

What's wrong with the United States' Southeast Asian allies?

18th October, 2016

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The Philippines and Thailand are not acting like US treaty allies are supposed to. While the Philippines' President Rodrigo Duterte seems somewhat of an outlier, his anti-Americanism is only the latest instalment of instability in the US–Philippines relationship. Thai–US relations have also suffered since the 2014 military coup and Thailand now appears to be seeking closer military ties with China. But these countries' disagreements with the United States do not necessarily mean they want a change to the status quo in Asia.



Duterte's election has thrown perceptions of the US–Philippines alliance into [disarray](#)^[1]. The firebrand leader's policy announcements have included a possible end to joint US–Philippines naval patrols and the US Special Forces presence in Mindanao. These, together with intemperate outbursts in response to US criticism of his campaign against drugs, appear to signal a relationship in serious trouble. Duterte has confounded expectations that his country would continue to draw closer to the United States in the wake of the [South China Sea dispute](#)^[2].

The Thai–US relationship has also struggled since 2014, with continuing frustration from Thai elites towards US policy. After the May 2014 coup there was fury that the United States would condemn the overthrow of the Yingluck government and mildly downgrade military cooperation. Since then the relationship has been marked by bitter spats, especially when US officials have criticised Thailand on human rights issues.

Meanwhile Thailand appears to be drifting closer to China. The two countries have undertaken new joint military exercises and the Thai navy has announced plans to [purchase Chinese](#)

[submarines](#) ^[3]. Thailand's recent decisions to [deport Uighurs](#) ^[4], an ethnic minority population in western China with separatist elements, and block entry to [Hong Kong celebrity activist Joshua Wong](#) ^[5] also appear to demonstrate increasing subservience to China.

Common to both Thailand and the Philippines is a fear of major powers interfering in domestic politics or intervening in internal security problems. While outside criticism is something that most Western states view as merely irritating, for many developing states it can be interpreted as intent to destabilise, including by fostering support for opposition forces.

This view of security circumscribes these countries' embrace of liberal values, which is why views of concepts such as human rights and the rule of law can vary. For example, the right to be innocent until proved guilty is one that considerable numbers of both Thais and Filipinos seem quite prepared to forego if a threat to security is perceived. This was demonstrated in former Thai prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra's [anti-drugs campaign](#) ^[6] and now is evident in the Philippines with Duterte's current crackdown.

All this means that countries like the Philippines and Thailand can react violently to criticism of their human rights performance. They are then prepared to make the political and diplomatic dimensions of their relationships with offending great powers very unpleasant. This includes through public overtures to alternative suitors like China and Russia who, being illiberal themselves, are refreshingly unlikely to offer criticism on the human rights front.

A shifting international power structure is changing the way Thailand and the Philippines balance between the United States and China. Cooperation with the United States offers access to desirable technology and training, as well as a shield against China, but neither state wants to become the patsy for US–China rivalry nor a proxy battleground for the United States. Yet neither wants Chinese hegemony either. To get around this, these states frequently compartmentalise different components of their bilateral relationships.

For example, despite Duterte's bluster, a [scheduled joint air force exercise](#) ^[7] with the United States recently occurred as planned, and the threat to cancel Philippines–US maritime patrols applies only to patrols in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone and not the territorial sea. The number of US forces who might be asked to withdraw from involvement in Philippines counterinsurgency operations is also quite small. And Duterte's threat to [buy arms from Russia and China](#) ^[8] is straight out of the Thai playbook, which is an act of asserting sovereignty and much less a guide to alignment.

In the case of Thailand, there is no sign at present that they or the United States wish to discontinue the flagship regional multilateral exercise 'Cobra Gold', despite threats to institute 'Panda Gold'. While some military training with China is occurring, it is on a far smaller scale than that with the United States.

The familiar separation of economic and security ties — China being the dominant economic partner and the United States the preferred security partner — appears to now extend to the politico-security dichotomy, where stormy political relations can be accompanied by stable military-to-military relationships.

Western states have a moral imperative to reiterate why liberal democracies offer the most just societies and are most able to deliver human dignity, freedom and development of human potential. But the United States and others need to be aware of the different perspectives of Southeast Asian countries. It is no more likely that Thailand or the Philippines will want to be entirely beholden to China than they wish to be beholden entirely to the United States.

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Article from the East Asia Forum: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org>

URL to article: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/?p=52755>

[1] disarray:

<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-philippines-duterte-trying-become-asias-erdogan-17962?page=3>

[2] South China Sea dispute:

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[3] purchase Chinese submarines:

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[4] deport Uighurs:

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[5] Hong Kong celebrity activist Joshua Wong:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/05/hong-kong-activist-joshua-wong-attacks-thailand-after-being-barred-at-chinas-request>

[6] anti-drugs campaign: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2008/03/12/thailands-war-drugs>

[7] scheduled joint air force exercise:

<http://www.pacaf.af.mil/News/ArticleDisplay/tabid/377/Article/961058/air-contingent-prove-s-us-committment-to-philippines.aspx>

[8] buy arms from Russia and China:

<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-duterte-arms-idUSKCN12414A>