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US Alliances with the Philippines and Thailand: Partnerships or Interests?

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Synopsis

While both the Philippines and Thailand are treaty allies of the US in Southeast Asia, they exhibit different levels of support to the US renewed focus on the Asia-Pacific. The vibrancy of Washington's ties with Manila and Bangkok is influenced by perception of a common security threat as well as domestic political and economic concerns.

Commentary

The US 'pivot' strategy towards the Asia-Pacific entails reinvigorating its security alliances with its partners in the region. In Southeast Asia, the Philippines and Thailand have long been the treaty allies of the US. However, Manila and Bangkok have different responses to the renewed US security engagement in the Asia-Pacific. Manila warmly welcomes the US military presence in the region while Bangkok adopts a hedging strategy to preserve its vibrant ties with Beijing. Washington's ties with Bangkok and Manila are influenced by two crucial factors: (1) the perception of an existential threat and (2) domestic political and economic interests.

The role of an existential threat

A key strategic hub for American forces, the Philippines has offered Washington greater access to its military facilities in exchange for American assistance in the modernisation of its military. Philippine President Benigno Aquino III announced in July that it may ask the US to deploy spy planes in the country's territory, particularly in the South China Sea. The US has recently approved the transfer of another patrol ship to the Philippine Navy and tripled its military assistance to the Philippines to US\$30 million in 2012.

As tensions in the South China Sea heighten, there is now a new facet in the US-Philippines alliance, i.e., China as an existential threat. The alliance is perceived as a deterrent to China's creeping assertiveness. Following the naval stand-off between Manila and Beijing, two US nuclear-armed submarines made port calls in Subic and thousands of American troops, with at least five American warships, held two military exercises with Filipino soldiers.

Though Thailand has been a treaty ally of the US since 1954, it is not willing to further open its territory for the facilitation of US strategic rebalancing. For instance, Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's cabinet decided last June to allow the parliament to first scrutinize NASA's request to use the U-tapao Airbase. After opposition

lawmakers warned that approving the NASA request could compromise Thailand's vibrant trade ties with China, NASA withdrew its request.

Since the Vietnam War, U-tapao has been used by the US to support its post-disaster humanitarian efforts and military operations, recently in Afghanistan and Iraq. US troops have access to U-tapao through the annual Cobra Gold multinational war games. NASA initially planned to use the airbase for a six-week climate study in August and September. However, the request was linked to the US 'pivot' to Asia and perceived as part of a wider American strategy to contain China. Beijing reportedly viewed the NASA request as a way of safeguarding American interests in Southeast Asia.

The US and Thailand do not have a common security threat that drives them to enhance their alliance. This "threat deficit" has significantly affected US-Thai cooperation. Though Thailand may be wary of China's perceived assertiveness, it nonetheless maintains and values its robust political and economic relations with China. While US-Thai relations have been less dynamic, Thailand and China upgraded their ties to a "comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership" during the visit of Ms Yingluck to Beijing last April. One reason why Sino-Thai relations remain strong is the absence of contentious territorial disputes.

Domestic political and economic considerations

Clearly, the recent behavior of Thailand is driven by its domestic economic interests. Thailand has benefitted enormously from a rising China in recent years. Although the US remains a major investor in Thailand, China is Thailand's largest export market. Sino-Thai bilateral trade valued at US\$64.7 billion in 2011 overshadows US-Thai commerce which stood at US\$35 billion in the same year. China also pledged continuous assistance in Thailand's reconstruction and water conservancy projects following last year's destructive floods. As Thailand benefits from China's soft power diplomacy, it is not surprising that it adopts a hedging strategy.

Meanwhile, the US is the Philippines' largest source of FDIs and the second-largest trade partner. In 2011, US-Philippines bilateral trade reached US\$13.6 billion, higher than the value of China-Philippines commerce (US\$12.1 billion). In June 2012, 15.6% of Philippine exports were shipped to the US, compared to 12.4% bought by China. The flexing of China's economic muscle pushes the Philippines closer to the US. When China 'punished' the Philippines by banning Philippine bananas, which could hit 200,000 Filipino farmers and the country's export growth, the US immediately offered to buy the country's bananas.

The stagnation of US-Thai defence ties in recent years has likewise been caused by distracting domestic politics in Thailand. Since the ouster of ex-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, Thailand has become more focused internally than externally. The cancellation of the NASA proposal indicates that Bangkok's divisive politics greatly influences its security ties with Washington. The opposition Democrat Party claimed that Ms Yingluck would approve the proposal in exchange for granting Mr Thaksin a coveted US visa. Whether or not the criticisms of the proposal have any basis, the existing political fault lines in the country have troubled the US-Thai security partnership.

In the Philippines, domestic politics under the Aquino administration have been conducive to a vibrant US-Philippines alliance. Most of the political leaders, including from the opposition except left-leaning parties, have backed Mr Aquino in playing the US card vis-à-vis China's assertiveness. Mr Aquino is less receptive to Beijing's commercial incentives, which undermines its soft power in the Philippines. Driven by an anti-corruption platform, he even cancelled some of the Chinese-funded projects which were marred by irregularities. Mr Aquino's policy approach towards US and China vividly reflects the domestic public opinion. The results of second quarter 2012 survey conducted by the Social Weather Station show that 55% of Filipinos have little trust in China, a record low, while the US enjoys high public trust at +62 net trust rating.

The convergence or divergence of threat perceptions has indeed determined the depth of US defence cooperation with the Philippines and Thailand. But local political and economic concerns in Manila and Bangkok have also taken precedence over their foreign relations, and dictated their receptivity to Washington's shifting defence strategy. It appears that foreign policy is just an extension of domestic policy after all.

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