*Contemporary Southeast Asia Vol. 43, No. 3 (2021), pp. 585–88* DOI: 10.1355/cs43-3f

ISSN 0129-797X print / ISSN 1793-284X electronic

# Book Reviews

***The US-Thai Alliance and Asian International Relations: History, Memory and Current Developments*. By Gregory Raymond and John Blaxland. London, UK: Routledge, 2021. Softcover: 238pp.**

When US Vice President Kamala Harris and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin visited Singapore and Vietnam in mid-2021 (Austin also stopped in the Philippines), officials in Thailand, Washington's oldest alliance partner, asked the Americans why they were bypassed. US officials have not publicly explained their decision, but the reason is likely related to the fact that Thai-US relations have been through a difficult patch in recent years and this has dented trust between the countries and weakened the alliance.

In *The US-Thai Alliance and Asian International Relations: History, Memory and Current Developments*, Gregory Raymond and John Blaxland analyse the complicated and sometimes tortured ties between the two countries, and how Bangkok has responded by embedding itself in multi-faceted relations with China and other Asian states. Part of the authors' analysis about the United States (and China) is based on surveys undertaken between 2015 and 2018 with some 1,800 respondents from various Thai military academies and staff colleges. The authors do not claim that their surveys were statistically representative of all Thai people, but rather use it as a prism to show what many senior Thai military officers think about the two superpowers.

Despite decades of US-Thai military cooperation dating back to the beginning of the Cold War, the two scholars found "significant distrust" (p. 67) of the United States among survey respondents. When Raymond and Blaxland asked about military threats, the majority said, "the United States was seen as a more likely military threat

to Thailand than China" (p. 67). They determined no significant differences between respondents who had studied in the United States and those who had studied in other countries.

Tortured exchanges between Washington and Bangkok in the wake of the 2014 coup only partly explain these surprising results. The authors point out that even before the coup, a survey conducted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington found that among 11 Asia-Pacific nations (including China, Japan, India and Australia), Thais were the "least enthusiastic about US leadership" despite their longstanding treaty alliance.

Raymond and Blaxland contend that Thai memories of the Cold War—when Washington provided over US$1 billion in economic and military aid in the two decades to 1966—are "underplayed in Thai historiography and collective memory" (p. 184). Instead, the memories of many Thais are ones of political interference, dictatorship, social problems (such as prostitution) and strained relations with Thailand's neighbours. The authors contend Thais have a "complex and ambivalent psychology towards the West" and a "righteous indignation against external criticism" (p. 69) which impacts their views of the United States.

Thai soldiers fought alongside US forces during the wars in Korea, Vietnam and Laos, but Bangkok and Washington had tense negotiations when the United States began withdrawing from Thai bases in the early 1970s, the writers point out. In the democratic uprising in 1973, left-leaning protesters accused the United States of supporting "tyrants" and using Thai territory to engage in wars with its neighbours.

Raymond and Blaxland argue that the Cold War is a distant memory for many Thais, who now are focused on more contemporary issues—Washington's failure to help Thailand during the 1997 Asian financial crisis, US criticism of Thai coups, and accusations that Thailand violated trade rules related to intellectual property and labour rights. Thai officials often complain that American officials regularly condemn Thai coups more harshly than those in other countries, such as Egypt.

Analysts repeatedly attribute the Thai drift away from the United States to its warming ties with China, but the authors found that Thais viewed China as the "second most threatening" nation, just behind the United States. Raymond and Blaxland found "greater variability" in how China is viewed than the way Thais see the United States (p. 103). They attribute some of this to the fact that

China is closer geographically and culturally and that the two countries share a long history.

Thai-China relations have gone through different phases much like Thai-US ties. Over the past few centuries, millions of Chinese immigrants moved to Thailand, with most of them assimilating by marrying Thai women and adopting Thai Theravada Buddhism. But in the mid-twentieth century, assimilation slowed as the Chinese began intermarrying within their own communities and establishing their own schools, prompting fears about a "Chinese state within a state". Thai nationalist leaders began forcing the Chinese out of industries like rice-milling, cracking down on the Communist Party of Thailand (which was supported by Beijing) and, in the 1960s and 1970s, restricting Chinese cultural displays, the authors say.

Thailand's geopolitical realignment began to change when Bangkok normalized diplomatic relations with China in 1975. With this strategic shift, China started playing a more important economic role in Thailand, and trade between the two countries increased significantly, prompting more Sino-Thais to reclaim their Chinese identities. Sino-Thais became more politically active, and by the time of the 2014 coup sharply criticized America's condemnation of the coup while lauding China's neutrality as Thailand reverted to authoritarian rule.

According to the authors, Thailand faced two crises near the end of the last century in which China played a strategically helpful role in reframing its image among Thais. The first was after Vietnam's 1978 invasion of Cambodia, which Thais believed threatened their security. Links between the Chinese and Thai militaries were expanded and China began delivering weapons to Cambodian insurgents on the Thai-Cambodia border. The second event was the 1997 Asian financial crisis to which China responded by offering financial assistance and refusing to devalue its currency.

Raymond and Blaxland argue that today, Thai "strategic culture" focuses on the "maintenance of multiple relations with Great Powers" and its neighbours following the tradition of the venerated nineteenth-century monarch Chulalongkorn. They say that even as China's influence increases, Bangkok will seek strong ties with other major powers, including the United States, and regional powers like Japan and India.

The authors provide a very useful primer on why Thailand's relations with the United States have veered off course, and why Bangkok's relations with China seem easier, albeit not without their

own set of challenges. They argue that in the future, the Thai-US relationship will be one more of a "partnership" than a traditional alliance. However, the book does not spell out how this sort of cooperation between Washington and Bangkok can be fostered. For this partnership to come to fruition, both sides will need to seek out opportunities to restore trust, perhaps by exploring short-term opportunities to engage each other in non-traditional security issues such as fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, strengthening economic ties, tackling cybersecurity issues or working together to deliver aid to deeply troubled Myanmar.

---

Murray Hiebert is a Senior Associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC. Postal address: 1616 Rhode Island Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C. 20036, United States; email: mhiebertASIA@protonmail.com.