

Set the US-Thailand relationship right by Kerry Gershaneck

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The visit of US Adm. Harry B Harris Jr, head of US Pacific Command, to Thailand this week is an opportunity for Thailand and the United States to reset a stagnant, strained relationship. The visit will also be an important symbol of the Trump administration's commitment to the Asia-Pacific Region, and to Southeast Asia in particular.

The visit is in conjunction with *Cobra Gold*, the region's most important multilateral military exercise. Although planned in the final months of the Obama administration, Harris' visit to Thailand will be a crucial marker for the new administration. He will be the most significant US government official to visit Thailand since the 2014 coup.

In much the same manner as Secretary of Defense James Mattis' "first week in office" visit to Japan and Korea, and Secretary of State Tillerson's recent calls to his Japanese, Korean, and Australian counterparts, Harris' visit should also put to rest concern that under Trump, an isolationist America will retreat from Asia into a xenophobic "Fortress USA."

Despite some contentious campaign rhetoric, President Trump and his national security team are well aware that the US is – and must remain – a Pacific nation with strong economic, military, and cultural ties to the countries of the Asia-Pacific.

Historically, the US has had a strong commitment to Asia and that support has been bipartisan and consistent. The commitment did not begin with President Obama's Pivot, or even with President George H. W. Bush's East Asia Strategy Initiative in the early 1990s. This longstanding commitment is best exemplified by the first US treaty in Asia, with Siam in the reign of King Rama III in 1833. The US "investment" in the region has been immense. Beyond investment of national treasure, that investment includes the blood of thousands of young Americans whose sacrifice bought independence, freedom, democracy, and rule of law for friends and allies.

Although overlooked by most news media reporting and many of his critics, Trump reaffirmed this commitment (as well as concerns about improving relations with Thailand) during the 2016 campaign. Key documents include the Republican Platform and articles in foreign policy-related publications by Trump's national security team. Trump's "Peace Through Strength" policy defined in these publications

means forging tighter bonds with US allies and a greater – not a reduced – commitment to the region.

Harris' visit comes at a delicate – but potentially promising – moment. Under the Obama administration, Thai-US relations went from simple atrophy into a highly destructive dynamic. Thailand was once "central" to US strategy in Asia – a treaty alliance partner holding "Major Non-NATO" status. But as it became consumed by internal politics and "diversification" of its foreign policy portfolio, Thailand factored less and less into Washington's calculus.

As one regional security analyst has noted, Thailand's 2014 coup d'état was both a result of declining US influence in the country and the cause of relations hitting historical lows. "Standard Issue" US support for democracy and human rights was, in Thailand's hyper-partisan political environment, seen as taking sides against the Thai military leadership in their struggle over the kingdom's future.

Mistrust seeped into the bilateral relationship, and negatively colored many Thais' views of the US. To quote one Thai army officer, "We bled with you on the battlefields of Korea, in Laos, in Vietnam, and in the War on Terror. But when we needed your understanding during a [deteriorating security situation], you didn't treat us as your friend and ally: you constantly scolded and humiliated us!" Other Thais noted that the Obama administration reached out to the Cuban, Iranian, and other dictatorships at the same time it was publicly lambasting Thailand.

This acrimony created space for China and Russia to exploit, portraying their authoritarian regimes as alternative security partners.

Although relations have stabilized somewhat since the appointment of Ambassador Glyn Davies and the Thai government's progress along the Roadmap back to democracy, the relationship has, at best, muddled along. On the US side, there's been no clear policy direction. That must change. While the Thai government is likely reassessing options in light of the new administration, the United States might look beyond Harris' milestone visit and implement the following steps to reinvigorate the alliance.

1. The US must commit to presidential attendance at the royal cremation ceremony for King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the architect of the modern US-Thai relationship. The Trump administration must show full understanding of the Thai people's reverence for the departed monarch – and show it at the presidential level. In doing so, it will also acknowledge the essential contribution of the US-born King Rama IX to more than 70 years of close Thai-US relations. World leaders and heads of state from around the globe will attend the royal ceremony, and US attendance will be one of its most

important markers on the importance of the US-Thai relationship.

2. The US should increase the pace of senior engagement. Harris' visit is highly significant, of course, but very soon the US should send a very senior administration official (such as a Cabinet secretary) to Thailand to demonstrate progress in relations. At the highest levels, the previous administration met with Cuban and other brutal dictators, compared to whom Thailand's departures on human rights are relatively modest. Thai-US relations demand at least equal attention.

3. Current laws should be changed to permit professional international military education and training (IMET) for Thai officers in the US. IMET is one of the best tools we have for promoting US values. It is absurd to "punish" allied Thai military officers by denying them access to our educational institutions – and thereby push them into schools (and authoritarian mindsets) offered for free by the PRC and Russia.

4. More controversially perhaps, open the policy to sell arms and ammunition to military and police units in Thailand. Equipment modernization is a key priority for Thai military and civilian leadership. After the coup, the US maintained an official policy of a case-by-case review for all such decisions. However, in practice, the US has not approved the transfer of small arms weapons, ammunition and some military vehicles since the coup. US companies have lost hundreds of jobs (500-800) and tens to hundreds of millions of dollars in sales, and US market share. Candidate Trump won the election, in part, on the promise of jobs: There's no useful outcome in continuing this unofficial policy that is costing US companies jobs, so the US should resume providing these materials.

5. Seriously begin long-stalled bilateral trade talks. President Trump is a businessman and he's made it clear he is not opposed to trade per se, and is willing to move ahead with bilateral deals. With Thailand as the centerpiece, show that partnership with the US brings privileges on the economic as well as military realm.

6. Open strategic talks to reexamine the purposes and opportunities codified under the treaty alliance and 2012 Joint Vision Statement for the US-Thailand Defense alliance.

We know where the Thai-US relationship has been since the first treaty in 1833. Set the vision for where we take it from here.

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