

Geopolitical ripples from Thailand's coup

THITINAN PONGSUDHIRAK

Thailand's May 22 military coup has generated sharp geopolitical divisions across the globe, as seen in the range of responses from Washington and Beijing, to Southeast Asian and European capitals and beyond. Western powers, particularly the U.S., roundly condemned the putsch and exhorted Thailand's military authorities to protect human rights and restore democratic rule. But Asian governments – with notable exceptions such as Tokyo's expression of “grave concern” and mild cautions from Jakarta and Manila – have largely met the military intervention with a business-as-usual shrug.

In its previous coup, in September 2006, which ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, Thailand got off lightly in the West. The U.S. perfunctorily suspended its International Military Education and Training program and urged the coup-makers to return to democratic processes as soon as possible. However, Washington's envoy to Bangkok paid a visit to the junta leader within hours of the coup. At the time, the rationale of Thailand's pro-coup coalition for overthrowing Thaksin – alleged corruption and abuse of power – was hard for Washington to reject, partly because Thailand had long been a staunch U.S. treaty ally.

But Thaksin's political machine was not so easily dismantled, twice triumphing at the polls after the 2006 coup, most recently in mid-2011 when his younger sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, effectively stood in for him and won a landslide victory. In international eyes, when Yingluck's government – widely seen to be under Thaksin's control – was deposed May 22, the pro-coup argument had a less convincing ring to it.

The Americans appear unwilling to play along this time. As the West lined up in opposition to the coup, Thailand's junta looked to its neighbors for recognition and support.

Big brother behind you

Looming large was the reaction from China. Although Thailand is not a formal ally, Beijing is as diplomatically and geopolitically close to Bangkok as any great power. Thailand has benefited from its proximity to China over the centuries, and Beijing recognized Thailand's newest junta, as it had others, within three working days. Its leaders quickly visited Beijing, paving the way for other high-level Chinese exchanges since.

To mark the 40th anniversary of the establishment of bilateral relations, Beijing has invited Gen. Prem Tinsulanonda, Thailand's former army chief and current president of the Privy Council, the elite palace body, for an official visit in coming months. Over the years, the Chinese have warmly received Thailand's royal family, particularly Crown Princess Sirindhorn.

In stark contrast with the West, China becomes more supportive when Thailand takes authoritarian turns, as seen after the September 2006 coup and this May. But Beijing has remained a

close partner during Thailand's democratic periods as well. The Chinese have found ways to be Thailand's friend through thick and thin because they are not burdened by democracy promotion; Beijing is more than willing to deal with authoritarian regimes.

For Beijing, Thailand is now pivotal to its geostrategic outlook. Myanmar's opening since 2011 has eroded China's dominance in that country, and just across Thailand's eastern border, Cambodia's seesaw election in July 2013 weakened the pro-Beijing re-

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gime of Prime Minister Hun Sen. In the maritime domains – both with Japan in the east and the Philippines and Vietnam in the south – China's territorial claims are fiercely contested, with the U.S. military presence constraining Beijing's freedom of action. Losing influence in Myanmar and Cambodia can be offset by gaining leverage through Thailand's resurgent authoritarianism. If China's southern maritime flank is unstable, its southern mainland tip must be secured. Thailand is thus a key piece of China's strategic jigsaw puzzle.

Much of what happens on Asia's canvas will depend on how the Thai coup plays out. If genuine democratic rule is restored after a period of pervasive and systematic militarization, Thailand may regain its geopolitical balance. But if authoritarianism solidifies at the expense of democratic legitimacy, Thailand may be increasingly forced to lean on Beijing for support and a geopolitical lifeline.

As democratization and geopolitics are increasingly intertwined for Thailand, Asia's democratic voices must nudge the country toward geopolitical balance and a democratic future. While Philippine and Indonesian leaders displayed their democratic instincts, discreetly conveying mild disapproval of the coup, other democratic governments in the broader region, particularly South Korea and India, could make a big difference by taking a similar stand. This would ultimately promote their interests by encouraging China to play by the rules of international conduct.

Tokyo could also repeat its earlier professed concern for Thai democracy. Of course, less is expected from less democratic governments in Asia, but those that count themselves democratic must stand up, not least because Thai democracy is a crucial element of future geopolitical stability in the region.



Thitinan Pongsudhirak teaches international political economy and directs the Institute of Security and International Studies at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok.

Thai junta's roadmap will lead to uncertainty

THITINAN PONGSUDHIRAK

Since it seized power on May 22, Thailand's military junta, led by Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha, has plowed ahead methodically with its drive to suspend Thai democracy, ostensibly to repair it while "returning happiness" to the people. But as political power becomes increasingly concentrated within the National Council for Peace and Order, as the junta is officially known, its declared roadmap for peace, order and economic stability appears to be leading Thailand some place the electorate is unlikely to find agreeable.

To be sure, the junta signaled from the start it means business. In just over four months, it has promulgated an interim constitution and stacked the hand-picked, 220-member National Legislative Assembly with active and retired generals. In turn, the NLA unanimously chose then-army commander Prayuth as caretaker prime minister. As if on cue, he promptly selected a 32-member cabinet, also dominated by the military.

Elevating unelected institutions

Prayuth's iron grip on Thailand during the coup is therefore unmistakable. The NCPO is his politburo and the assembly his rubber-stamp legislature. Unlike past coup leaders, Prayuth and his military cohorts are ruling and running Thailand themselves, rather than delegating authority and autonomy in areas such as foreign relations and investor communications to technocrats and policy professionals, as previous coup-installed governments did. Generals occupy crucial technocratic portfolios in the Prayuth cabinet – notably foreign affairs, transport, commerce and education.

Leaving no doubt about its intentions, the NCPO has already codified 10 broad charter preferences into Article 35 of the interim constitution, mainly addressing past corruption and abuse of power among elected politicians. The article also stipulates that the permanent constitution must ensure a democratic system that is "suitable for Thai society." This constitution-drafting formula evokes the arrangement following the 2006 coup. The 2007 charter was largely oriented toward keeping former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his party machine at bay. This time, the net will be cast more widely. The new constitution is likely to be a broader, more anti-politician document that removes political power from elected forces and restores it to the traditional pillars of the bureaucracy, the military and the monarchy.

This is in line with Prayuth's view of Thailand as a country with a glorious past that has been corrupted by democracy. The junta's response is to minimize elected popular representation and elevate the role of unelected institutions deemed to draw legiti-

macy through traditional moral authority. The constitution-drafting process next year will thus be a battleground for competing visions of Thailand, pitting supporters of this long-established but undemocratic political order against a more recent but unformed and incomplete system based on electoral rule.

Thailand's key problem is that it has not yet found a middle path that both establishment centers of power and their electoral opponents can live with. The evidence so far suggests the NCPO is not attracted by the idea of a new compact between the two that could carry Thailand forward.

Beyond the transition

The longer-term implications are inevitably messy. With unaccountable absolute power, Prayuth and his NCPO members will have the incentive to hunker down beyond the term of office laid

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out in the roadmap, which pledges to restore democracy and hold elections by October 2015. If they are widely seen to be doing a good job, the generals in and out of uniform will want to keep doing it. If they are seen to be doing a bad job, they will want a second chance. The top brass will also fear retribution from opponents once they step down. In addition, the generals are accompanied by their own vested in-

terests, which have much to lose without political power. At the least, Prayuth and his military comrades may insist on being the midwives of Thailand's transition beyond the glorious but fading era of King Bhumibol Adulyadej – who is now 86 and has been on the throne for 68 years.

Not for decades has Thailand been ruled so directly and blatantly by a military government in strongman fashion, with a pervasive hold on the decision-making apparatus. The mounting risks of a collision are clear. Thai society has grown up opposing military rule for the past four decades, including popular uprisings that famously restored democratic rule in 1973 and 1992. There is no evidence it will put up with a military dictatorship for the long term, notwithstanding the initial positive reception of the coup.

On the other hand, the military government is hierarchical, its organizational culture based on chains of command and control that are not open to debate and public participation. An unaccountable government will in any case lose touch with popular sentiments and grievances. This mismatch of top-down military government underpinned by traditional institutions with democratic trappings can only be a recipe for disaster.



Thitinan Pongsudhirak teaches international political economy and directs the Institute of Security and International Studies at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok.

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Thitinan Pongsudhirak: When global terror goes retail

The recent terrorist incidents in Australia and Canada may be more significant -- and disturbing -- than they may at first seem. No longer a top-down and organized international network of Jihadist cells with a command and control hierarchy, global terrorism of the kind the world has seen in Ottawa and Melbourne has spawned lone-wolf extremists as foot soldiers of Islamist expansionism, inspired and radicalized by the militant rhetoric of the Islamic State group.

The urgent challenge for governments in Asia and elsewhere is to find a balance between tougher counter-terrorist vigilance that will inevitably infringe on civil liberties and more moderate responses that encourage mutual accommodation of Islam and modernity.

What is particularly alarming in the Australian and Canadian cases is the audacity and indigenous nature of the attacks. On Oct. 22 in Ottawa, 32-year-old Michael Zehaf-Bibeau launched a daylight shooting attack on Canada's parliament and nearby War Memorial, killing one soldier. Two days earlier, another suspected Jihadist ran down two soldiers, killing one in a hit-and-run car attack, after authorities prevented him from traveling to the Middle East. And on Sept. 23, police in Melbourne shot and killed a young Australian man of Afghan background, who stabbed two police officers after his Australian passport was cancelled by authorities who suspected he was planning to join Islamic State in Syria or Iraq.

To be sure, these isolated acts of terrorism appear to have been triggered by frustration and fury over official restrictions that may have curtailed plans to join Islamic State's campaign. But the potential for such attacks to spread regionally cannot be ignored.

These extremists are homegrown nationals or grew up in their adopted countries; they are not imported or incubated cells as was the case with al-Qaeda in the earlier phase of global terror. Misfits at home suffering from economic deprivation and social alienation can discover a voice, purpose and clarity with the totality of what the Islamic State group offers. It is a powerful coupling of the Islamist appeal in a faraway land and personal disenchantment at home.

Yet, allowing these aspiring fighters to leave to join Jihadist movements abroad is not a prudent option -- even for governments seeking to curb the threat within. In the previous generation of global terrorism, returning veterans of "holy wars" in Islamist insurgencies, from the Middle East to North Africa, posed daunting security risks. Southeast Asia in the 2000s, for example, had to grapple with returnees from Jihadist insurgencies against the former Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s and from studying and networking in other hubs of Islamic radicalization -- particularly the *madrassas*, or religious schools of the ultra-conservative Wahabi brand of Islam.

In Muslim insurgencies in Southeast Asia, the main grievances have been ethno-nationalist rather than Islamist in nature. It is not global Islamism but historical rights to traditional livelihoods, religious freedom and administrative autonomy that is demanded. State accommodation and limited autonomy have resulted in relative peace in Mindanao and Aceh but not in southern Thailand.

Even so, countries such as Australia and Canada now face a stark dilemma: allowing local, aspiring Jihadists to travel freely to swell the ranks of Islamic State poses the risk of their eventual return and consequent importation of extremism. But confining them to the home front can lead to spontaneous and "do-it-yourself" acts of terrorism. If these unilateral acts become more frequent, as the recent attacks in Australia and Canada suggest, they could present a new global threat in which Islamist radicalization and action could be "indigenized," sprouting individual offshoots with member who may or may not have spent time as Jihadists abroad.

Era of the 'lone wolf'?

The bottom line is that we will see this challenge again -- fighters coming home from Syria, Iraq and other Islamic State-contested zones to Southeast Asia. The new element here is the lone-wolf Jihadi syndrome.

Local governments hold the key to reintegrating and even watching over radicalized returnees. Indonesia has a commendable record with the Aceh peace agreement and wide-ranging decentralization measures, and the Philippines is getting there with a comparable accord in the Bangsamoro Framework Agreement. However, Thailand's Malay-Muslim insurgency in the country's deep south rages on as one of the world's deadliest internal conflicts, with poor prospects for accommodation as long as military dominance of national politics continues.

A systematic germination between Islamist ideology and regional Muslim radicals is unlikely but there could be limited interaction and penetration of fighters from Islamic State in regional Muslim insurgencies.

This risk is most acute in southern Thailand, even as the prospect grows of further repression in Muslim-dominated Rakhine state in western Myanmar. In this respect Indonesia and the Philippines, despite their much larger Muslim populations, are less of a concern

than Thailand and Myanmar.

As in the individual acts of terror in Melbourne and Ottawa, random and individual offshoots of Islamic extremism in the region merit close scrutiny. Go-it-alone extremists or even loose cells of Islamist expansionism should occupy a prominent place on the security radars of regional governments.

Down the road, a greater spotlight is needed on moderate Muslim countries like Indonesia and Malaysia that have promoted modern models of Islam that sit comfortably with democracy, market economy, and capitalist development, notwithstanding periodic tensions and setbacks. The international community should call out state sponsors of Islamist extremism such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which is more viable now in view of the shale gas revolution. Oil power in the 21st century is not what it used to be.

The need for action highlights what in some senses is a race against time. Lone-wolf religious extremism is growing, as Islamism takes on what one might call "retail" and "DIY" features. Australia and Canada are just recent examples. As a result, state-society relations are likely to suffer as civil liberties are increasingly curtailed amid the imperative for greater state vigilance.

However, democratic governments must be mindful not to end up as repressive states that undermine their core identities, and systems based on inalienable rights and freedoms of religion, speech and movement, among many others.

Thitinan Pongsudhirak teaches international political economy and directs the Institute of Security and International Studies at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok.

Mekong region's future hinges on China, Japan

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It is now clear that the China-Japan dynamic is the most consequential factor in the steady rise of what might be called the Mekong mainland of Southeast Asian countries along the mighty river. Both powers have helped shape the regional contours and economic trajectory of mainland Southeast Asia, and seem determined to deepen and broaden their roles.

If they can manage their bilateral relationship more maturely than in the past, it would be a boon to the burgeoning region – and to their own economies, as they well know. The alternative is intraregional competition and multiple tensions that will undermine the growing promise of the most promising of regions.

To appreciate the potential of the Mekong mainland, which encompasses Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam along with the southern Chinese provinces of Yunnan and Guangxi, the paramount role of geography in determining international outcomes must be recognized. In the 18th and 19th centuries, colonial powers erected borders and configured the international system around them. In the latter half of the 20th century, the global system was shaped not by territories but by a battle of ideologies and conflicting ideas of socioeconomic organization.

Now, in the second decade of the 21st century, we are seeing a reversion to the distant, pre-colonial past when borders matter less and the mobility of the masses, with their money and their means, is expanding inexorably. Nowhere is this trend more evident than in the Mekong mainland.

When it includes Yunnan and Guangxi, the Greater Mekong Subregion, as it is known, harbors more than 300 million consumers and a combined gross domestic product of more than \$1 trillion, even by conservative estimates. Over the past two decades, extensive road construction has enabled infrastructure corridors – from north to south and east to west – to connect, broaden and tighten cross-border trade and investment flows among these countries.

It is now possible to drive from southern China to Thailand's deep south, and from Myanmar across the mainland all the way to Vietnam. Railway development is substantially behind road linkages but this leaves a vast space for rail expansion. Its collective annual growth trajectory is likely to stay in the 4-6% range for at least the decade ahead.

When the Asian Development Bank, traditionally headed by a Japanese due to the country being its largest investor, initiated and propelled the GMS as a concept in the early 1990s, it probably did not foresee that the region would evolve into China's vibrant backyard. As Mekong mainland countries fall increasingly



Reuters

The Mekong River runs through Phnom Penh.

under China's influence, Japan feels that the region is slipping away. That is despite the fact that Japanese companies and government agencies have poured substantial investments and resources into the GMS over the years.

The new great game?

As a result, a rising new “great game” of geopolitical competition on the Mekong mainland has intensified. China is naturally the resident superpower, displaying growing confidence and global leadership ambitions. A major power in economic terms but a middle power in most other respects, Japan is heavily invested in this region and intends to maintain and expand its regional role.

At a peak point during President Barack Obama's first term, the U.S. upped its game in mainland Southeast Asia. Since then, however, America's role in the Mekong mainland is perceived to have waned. Washington's sea power is still immense and necessary for regional peace and stability, but its role on the mainland and particularly in the GMS region is not what it used to be. As for India's highly touted eastward foreign policy focus, its weight and role are nowhere close to China's and Japan's – although some infrastructure investment would appear to flag New Delhi's continuing interest.

Thus the China-Japan axis is central to events in the Mekong mainland in the years ahead. If these two Asian powers and neighbors can iron out latent hostilities from decades past and constructively manage territorial tensions, particularly their bitter wartime memories and their island dispute in the East China Sea, it would contribute significantly to the region's prosperity and security. But if tensions persist – or even spill over into outright conflict – the Mekong mainland will suffer from greater geopolitical rivalries.

To be sure, the Mekong mainland faces many obstacles – environmental issues, nontraditional security challenges, natural disasters, ethnic conflicts and water security, to list a few. While these problems will weigh on individual countries, they are unlikely to stop the region's phenomenal growth story.

The message is mainly for Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and President Xi Jinping: This region is large enough for Asia's two foremost residential powers, a rising and thriving corner of the global map that urgently needs greater alignment of Japan's and China's mutual mainland interests.



Thitinan Pongsudhirak teaches international political economy and directs the Institute of Security and International Studies at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok.