forward momentum into the next decade. Similarly, intentioned guidance will be required if the Strategic Alliance is to retain its value as a practical tool for the two nations to effectively navigate the increasingly complex challenges of the future, both at the regional and global levels.

Therefore, while we speak of the special relationship of the past with fondness, it is imperative that both Thailand and the United States make serious efforts to invest in strengthening their existing friendship, while finding new ways by which and new areas in which cooperation can be deepened.

To deepen cooperation, both Thailand and the United States need to be forward looking with a broad perspective that considers the modern-day ecosystem of which the Alliance is now a part. Gone are the days when an alliance is viewed exclusively from the security and military perspective. The geopolitical realities of the 21st century require alliances to encompass agendas which are non-military, non-political and non-confrontational.

The cornerstone of an alliance is the joint vision of its members. The word "strategic" in "strategic alliance" does not intrinsically refer to military or security cooperation. Instead, "strategic" defines the "how" of realizing common goals.

In fact, the visions and goals that the United States and Thailand have for themselves as nations, and for Southeast Asia as a region, are not that far apart. Such visions and goals are very similar, peace, prosperity, well-being for the people, respect for democratic principles, human rights, gender equality, environmental conservation, and others. These are the shared visions and goals of the two countries. These are the things that both countries want to see in Thailand and in Southeast Asia in the years to come.

It is a journey from where they are today to where they want to be or aspire to arrive at in their relationship. If the two countries can agree on this point, then they can start to discuss the "how" or the "strategy" to

Dr. Darnp Sukontasap, Director, Institute of Diplomacy and International Studies, Rangsit University, Thailand, explains that, "gone are the days when an alliance is viewed exclusively from the security and military perspective. The geopolitical realities of the 21st century require alliances to encompass agendas which are non-military, non-political and non-confrontational."

make things happen. The “how” would also tell us what needs to be strengthened, or what needs to be fixed, before the two countries can move forward at full speed.

The important thing is, before the “how” can be articulated, the two countries would first need to agree on a set of priorities that they want to address, promote or resolve. To this end, perhaps a good place to start would be defining some issues of common concern.

Areas for cooperation and coordination include: the direction of political, democratic, economic, and social developments in Thailand and the region, the widening income disparity among the various segments of the population, the current “systematic” mass migration and human trafficking in Southeast Asia, the increasing political and military tensions in the region—especially in the South China Sea, pollution, water resource management and climate change in the Mekong region, cybersecurity. This is not an exhaustive list. There is a plethora of points where Thai and U.S. interests intersect.

Thailand and the United States can start by picking a few issues from the list above or the [United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals \(SDG\) agenda](#) and turning them into tangible, achievable and measurable projects.

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But, in discussing “how” Thailand and the United States should jointly deal with these pressing issues, there needs to be some ground rules. Although the term alliance does not imply equality, it does imply mutual trust and respect.

No two countries are the same, as far as history, culture and experience are concerned. Thailand respects and admires the United States for its democratic values and principles. However, the fact is, due to its own unique historical and cultural experience, Thailand will never be completely like the United States, no matter how much of the international principles and standards it adopts.

Therefore, in order to promote better understanding between the two countries, as their respective societies and thinking continue to evolve, the most important commodity that both sides need to invest in each other is “time”. There needs to be more regular informal and formal dialogues at all levels, in areas such as diplomacy, economy, trade, security and the environment.

Aside from understanding each other better, the dialogues would also help the two countries identify commonalities and shared interests, and, hopefully, help each other find novel and creative solutions to address issues of common concern.

The responsibility lies on both countries to ensure that they bring value to the table, in whatever they think or do, and that they have realistic expectations of one another. If Thailand says that it is of important “geostrategic” value to the United States, it will have to be able to elaborate on and demonstrate its importance. If the United States says that it values the strategic partnership between the two countries, perhaps a greater investment of time and an increase in communication is warranted.

It is only through the re-examination and recalibration of the Thai-U.S. Alliance, together with the injection of new thinking, openness, and increased communication that we can ensure the relevance of the Alliance well into the next decade and take full advantage of what the Alliance has to offer.

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