

US Battling to Swing Thailand Away from China

Chinese submarines and American stealth fighter jets are both on the menu for Thailand's military-aligned government

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You can see China's inexorable southern thrust along the Mekong River where tall, fanciful, Chinese buildings sprout on the Laos side of this sleepy northern border, sparking hopes and fears about Beijing's influence and intent in Thailand.

The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) chief's recent visit to Bangkok amid a flurry of lucrative US military and business deals may lure Thailand back toward the US and away from China in the future, but the rivalry is heating up.

"Thailand has been leaning toward China, and away from the US, for two decades," said Benjamin Zawacki, the Bangkok-based American author of *Thailand: Shifting Ground Between the US and a Rising China*.

"In the military sphere, relations with the US are arguably still deeper but the gap is closing swiftly," Zawacki told Asia Times.

Many Thais celebrate Chinese ancestry which dates back more than 700 years, in contrast to the persecution they suffered in Thailand during US-led anti-communist purges in the mid-20th century.

Chinese schools, newspapers and other facilities in Thailand were forced to close during those years of racism and political frenzy, amid accusations of disloyalty and subversion.

“Ancestry plays a big part in bringing the two countries closer together, as more Chinese migrants moved to Thailand than to any other countries” in Southeast Asia, said Thai-Chinese Cultural Relationship Council president Pinit Jarusombat, a former deputy prime minister.

Thailand is prized by China partly because this rapidly modernizing Southeast Asian nation enjoys access near Bangkok to the Gulf of Thailand, which opens onto the South China Sea.

Beijing and Washington have dangerously opposing views about the South China Sea’s territorial borders, shipping routes, military access and exploitation of natural resources.

The US Navy started training the Thai Royal Navy in anti-submarine warfare in 2019, despite the navy wanting to purchase three Chinese-built Yuan-class S26T submarines, priced at US\$400 million each.

“Any armed conflict in the region that implicates, or directly involves the US and China, will turn on which power occupies the maritime high-ground. The dynamic you describe [about submarines] is the rivalry in action,” Zawacki said.

“Since we already have the first submarine [agreed upon], the second and third will have to follow, but it remains to be seen as to when,” Navy Chief Admiral Somprasong Nilsamai said on January 6.

Bangkok’s budget crunch due to Covid-19 may delay the three deliveries.

Here in Nong Khai, Thais hope to profit from a sleek \$6 billion, 257-mile (414-kilometer), Chinese-built railway across Laos, completed in December under China’s Belt and Road Initiative.

The new route links southern China’s Yunnan province to Vientiane, the capital of impoverished, landlocked Laos several miles upriver and across from Nong Khai.

Imports and exports utilizing the Chinese train at Vientiane must be transferred by road across the Mekong’s bridge to Nong Khai’s railhead, where Thailand’s trains connect to Bangkok and elsewhere.



Conceptual image of the extension of the Lao-China railway through Thailand. Image: Facebook

Laos' railway to China "will likely make Thailand more economically dependent upon Beijing, which itself will seek to protect its geopolitical interests in Thailand," said Paul Chambers, a lecturer at Thailand's Naresuan University, who specializes in Bangkok's international affairs, military and foreign policy.

"Thailand has become a center of bipolar friction between the US and China," said Chambers.

To tighten relations, CIA **Deputy Director David Cohen** flew to Bangkok in November and met **Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-Ocha**, a now-retired army chief who seized power in a 2014 coup and won a 2019 election.

Their closed-door meeting reportedly highlighted Thailand's politics, economy and regional security.

Ford Motor Co, meanwhile, announced in December it would invest \$900 million in an upgrade of its car assembly factories in Thailand.

Other US firms also promised new investments. America is Thailand's biggest export market.

"Since the Biden administration took office, the US has reached out to maintain a close

dialogue with their Thai counterparts,” said Foreign Ministry spokesman Tanee Sangrat.

“The country has not been bypassed by the US,” Tanee said.

Thailand, meanwhile, is enthusiastically integrating China’s Huawei 5G telecommunications systems, including smartphones, cloud computing, fiber infrastructure, medical services and artificial intelligence.

“I am deeply impressed by Huawei’s history and dedication,” Prime Minister Prayuth said.

The Taliban’s recent victory over the US in Afghanistan also had a knock-on effect in Thailand.

“Many Thai senior security officials were disappointed that the US would leave Afghanistan and give up on an ally,” Chambers said.

“However, by leaving Afghanistan, Washington is paying more attention to East Asia and China, and can perhaps offer more military aid to Thailand. That is something that Thailand likes.”

Image on the right: The US Lockheed Martin F-35 could be seen on the Thai military’s shopping list. Photo: WikiCommons /US Air Force / Airman 1st Class Jose Miguel T Tamondong



For example, **Air Chief Marshal Napadej Dhupatemiya** wants to purchase eight Lockheed Martin F-35 stealth combat jets to replace the aging F-5s and F-16s.

“The F-35 aircraft are no longer out of reach because the price per unit has been lowered to \$82 million from \$142 million,” ACM Napadej said on January 4.

The Royal Thai Army is already awaiting delivery of about 60 US-made Stryker armored personnel carriers – the type of vehicle the military deployed when crushing Bangkok’s pro-democracy insurrection in 2010 during which nearly 100 people, mostly civilians, died.

Bangkok is a non-NATO treaty ally with Washington and was used to launch US aerial bombing raids and ground assaults against communist nationalists in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos during America’s failed 1960-75 regional Vietnam War.

Ghosts from that bloodshed still haunt relations.

“We should not follow the path of a nation [the US] which, in the past, set up a military

base in Thai territory, from which it launched offensives” against Thailand’s neighbors, Pinit told the Bangkok Post.

A new generation of Thais is also being taught about the US-China rivalry.

“Globalization has benefitted the poor in China and the rich in the US, not the American middle class, prompting them [the US] to look for a scapegoat,” Chulalongkorn University’s Chinese Studies Center director Arm Tungnirun told a recent forum.

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Featured image: A busy street in Bangkok’s Chinatown. Thailand and China have relations and connections going back centuries. Photo: WikiCommons

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