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MZW-7
SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Mr. Thaksin Goes to Washington

By Matthew Z. Wheeler

JULY 10, 2003

BANGKOK, Thailand—On June 10 this year, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra met with President George W. Bush in Washington. It was a meeting that some thought might not take place. Thailand was reported to be among those countries slated for “punishment” by Washington for failing to back the U.S. invasion of Iraq.¹ Prime Minister Thaksin’s string of nationalistic outbursts, including the recent assertion that Thailand is not a U.S. “lackey,” did nothing to foster prospects for a productive meeting. Furthermore, in the months prior to the meeting, U.S. officials and lawmakers had expressed concern about the Thai government’s apparent support for extra-judicial execution of drug suspects; more than 2,000 people were murdered in Thailand during the recent anti-drug crack-down (see MZW-6). Under these circumstances, it was reported that Washington might not consent to a meeting between Bush and Thaksin. When a meeting was at last scheduled, many observers believed that Thaksin would face censure from the Bush administration about the extra-judicial killings.

In the event, both Thai and U.S. officials described the meeting as a great success. Thaksin appeared to put to rest any doubts about his support for the U.S.-led war on terrorism while winning pledges of U.S. support for a Free Trade Agreement and construction contracts in Iraq. The U.S. secured several commitments from Thailand, including an agreement to exempt U.S. citizens in Thailand from prosecution in the International Criminal Court and to allow “forward-positioning” of U.S. military hardware on Thai soil. In a victory for U.S. diplomacy, Thaksin appeared to depart from his “constructive engagement” of Burma’s military dictators to join President Bush in calling for the release of National League for Democracy (NLD) leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been held in “protective custody” since she and her supporters were attacked by a government-sponsored mob on May 30.

After the meeting Thaksin’s spokesman Sita Divari told a Thai reporter, “Please note that the president did not voice concern or complain about extra-judicial killings and ‘silencings’ during the three-month campaign.”² The joint statement issued after the meeting, which includes mention of extra-judicial killings, would appear to contradict this pronouncement. In Sita’s defense, it should be noted that the reference in the joint statement—which praises Thaksin’s drug suppression efforts—cannot be construed as a criticism of Thailand’s anti-drug initiative.

How did the two sides overcome the considerable irritants in bilateral ties to conclude such a meeting? What became of U.S. concerns about human-rights abuses in Thailand? A cynic might attribute the sudden improvement in Thai-U.S. relations to the arrest by Thai authorities of three suspected members of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), a terrorist organization linked to al Qaeda, just hours before Thaksin walked into his meeting with Bush. The timing of the arrests is extraordinary, not least because Thaksin had previously proclaimed Thailand free of terrorists and

¹ Barry Wain, “Washington Begins to Reward Asian Backers of Iraq Invasion,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 28, 2003.

² Supalak Ganjanakhundee, “Thailand ‘to Become a Major Non-NATO Ally,’” *The Nation*, June 12, 2003.

that any views to the contrary were the imaginings of “crazy” people (see MZW 1). Certainly, the Prime Minister’s change of heart on the issue most important to the Bush Administration *could* help explain why the Thai government was later able to claim that the U.S. had not criticized the conduct of the drug war or Thailand’s record on human rights.

The suspicious timing of the arrests in southern Thailand unavoidably suggests such a *quid pro quo*. However, as with other outcomes of this meeting, the appearance of a trade-off may be misleading. With so many issues on the table during the Bush-Thaksin meeting, it is impossible to parse the correlations with any certainty. Perhaps there will be some value in speculating.

An Ambivalent Ally

In the months leading up to the June 10 meeting, Thaksin had good reason to be concerned about his reception in Washington. Thai foreign policy under Thaksin has not always sat well with U.S. priorities. Indeed, his defiance of the U.S. has sometimes been a point of pride for the Prime Minister. Many people believe that Thaksin aims to replace Malaysia’s Mahathir Mohammed as the voice of an “Asia that can say no” to the West.³ Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai Party campaigned with promises of a foreign policy based on “personal diplomacy,” emphasizing commercial ties and so-called “Asian values.” In the 2000 election campaign, Thaksin attacked the incumbent Democrat Party for pandering to the U.S. in its economic and foreign policies. Many Thais felt aggrieved by a perceived indifference on the part of the U.S. to Thailand’s economic woes following the 1997 financial crisis. As one Thai scholar observed, “The United States became the main target of a resurgent Thai nationalism that sometimes degenerated into xenophobia.”⁴ Thaksin has been adept at exploiting this resurgent nationalism.

Thaksin’s pursuit of closer relations with the People’s Republic of China and appeasement of military rulers in Burma have widened the gap between Thailand and the U.S. Meanwhile, Thaksin’s promotion of the Asian Cooperation Dialogue, the Asia Bond and the Asian Monetary Fund has been described as an effort to establish a new financial architecture that will “liberate Asia from US dollar hegemony.”⁵

Indeed, the rationale for close security cooperation between the two countries, once exemplified by the presence in Thailand of U.S. airbases and 50,000 servicemen



Thaksin and Bush shake hands in the White House. An image of Thai Jemaah Islamiyah-suspect Maisuri Haji Abdulloh looms in the background. The text reads, “Whoever is not with America is with the terrorists.” Siam Rat Weekly, June 20, 2003

during the Vietnam War, has diminished since the end of the Cold War. In the absence of a communist threat, Bangkok’s strategic perceptions have increasingly diverged from Washington’s.

Of course, Thaksin could ill afford to rebuff the U.S. altogether. Whatever his personal ambitions and inclinations, the U.S. remains Thailand’s largest export market, most important trading partner and, under terms of the 1954 Manila Pact, ultimate guarantor of Thai security.

Thaksin has struggled to find a comfortable position in a world divided by President Bush into those who are “with us” and those who are “with the terrorists.” In this effort, Thaksin is constrained not only by his nationalist impulses but also by a concern for the sensitivities of six million Thai Muslims, mostly ethnic Malays in southern

³ Mahathir co-authored a book with Japanese politician Shintaro Ishihara called *Asia That Can Say No*, published in English with the title, *The Voice of Asia*, (translated by Frank Baldwin), Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1995.

⁴ Kusuma Snitwongse, “Thai Foreign Policy in the Global Age: Principal or Profit?” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* Vol. 23, no. 2, August 2001, p. 206.

⁵ Thanong Khanthong, “Thaksin’s Asia: Standing on its Own Two feet,” *The Nation*, October 18, 2002.

Thailand. Many Thai Muslims are deeply suspicious of U.S. intentions in the war on terror. Earlier this year, the Islamic Committees of Thailand's five southernmost provinces introduced a resolution in Parliament demanding that the words "terrorist state" be included with any reference to the U.S.⁶

After the September 11 attacks Thaksin tried to keep Thailand on the sidelines of the conflict between the U.S. and al Qaeda. Just days after the terrorist attacks in Washington and New York City, Thaksin said that Thailand would be "strictly neutral" in any coming conflict.⁷ This gaffe was quickly explained away, and U.S. officials subsequently praised Thailand's cooperation in the war on terror, but it betrayed Thaksin's inclination not to offer public support to the U.S.

Thaksin's refusal to publicly back the U.S. invasion of Iraq was a further disappointment to the Bush Administration. Thaksin said, "Thailand, as an ally [of the U.S.], cannot afford to join the war because we are against it. The only thing we can do is to take part in restoration work after the war."⁸ When CNN reported in March that Thailand was among 15 countries that had quietly pledged support to the US for a prospective invasion of Iraq, the Thai government denied it.

Washington has not been pleased by Thaksin's half-hearted public support for the U.S. war on terror and invasion of Iraq. Never mind that U.S. officials have described Thailand's cooperation with the U.S. as exemplary; in the war on terror the Bush Administration doesn't just want partners, it wants cheerleaders. Thaksin has proven reluctant to play that role.

The extra-judicial killings during the anti-drug crackdown earlier this year further vexed Thai-U.S. relations. Three weeks into the new drug war, with the death toll around 600, U.S. Ambassador to Thailand Darryl N. Johnson raised U.S. concerns about the unusually high number of killings with Thailand's Justice Minister. Johnson also raised the issue privately with Thaksin and again with Thai Foreign Minister Surakiart Sathirithai on April 30 when he sought an explanation that he could relay to members of Congress.⁹ On May 7, a US Embassy spokesman said, "The Royal Thai Government needs to thoroughly investigate these cases and prosecute the killers in full accordance with the law — and in a fast and transparent manner."

The possible consequences for failing to do so include

suspension of U.S. counter-narcotics aid and training. The Leahy amendment to the Foreign Operations Appropriations Act (named for its sponsor, Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont) prohibits U.S. assistance to security forces of foreign countries known to have committed human rights abuses.

The unlikely prospect of a suspension of U.S. counter-narcotics aid failed to impress Thaksin: "If you're telling me that someone will cut off aid because of what we are doing, I will say directly that I don't care. Thailand under my leadership has no need for relationships with other countries in their role as donors, but only for relationships with other countries as equal partners in this war."¹⁰

The State Department's 2002 Human Rights Report on Thailand, released at the end of May, resonated with the reports of extra-judicial killings during the anti-drug crackdown. The State Department review of the human-rights situation in Thailand during the previous year cited problems with corruption, press freedom, arbitrary detention and police brutality. At the top of the list, however, was the killing by police officers of criminal suspects. The summary of the report states:

The Government generally respected the human rights of its citizens; however, significant problems remained in several areas. Police officers killed a number of criminal suspects while attempting to apprehend them. Suspected narcotics traffickers and users were most often the victims of deadly police force. The Government remained reluctant to prosecute vigorously those who committed such abuses, contributing to a climate of impunity. Police occasionally beat suspects to coerce confessions.¹¹

The State Department's report gave Thaksin another opportunity to express his annoyance with the U.S. Thaksin observed, "For a country that likes to talk about peace, it sure doesn't practice it much," and warned that, "One day our Foreign Ministry might take the liberty of berating another country about a great many things that it had done which were lousy." The Prime Minister went on to say, "We are a friend (of the US). But we are nobody's lackey. (The US) should look at us as an ally and mind its manners."¹²

With this kind of rhetoric it is little surprise that Thaksin had difficulty getting a meeting with President Bush. Initially, Thaksin's visit was unofficial; he was in-

⁶ Don Pathan, "Thaksin sails uncharted foreign-policy waters," *The Nation*, April 19, 2003.

⁷ "Thailand Will Be Strictly Neutral," *The Nation*, September 17, 2001.

⁸ "Govt against war, cautious backing for US," *Bangkok Post*, March 21, 2003.

⁹ Achara Ashayagachat, "Envoys to be briefed again," *Bangkok Post*, May 8, 2003.

¹⁰ "Thaksin to US-No Outside Assistance Needed," Thailand News Agency, March 1, 2003.

¹¹ U.S. Department of State, "2002 Human Rights Reports-Thailand," March 31, 2003; available at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2002/18265.htm>.

¹² Yuwadee Tunyasiri: "We Are No Lackey of US, Says PM," *Bangkok Post*, April 3, 2003.

vited to Washington by the U.S.-ASEAN Business Council to address their annual meeting. Heads rolled at the Thai Foreign Ministry before a meeting was scheduled with the President. In early May the director general of the Americas and South Pacific Affairs Department and his deputy were transferred, reportedly for failing to secure the meeting.¹³ There was a real chance that Thaksin might go to Washington without an official reception by President Bush.¹⁴ That scenario would have presented an embarrassing contrast to the visit by Philippines President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo to Washington on May 21. President Arroyo, a staunch—and vocal—supporter of the U.S. war on terror and the invasion of Iraq, received a red-carpet welcome complete with military honors and a state dinner.

Interestingly, the day before Thaksin flew to the U.S., the *New York Times* published an article by Raymond Bonner that detailed Thailand's cooperation with the U.S. in the war on terrorism. According to unnamed U.S. officials, Thailand has allowed the Central Intelligence Agency to bring al Qaeda suspects to the Kingdom for interrogation. The article also noted Thaksin's efforts to keep Thai cooperation with the U.S. quiet for fear of attracting terrorist attacks and frightening potential tourists.¹⁵ Consistent with efforts to downplay cooperation with the U.S., Thai officials denied the claim that al Qaeda suspects had been interrogated in Thailand.¹⁶

Thaksin's "Turnabouts": Real or Apparent?

Thaksin and Bush covered a lot of ground during their 55-minute "working meeting." Chief among U.S. successes was Thaksin's pledge to exempt U.S. citizens from jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court. For its part, Thailand received a promise from the U.S. to "actively" consider conferring "major non-



Photo: "<http://www.navsource.org/archives/02/027228.jpg>"

Top Guns

President Bush and Prime Minister Thaksin may have their differences when it comes to the role of American power in the world or the rise of China, but they also have many things in common. For example:

- Both men share a link to Texas. Bush was governor of the Lone Star state before he became president. Thaksin studied in Texas, receiving a Ph.D. in criminal justice from Sam Houston State University in 1979.
- Both men have a background in business, though Thaksin would appear to have the better head for business. Thaksin's telecommunications business has made him the richest man in Thailand. Bush's oil ventures were not very successful, but, like his stake in the Texas Rangers baseball team, they were lucrative nonetheless.
- Both leaders had their political futures determined by narrow high-court decisions. A 2001 U.S. Supreme Court decision reversing the Florida Supreme Court decision to allow manual recounts in some Florida counties cleared the way for Bush to move into the White House. A 2001 Constitutional Court decision cleared Thaksin of charges that he intentionally falsified a statement of his assets; a guilty verdict would have barred him from holding office for five years.
- Both men like to present the image of straight-talking, no-nonsense leaders.
- Both leaders recently enjoyed well-publicized flights in military jet aircraft. On April 23, Thaksin flew in an F-16 from Bangkok to the Wing 1 base at Nakhorn Ratchasima. On May 1, Bush landed on the *USS Abraham Lincoln* in a Navy S-3B Viking. Both leaders made speeches after their flights.
- Both leaders took flak for their jet flights, which opposition party members criticized as expensive and unnecessary.

There's no word on whether or not Thaksin also uses Colgate toothpaste. In the post-Saddam regime world, it's hard to believe that Colgate was once the first thing that occurred to Bush when asked by reporters what he had in common with British Prime Minister Tony Blair.



Photo: "<http://www.raf.mi.th/news/n03/taksin/taksin2.html>"

¹³ "Transfer Fuels Fear of a Purge," *Bangkok Post*, May 16, 2003.

¹⁴ Rungrawee Pinyorat: "No Red Carpet' for Thaksin," *The Nation*, May 1, 2003.

¹⁵ Raymond Bonner, "Thailand Tiptoes in Step with American Antiterror Effort," *New York Times*, June 8, 2003.

¹⁶ "Bangkok Denies Report of al-Qaeda Interrogations at Base," *The Nation*, June 10, 2003.

NATO ally” status (MNNA) on Thailand. The two sides called on Burma’s military junta to release Aung San Suu Kyi and other members of the National League for Democracy and “an immediate substantive political dialogue between Rangoon and all domestic political elements, consistent with the regime’s stated commitment to a peaceful transition to democracy.”¹⁷ According to the joint statement, the U.S. praised Thailand’s cooperation with the U.S. and its commitment to “fight against all forms of terror.” Thailand restated an earlier offer of a battalion of army engineers and medical teams for deployment to Iraq while the U.S. voiced support for Thailand’s effort to secure construction contracts there. The joint statement also include an expression of concern about the situation on the Korean peninsula, pledges to work toward greater trade and investment, and commitments to fight infectious diseases.

Both sides claimed to have got what they wanted.

The agreement to exempt U.S. citizens from the International Criminal Court (ICC), known as an Article 98 agreement, was worked out before the meeting. The U.S. opposes the ICC for fears that politically motivated charges may be brought against U.S. soldiers abroad. The issue is so important to the U.S. that it has threatened to withdraw military aid to countries that do not consent to an Article 98 agreement. Thaksin’s approval of the exemption drew fire from Thai lawmakers who argued that because Thailand had signed the ICC agreement, any changes required Parliamentary approval. Press reports suggested that the U.S. offered MNNA status in return for the Article 98 agreement.¹⁸ If that is the case, Thaksin might have driven a harder bargain. Thailand is already one of the U.S.’s five treaty allies in Asia. Although MNNA may have some symbolic value, it will have little practical significance. MNNA status will entitle Thailand to priority consideration for excess defense articles (EDA), or military equipment the U.S. no longer needs. Thailand has long been a beneficiary of EDA.

Most Thai observers applauded Thaksin’s pragmatism in granting certain concessions to the U.S. while gaining the promises of progress on a Free Trade Agreement, enhanced security ties and contracts in Iraq. Most welcomed Thaksin’s call for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi as a sign of a new approach to Burma. A minority took a more critical view, faulting the Prime Minister for abandoning the principle of non-interference with respect to Burma, and compromising Thai sovereignty by submitting to a greater U.S. role in Thai security affairs.¹⁹ Most observers, both critics and fans of Thaksin’s performance, saw the visit as a departure from Thaksin’s previous approach to foreign policy. In particular, public support for the U.S.-led war on terrorism and unprecedented commentary on the Burmese situation appeared to mark a turnabout in Thai policy. As Thitinan Pongsudirak, a pro-fessor of international relations at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, wrote, “The Thaksin-Bush meeting has crucially re-oriented Thai-US relations”²⁰

Thaksin’s gestures in Washington were indeed pragmatic, but it is not likely that they



¹⁷Joint Statement Between the United States of America and the Kingdom of Thailand,” June 11, 2003; available at <http://usa.or.th/relation/rel061003.htm>.

¹⁸ “PM tipped to ink deal to bypass ICC Agreement aimed at repairing relations,” *Bangkok Post*, June 4, 2003.

¹⁹ Thammasat University political scientist Surachai Sirikrai advanced this view at a panel discussion titled, “The Unequal Bilateral Relationship between Thailand and the United States.” Thaksin responded the following day by asking academics to keep quiet about issues that could damage Thailand’s reputation. Acharya Ashayagachat, “Alliance with U.S. Bad for Diplomacy,” *Bangkok Post*, June 14, 2003; “Thaksin Hits Back at Critic of US Visit,” *The Nation*, June 15, 2003.

²⁰ Thitinan Pongsudirak, “A Nationalist Takes the World Stage,” *Bangkok Post*, June 27, 2003.

represent a dramatic reorientation of Thai foreign policy. Thaksin's "turnabouts" on terrorism and Burma are examined in more detail below.

Thaksin's "Turnabout" on Terror

As discussed in MZW-1, Thaksin went to great lengths to discount reports that international terrorists, particularly suspected members of JI, were present in Thailand. The efforts aimed to protect Thailand's lucrative tourism industry, a key generator of foreign exchange. Since December, however, the Prime Minister's assertions that Thailand has no terrorists have, step by step, been attenuated and finally discarded. First, the Thai government acknowledged that some JI members *might* have passed through Thailand. At the end of January, Thaksin admitted that some of those who planned the October 2002 Bali bombings had transited Thailand. On May 28, two Thai nationals in Cambodia were arrested and charged with membership in JI. The next day, Thaksin conceded that there were JI members in Thailand, but that they were "inactive." On May 30, eleven Thais were deported from Cambodia for alleged links to JI. Finally, on June 10, the day that Thaksin met President Bush, Thai authorities announced the arrests of three JI suspects in southern Thailand. The announcement came complete with confessions from two of those arrested that they planned bomb attacks on five embassies in Bangkok, the backpacker area of Khao San Road and the resorts of Pattaya and Phuket. The attacks were reportedly planned to coincide with a meeting of regional heads of state, including President Bush, during the October Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Bangkok. In this way, Thailand went from a terrorist-free haven to a terrorist base and terrorist target.

As recently as May 16, Thaksin had dismissed terror warnings issued by Australia and New Zealand. However, even as Thaksin sarcastically warned Thais to beware of the terrorists lurking in Australia, a suspected member of JI named Arifin bin Ali was arrested in Bangkok. (The arrest wasn't made public until June 10.) Arifin, alias John Wong Ah Hung, was repatriated to Singapore where he identified four Thais as members of JI. Three were arrested on June 10 in Narathiwat Province: Maisuri Haji Abdulloh, the owner of an Islamic school, his son Muya, and Dr. Waemahadi Wae-dao, a physician, philanthropist and community leader who helped raise money for Maisuri's school. The fourth suspect, alleged bomb-maker Samarn Waekaji, turned himself in to police on July 8.²¹

Many Muslims in southern Thailand met the arrests

with great skepticism. A number of academics and lawmakers came forward to vouch for the three suspects. According to Fudruddin Boto, a senator from Narathiwat, "They were social activists, not terrorists. ... This is the government's way of trying to please the United States at the expense of our peoples' rights." Even a U.S. Embassy official acknowledged Dr. Waemahadi's standing as a community leader.²² A lawyer for the three dismissed government claims that suspects confessed to being members of JI. "They deny doing anything wrong and say they haven't confessed to police. They deny all the charges against them and they want to testify in court," said Somchai Nillapaijit.²³

The timing of the arrests added to speculation that the three men were victims of a political ploy to please the U.S. Abdullah Hapbru, a lecturer in Islamic studies at Prince of Songkhla University, Pattani campus, said, "They (the Americans) once told us how ugly and loathsome communists were and taught us to hate China and Russia when the communists were its main opponent. We no longer have a threat from communists but the US makes a new monster to serve its interest."²⁴ The Thai government's call for new anti-terrorism legislation exacerbated fears that the government was exploiting the terrorism issue to gain broad powers that might be used against political opponents.

Thaksin's turnabout on the issue of terrorism in Thailand is genuine. Having admitted the presence of JI in Thailand, the Prime Minister cannot go back to his previous public position that there is no threat. The implications of this new stance for Thailand, particularly in the predominantly Muslim southern provinces where violence against military and police targets is ongoing, remain unclear. At this stage it seems unlikely that the closer security ties promised by the Thaksin-Bush meeting will translate into a greater U.S. involvement in counter-terrorism operations within Thailand. It is even less likely that any such involvement would include a more pronounced U.S. presence in the troubled southern provinces. There is little indication that Thaksin seeks or would welcome such involvement; the perception of a greater U.S. role in Thailand would likely aggravate an already difficult and potentially explosive situation in the south. However, some Muslims in Thailand are worried that the arrests mark a new willingness on Thaksin's part to follow the U.S. lead.

Thaksin's "Turnabout" on Burma

In contrast to Thaksin's reversal of his public stance in the terrorist threat in Thailand, his turnabout on Burma

²¹ Days later, on June 13, a Thai man was arrested in Bangkok after he allegedly tried to sell 30 kilograms of cesium 137 to Thai undercover agents. Police say the highly radioactive isotope had been smuggled from Russia via Laos and was destined for a "dirty-bomb."

²² Shawn W. Crispin, "Targets of a New Anti-Terror War," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, July 10, 2003.

²³ Agence France Presse, "JI arrests 'may cause unrest,'" *The Star* (Malaysia), June 18, 2003.

²⁴ Sermsuk Kasitipradit, "US Accused of Setting Up Arrests of Trio," *Bangkok Post*, June 22, 2003.

policy is more apparent than real. Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters were attacked by a mob on May 30 near Mandalay. According to eyewitnesses, Suu Kyi's convoy was set upon by mob of club-wielding assailants. The Burmese government concedes there were at least four deaths, though witnesses say the death toll was likely much higher. Suu Kyi and at least a dozen NLD officials were detained and placed in "protective custody" by the ruling State Peace and Development Council. U.S. Embassy officials who visited the scene of the violence concluded that the attack was planned by the government and likely carried out by members of the Union Solidarity and Development Association, the *de facto* political party of the military regime.

The attack on Suu Kyi and her detention mark another low point for Burma and an embarrassment for the Association of South East Asian Nations, the regional organization that admitted Burma in 1996. Burma has relied on support from ASEAN, and especially from the Thaksin government, to claim a degree of international legitimacy and to deflect criticism and pressure from the West.

Suu Kyi's renewed detention also undermines Thailand's "constructive engagement" of Burma, which has failed to yield progress on national reconciliation or democratization. Thaksin responded to the attack by saying, "I think the whole world is concerned and the Burmese government understands this. They will have to do something to bring everything back to normal as soon as possible."²⁵ Of course, the "normal" situation in Burma

includes the suppression of democracy and human rights.

Thaksin made a more forceful statement on the eve of his visit to the U.S., taking the unprecedented step of calling for Suu Kyi's immediate release. This statement was a bold departure from the principle of non-interference in another country's domestic affairs, which has been the foundation Thaksin's approach to Burma.

In Washington, Thaksin joined President Bush in again calling for Suu Kyi to be released. The joint statement reads in part:

"The two leaders agreed on the need for the immediate release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other National League for Democracy (NLD) members. Prime Minister Thaksin affirmed the Thai Government's readiness to do whatever possible to facilitate Burmese national reconciliation and the return to democracy."

A week later at the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Phnom Penh, Thaksin joined the other ASEAN heads of state to urge the resumption of a dialogue to promote national reconciliation in Burma. The Joint Communiqué expressed a desire to see, "the early lifting of restrictions placed on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD members."²⁶

The promise of a new, more principled Thai approach to Burma soon dissolved into a sorry spectacle. Late in June, Rangoon informed the Thai government that Burmese dissidents were planning to kidnap Burmese dip-



Bangkok Post, July 2, 2003

²⁵ "Rights Group Calls for Suu Kyi's Release," *Bangkok Post*, June 3, 2003.

²⁶ Joint Communiqué of the 36th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, Phnom Penh, June 16-17, 2003, available at <http://www.aseansec.org/14833.htm>.

lomats in a plot to exchange them for Suu Kyi. A crackdown on Burmese dissidents in Thailand ensued. On June 26, Thai police arrested 11 Burmese pro-democracy activists for planning a demonstration in front of the Burmese Embassy to protest the one-month anniversary of Suu Kyi's latest detention. In effect, the Burmese dissidents were arrested for demanding Suu Kyi's release, which Thaksin had also called for when he visited the White House.



The Nation, July 1, 2003

Thaksin and Foreign Minister Surakiart spoke out against broadening sanctions on Burma, claiming this would only lead to a rising tide of illegal immigrants in Thailand. On June 30, Thaksin launched a diatribe against the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) office in Bangkok for issuing cards to certain Burmese dissidents, recognizing them as Persons of Concern (POC, *i.e.*, refugees) without consulting with or informing the Thai government. Painting the Burmese asylum seekers as drug dealers and troublemakers, Thaksin said, "We have been kind to them for too long."²⁷ By the end of June, Thaksin threatened to deport POCs who caused disturbances by opposing the Burmese regime.

Thaksin's sudden criticism of the UNHCR evinced astonishing ignorance of the role of the agency and the longstanding precedent for its activities in Thailand. In fact, the UNHCR has been involved in refugee affairs in Thailand since 1977. Moreover, the Thai government has had an agreement with the UNHCR since 1989 to allow the agency to conduct determinations on "persons of concern." Only about 1,500 Burmese, mostly former-student activists, have been issued cards by the UNHCR.

The fundamental problem rests not with the UNHCR, but with the Thai government, which has failed to establish a sound legal framework for determining the status of asylum seekers from Burma. Indeed, the Thai approach to the problem of Burmese refugees has been to preserve its freedom of action by refusing to make any internationally-recognized commitments. Thailand is not party to the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. According to a 1998 Human Rights Watch report, "The 1979 Immigration Act... is the only relevant piece

of [Thai] legislation, and under this law all undocumented asylum-seekers are considered 'illegal immigrants' and liable to summary deportation."²⁸ This report notes that although Thailand is bound by a series of human-rights agreements to protect asylum seekers until a determination has been made on their refugee status, it has often repatriated Burmese asylum seekers as well as people determined by the UNHCR to be refugees.

Thaksin's complaints about the UNHCR culminated in a demand that dissident card-holders not be allowed to "roam freely." On July 3, the day after Thaksin and Foreign Minister Surakiart met with Burma's deputy foreign minister, the Thai government proclaimed that the POCs would be moved to camps near the Burmese border. The incoherence of this new policy is compounded by the fact that Thaksin ordered the closure of just such a camp in December 2001 precisely because it had become a hotbed of opposition to the Burmese regime.

The arrests of Burmese dissidents and Thaksin's attack on the UNHCR devalued his calls for Suu Kyi's release and a transition to democracy in Burma. The message to the generals in Rangoon could not have been clearer.

Bending with the Wind

Thaksin's performance in Washington and his contradictory statements and actions on Burma after his return suggest that he has embraced the traditional Thai approach to foreign policy. Sometimes disparaged as "bend with the wind" foreign policy, this approach seeks, "balance-of-power arrangements in which preponderant power [is] organized on the side of Thailand."²⁹ The key

²⁷ "Eleven Held for Echoing PM's Call," *The Nation*, June 27, 2003.

²⁸ Human Rights Watch, "Unwanted and Unprotected: Burmese Refugees in Thailand," September 1998; available at http://www.hrw.org/reports98/thai/Thai989-02.htm#P156_28997

²⁹ Muthiah Alagappa, *The National Security of Developing States: Lessons From Thailand*, Dover, Mass.: Auburn House, 1987, p. 57.

features of this approach are flexibility, pragmatism and open lines of communication with countervailing powers. Thaksin, consistent with his nationalist, pro-Asia image, has resisted aligning Thailand too closely with the U.S. What he seems to have discovered is that the “bend with the wind” approach historically has not precluded alignment with one major power or another. Thus, Thailand relied primarily on British protection from French predation during the nineteenth century, was formally allied with Japan during the Second World War and was squarely in the U.S. camp during the Vietnam conflict.³⁰ However, by bending with prevailing winds, Thailand was able quickly to adjust to shifts in the regional balance such as the Japanese defeat in World War II and the U.S. withdrawal from Indochina.³¹

A Thai analyst wrote of Thaksin’s meeting in Washington, “[M]r Thaksin will now have to square his previous anti-western posture with his concessions to Mr Bush. Moreover, his accommodation of the military junta in Rangoon, a policy that implicitly came into question [*sic*] with Washington’s castigation of the Burmese junta’s treatment of Ms Suu Kyi, also will need to be revamped.”³² The advantage of “bending with the wind,” as illustrated by Thaksin’s mixed signals on Burma, is precisely that the Prime Minister does *not* have to square or revamp anything. Thaksin can tell Bush what Bush wants to hear when he’s in Washington and tell Burma’s military rulers what they want to hear when he’s in Bangkok.

Although the tangible benefits of Thaksin’s concessions to Washington are limited, the Prime Minister can claim real success in improving the tenor of Thailand’s relations with the U.S. An additional benefit Thaksin appears to have won for himself in bending with the wind of U.S. predominance was the successful deflection of criticism about human-rights abuses connected with his war on drugs. As noted above, the issue was raised in the joint statement. The relevant section reads:

President Bush recognized Prime Minister Thaksin’s determination to combat transnational crime in all its forms, including drug trafficking and trafficking in persons. Regarding recent press allegations that Thai security services carried out extrajudicial killings during a counternarcotics campaign in Thailand, Prime Minister Thaksin stated unequivocally that the Thai Government does not tolerate extrajudicial killings and assured President Bush that all allegations regarding killings are being investigated thoroughly.

It is the nature of a Joint Statement that its language be diplomatic. However, one would think that the U.S. administration could muster a stronger response to se-

rious human-rights violations in Thailand than to praise Thaksin’s drug-suppression efforts and to countersign his assurance that the anti-drug campaign was conducted in accord with the law.

It is quite possible that President Bush was less equivocal than the joint statement seems to suggest when he spoke with Thaksin. What is certain, however, is that Thai officials denied that there was any criticism. Thaksin’s spokesman took to the airwaves upon returning to Bangkok to reiterate the statement that Bush had not criticized the drug crackdown. The clearest indication that the U.S. failed to press sufficiently its concerns about extra-judicial killings is comments made by Thaksin on July 5: “I would like to tell all police to take a stringent approach towards drug traffickers. ... If they resist, there is nothing we can do. They will have to die prematurely if necessary.”³³ Whatever criticism Thaksin may have faced in Washington concerning conduct of the drug war evidently made little impression.

Why didn’t the U.S. press concerns about extra-judicial killings more strongly? If there wasn’t a trade-off, then there’s no good reason for the U.S. not to have censured Thaksin. If there was a trade-off, even an innocuous compromise born of the obliging atmosphere generated by the JI arrests, there need not have been. If the U.S.-Thailand relationship is strong enough to withstand Thaksin’s nationalistic outbursts and the annual State Department human-rights report, it is also strong enough to withstand a more direct and forceful statement by the President on extra-judicial killings.

There’s another explanation for the administration’s gentle mention of “press allegation” in the joint statement. It is possible that the Bush Administration takes at face value Thaksin’s assurance that, “Thai Government does not tolerate extrajudicial killings and... that all allegations regarding killings are being investigated thoroughly.” Of course, this assurance is undermined by the State Department’s own analysis of the human-rights situation in Thailand. It is also a simple matter to verify whether or not the murders are being investigated thoroughly. If Thaksin follows through on his promise that the murders will be investigated in the same way he followed up on his demands that Aung San Suu Kyi be released, justice is a distant prospect.

Certainly, one might argue that Thai-U.S. relations should not be reduced to the single issue of human rights, and that securing Thailand’s public cooperation and support in the war on terrorism is more important than concerns about extra-judicial killings. This argument assumes that in some circumstances the values of democracy and human rights are incompatible with the nec-

³⁰ David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984, p. 287.

³¹ David A. Wilson, *The United States and the Future of Thailand*, New York: Praeger, 1970, p. 45.

³² Thitinan Pondsudirak, “A Nationalist Takes the World Stage,” *Bangkok Post*, June 27, 2003.

³³ “PM Warns Drug Dealers: ‘Surrender or You’ll be Shot’,” *The Nation*, July 6, 2003.

essary and necessarily dirty war against terrorists. However, as RAND Corporation research on influencing and deterring terrorists concludes, this dilemma between democratic values and an effective war on terrorism is largely artificial.³⁴ In most cases, there is no good reason the U.S. can't pursue both.

In fact, there are good arguments for simultaneously pressing for greater democracy, demanding respect for human rights and fighting terrorism. The war on terrorism can't be won by military and economic coercion

alone. In the long run it is "soft power," the ability of a state to persuade and attract by means of its culture and values, that offers the greatest promise of lasting security for the U.S.³⁵ In view of more pressing concerns elsewhere in the world, the failure of the U.S. to make an issue of extra-judicial killings in Thailand's drug war may seem inconsequential. However, the failure to consistently demand respect for human rights and democracy may, over time, diminish U.S. soft power and weaken the institutions and processes that protect freedom around the world and at home. □

³⁴ Paul K. Davis and Brian Michael Jenkins, *Deterrence and Influence in Counterterrorism: A Component in the War on al Qaeda*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2002, p. xviii.

³⁵ I'm indebted to William J. Klausner for his thoughts on soft power and the fight against terrorism. Political scientist Joseph Nye of the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, is the first and most important exponent of soft power, a concept expounded in his book *The Paradox of American Power* and various op-eds.

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A Yale graduate (History) with a Master's in China Studies from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Alex also worked as a French-language instructor with the Rassias Foundation at Dartmouth College, studied at the Universidad Complutense in Madrid, and served as a Yale-China teaching fellow at Zhongshan University in Guangzhou. Against the backdrops of China's recent accession to the World Trade Organization and the anointing of the new leadership in Beijing, Alex will examine how Chinese are adapting to economic and cultural globalization, both inside and far from the capital.

Martha Farnelo (August 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**

A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender and public policy issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine economist and mother of a small son, Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

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A former staff writer for the *New York Observer* and a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the Washington Bureau of *Newsday*, Andrew is spending two years in east-central Africa, watching, waiting and reporting the possibility that the much-anticipated "African Renaissance" might begin with the administration of President Yoweri Museveni. Andrew won a B.A. in Government from Georgetown (minor: Theology) in 1997 after having spent a semester at Charles University in Prague, where he served as an intern for *Velvet* magazine and later traveled, experienced and wrote about the conflict in the Balkans.

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Author: Wheeler, Matthew Z.

Title: ICWA Letters - South Asia

ISSN: 1083-4257

Imprint: Institute of Current World Affairs, Hanover, NH

Material Type: Serial

Language: English

Frequency: Monthly

Other Regions: East Asia; The Americas; Europe/Russia; Mideast/North Africa; Sub-Saharan Africa

ICWA Letters (ISSN 1083-4257) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

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