



Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations

Thailand is a long-time military ally and economic partner of the United States. The United States operates numerous regional offices from the Bangkok Embassy, one of the largest U.S. diplomatic missions in the world. Bilateral cooperation includes security initiatives and operations, intelligence and law enforcement efforts, and regional health and education programs. Nearly two decades of political turmoil in Thailand, including military coups in 2006 and 2014, have hampered policymaking in Bangkok and complicated relations. National elections held in May 2023 have prolonged that instability. A reformist party that earned the largest vote total was blocked by conservative stakeholders from forming a government. Srettha Thavasin, an unpopular real estate tycoon, became Prime Minister in August 2023, leading a disparate coalition that includes military parties.

Thailand was once the most democratic country in Southeast Asia; efforts by successive Thai governments to manipulate political processes and suppress critics over the past two decades have raised questions about its prospects for returning to democratic governance, including peaceful transfer of power and protection for civil liberties. The U.S. State Department and human rights organizations report numerous issues, including curtailment of freedoms of speech and assembly, harassment of government critics, use of *lese majeste* (offenses against the monarchy) laws to muzzle dissent, arbitrary arrests, and a lack of protections for human trafficking victims, laborers, and refugees.

As U.S.-China tensions shape regional decisionmaking, Thailand remains an arena of competition and an important component of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. Congress may wish to consider whether and how it might respond to Thailand's democratic backsliding as it considers appropriations to support bilateral programs and conducts oversight of the executive branch's stewardship of a military alliance with one of the region's largest economies that also is home to key strategic military facilities.

2023 Elections

Thailand held national elections in May 2023, the first since 2019. In heavy turnout, two reformist parties earned over 58% of seats in the Lower House of Parliament: the Move Forward Party, led by U.S.-educated Pita Limjaroenrat, which advocated for lessening privileges enjoyed by the military and royal palace; and Pheu Thai, associated with former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who had been in self-imposed exile since being deposed in the 2006 coup. Two military-backed parties finished with the third and seventh largest vote totals.

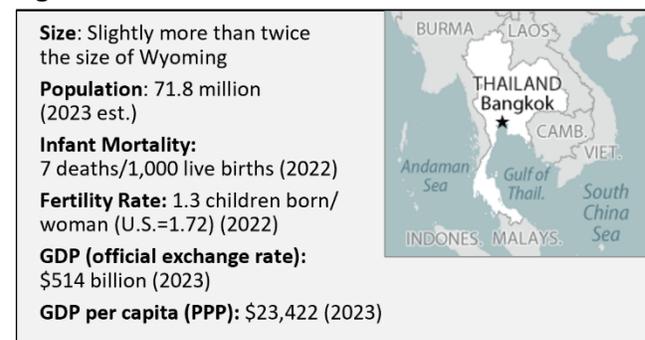
Under electoral rules in place at the time, the Prime Minister was selected in a vote of the 500-member elected Lower House and a 250-seat Upper House, whose members were appointed by the military. After an initial vote for a Pita-led coalition government failed, Parliament voted to

void Pita's nomination as Prime Minister and a constitutional court suspended him from Parliament for failing to disclose his holdings in a defunct media firm before running for office. Many observers considered the suspension politically motivated. Pheu Thai formed an 11-party coalition, and Parliament approved Srettha as Prime Minister.

Thaksin returned from 15 years in exile in August 2023; many observers assessed that he had reached an agreement with the military and monarchy to serve a short prison term and limit his political activities in exchange for being allowed to return. He was immediately arrested on corruption charges and held in a military hospital. After his sentence was shortened from eight years to one year, he was released early in March 2024. In May 2024 Thaksin was charged under *lese majeste* laws for comments he made in 2015, suggesting Pheu Thai's partnership with the military is fragile.

Srettha is deeply unpopular; his approval rating dropped to just under 13% in a June 2024 poll. His government has announced plans to implement a number of populist measures including digital-currency handouts, agricultural and fuel subsidies, and lower public transportation fares.

Figure 1. Thailand at a Glance



Source: CIA World Factbook, 2024, World Bank. Map, CRS.

Political Divisions and Protests

Thailand is deeply politically divided between the political establishment (a mix of the military, royalists, and senior bureaucrats) and those seeking more popular democracy—including young Thais seeking a democratic voice as well as less-affluent, traditionally disenfranchised rural citizens who tend to be Thaksin's base of support. Pita and the Move Forward Party garnered the support of Thailand's young, urban voters protesting the denial of their democratic choice, and their status as the primary opposition raises the possibility of future street protests and civil disobedience. Similarly, Pheu Thai's ruling coalition, which includes parties with very different political agendas, may struggle to govern effectively.

Move Forward has called for the removal of some of the monarchy's privileges; a controversial move in a country where criticizing the monarch is illegal, and the definition of *lèse majesté* has expanded over the past two decades to include even subtle criticisms of the king, palace, military, or government. King Maha Vajiralongkorn, who succeeded his widely revered father in 2019, is reportedly deeply unpopular with the public for his profligate lifestyle and history of capricious and sometimes violent behavior. Since 2020, pro-democracy protests have broken the taboo against overtly criticizing the monarchy and garnered support from students from across the political spectrum.

Security Relations

U.S.-Thai security relations, which date back to the Korean and Vietnam Wars, have long been the highest-profile pillar of the relationship. In addition to hosting military exercises, Thailand provides the U.S. military with access to key facilities, particularly the strategically located U-Tapao airbase and Sattahip naval base. The U.S. military has used U-Tapao for refueling operations during its campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan in the 2000s as well as for humanitarian relief efforts in Asia. U.S. officials say intelligence and law enforcement cooperation remains a priority, particularly as the United States confronts international criminal and drug networks active in the sub-region.

Despite the imposition of foreign aid restrictions under §7008 of annual appropriations measures following the 2014 coup, the United States continued most non-military aid and cooperation, including the large-scale annual Cobra Gold military exercises. The Trump Administration's certification of the March 2019 elections as democratic allowed the resumption of State Department-administered military assistance, including Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and International Military Education and Training (IMET). The Biden Administration has continued IMET and FMF assistance for Thailand, allocating \$2.0 million in IMET funding in FY2021, \$1.3 million in FY2022, and \$2.3 million in FY2023. Thailand also was allocated \$14 million in FY2021 FMF through the Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative (SAMSI) and the Advanced Targeting Development Initiative (ATDI) for maritime security and other projects.

Trade and Economic Relations

Thailand is an upper middle-income country, and trade and foreign investment play a large role in its economy. The economy, heavily dependent on tourism, suffered as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and GDP contracted by 6.1% in 2020 before rebounding. GDP expanded by 1.9% in 2023. Thailand is the United States' 19th largest trade partner and 24th largest goods export market. Two-way trade in goods and services in 2022 was valued at \$79.1 billion, with \$60.5 billion in Thai exports to the United States and \$18.6 billion in U.S. exports to Thailand.

The United States is Thailand's third largest trading partner, behind Japan and China. Thailand is a member of the Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) initiative, which focuses on trade, supply chains, and clean and fair economic growth. It is a member of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) trade agreement that includes Asia-Pacific countries. Thai-U.S.

trade discussions have focused on Thailand's poor intellectual property (IP) rights protections and protection and subsidization of its large agriculture industry.

Thailand's Regional Relations

Historically, Sino-Thai economic relations have been close, with deep trade and investment ties, and defense ties have been growing. As a member of the China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Thailand is involved in a high-speed railway project that would connect southern China with several Southeast Asian nations to its south.

Thailand was one of five founding members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and has extensive trade and investment relations across the region. Japan is its largest source of foreign direct investment. Thailand has no territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea and has been viewed as loath to voice opposition to China's assertive behavior in pressing its claims, despite its impact on Thailand's ASEAN partners.

Thailand shares a 1,500-mile border with Burma (Myanmar), and hosts over 90,000 refugees from Burmese internal conflicts over the past several decades, and thousands more who fled after Burma's 2021 coup. Thailand relies on natural gas imports from Burma to meet its energy needs, and a Thai company is a leading partner of Burma's military-run oil and gas firm.

The Thai government's engagement with Burmese governments since that country's independence in 1948 arguably has been more intensive than that of any other country. Following Burma's 2021 military coup, the Thai government refrained from strong criticism of the coup, attempted to pursue diplomacy with the Burmese junta, and provided humanitarian assistance to conflict-affected regions in Burma. Thailand's former Foreign Minister traveled to Burma in April 2023 and met both coup leader Min Aung Hlaing and imprisoned opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, seeking to "re-engage" with the parties to seek a peace process.

Issues for Congress

Since 2014, Members of Congress have introduced numerous resolutions urging the government of Thailand to protect and uphold democracy and human rights, and conducted oversight of the executive branch's implementation of coup-related foreign assistance restrictions, as well as military-to-military engagements. Members have also expressed concern about Thailand's human trafficking record; the State Department's 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report rated Thailand as a Tier 2 nation, indicating the government does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking as set out by the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA, P.L. 106-386, as amended). As Thailand's current political turmoil evolves, Members may consider how the United States might promote respect for democracy and civil rights, and whether the United States should sustain or strengthen bilateral cooperation, and in what areas.

Payne Fellow Trey Spadone contributed to this In Focus.

Ben Dolven, Specialist in Asian Affairs

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