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## Evaluating U.S. Democratization Pressure on Post-Coup Thailand

メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 関西外国語大学・関西外国語大学短期大学部 公開日: 2018-04-05 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): Leverage, democratization, Thailand, United States, foreign policy 作成者: Cogan, Mark S. メールアドレス: 所属: 関西外国語大学
URL	<a href="https://doi.org/10.18956/00007785">https://doi.org/10.18956/00007785</a>

# Evaluating U.S. Democratization Pressure on Post-Coup Thailand

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## Abstract

Immediately following the May 2014 military coup d'état in Thailand, the Obama Administration began a series of diplomatic and political actions, partly aimed at pressuring the Thai junta to return the country to democratic control. While this short-term democratization pressure proved largely unsuccessful, some Obama-era maneuvers cast a spotlight on some of Thailand's remaining vulnerabilities to external pressures. This paper analyzes the American response to the 2014 Thai military coup, using Levitsky and Way's (2005) linkage and leverage democratization theory as a method of evaluation. The reach of American leverage is discussed and potential pressure points are revealed.

**Keywords:** Leverage, democratization, Thailand, United States, foreign policy

## Introduction

On May 22, 2014, Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha, the Commander of the Royal Thai Army, deposed the caretaker government of Yingluck Shinawatra in a bloodless military coup. In the process of upending democratic rule and suspending Thailand's democracy, the military junta also reset bilateral relations with the United States. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, concerned about unfolding events, immediately denounced the Army's incursion into domestic affairs, calling it both "disappointing" and "unjustified."<sup>1)</sup> While Obama administration officials held out hope that the military would return power to civilian control with free elections, it was evident by mid-June that the military was seeking to entrench itself in power<sup>2)</sup>. Shortly after Kerry's announcement, the United States began restricting regular financial assistance and maneuvered to cancel or scale down joint military cooperation exercises (Parameswaran, 2015b). It immediately snubbed Thai military observers from attending RIMPAC exercises. (Campbell, 2014) For Obama, the political conditionalities of a return to normal diplomatic and political relations with the United States was a specific

timetable for a return to a democratically-elected government and the immediate restoration of civil and political liberties that were suspended as a result of Yingluck's removal.

Some of America's foreign policy concerns in Thailand can be attributed to a fundamental misunderstanding of Thai politics. Two contrasting views of the Thai political landscape can arguably be seen--and both are somewhat problematic. First, the lead Western democratic players witnessed a period of rapid democratic consolidation in Thailand, with free and fair elections held in 2001, 2006 and 2011<sup>3)</sup>. A vibrant Thai civil society emerged during this period and some believed that Thailand was developing a pluralistic, participatory democratic culture (Pathmanand, 2001; 27). The darker side of the same coin depicts a dormant, yet powerful military with an elite bourgeoisie increasingly frustrated by the populist gains of Thaksin Shinawatra, an eccentric billionaire telecommunications magnate.

Days before the Thai coup, Amy Searight, Deputy Secretary of Defense for South and Southeast Asia, said the U.S. was "reasonably confident" (Beattie, 2014) that there would be no military coup, showing optimism in the first paradigm. In keeping with expectations, the elite classes believed the Americans would take their cues from 2006--and were surprised when they did not. Growing American frustration with Thai excuses for both the 2006 and 2014 interventions led to a much stronger American position (Pongsudhirak, 2016; 65). The White House began to lean heavily on Thailand, convinced that traditional leverage could create the necessary conditions to influence Thai foreign policy and return the country to democratic control. That leverage is the focus of this paper. This article examines U.S. democratization pressures on Thailand following the events of May 2014. Obama Administration policy is presented in contrast to traditional bilateral ties, where regional security, internal stability and combating terrorism overwhelm democratic interests. This paper will examine the failures of U.S. external democratization pressure on Thailand with an eye on possibilities for democratic value promotion in an increasingly resistant authoritarian environment. To identify prospective pressure points, this article employs Levitsky and Way's (2005) leverage and linkage democratization theory as an evaluative mechanism. The article is divided into three sections. First, I detail relevant literature post-Cold War democratization and then summarize the history of American leverage on Thailand prior to 2014. I then analyze American policy changes after May 2014 and finally, outline specific pressures that have had demonstrable results in upholding democratic norms.

despite the decline and effectiveness of U.S. leverage. A post-coup analysis of American external democratization pressure is particularly relevant in a unique chapter in U.S.-Thai bilateral relations. The 184-year-old alliance<sup>4)</sup> has been strained as a result of chronic political instability in Thailand and the emergence of China as a regional counterbalance to U.S. interests.

## Literature and Context

Larry Diamond (2014) has argued that democracy has been in retreat and the West has overlooked a sustained democratic “recession” that has endured for more than a decade. This democratic recession is a stark departure from more than 30 years of democratic expansion dating back to 1975. In Southeast Asia, Freedom House indicators for 2017 indicate a precipitous drop, with Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, Lao PDR, and Malaysia receiving equal or lower scores than the previous year. Western illusions about liberal values permeating Asian institutions have been replaced by authoritarian governments dismantling what remains of democratic pillars. Scholarly literature reveals some of these faulty expectations.

Considerable attention has been given to the field of democratization, most notably after the tumultuous events of the Cold War (Huntington 1991; Diamond 1999), when it was assumed that states with political, economic, and military ties to the former Soviet Union would seek greater liberalization. Seismic, structural changes realigned political boundaries and a spirited debate emerged about the limitations of external state pressure in influencing democratization around the globe, both from a state’s transition from an authoritarian regime, or when a state fails to consolidate democracy. Levitsky and Way (2005) proposed that the post-Cold War structural environment was influenced by “dimensions”, that both Western leverage and linkage increase the cost of authoritarian behavior. (p. 23) Leverage is defined as the vulnerability of a state to varieties of external pressure--a function of three factors: a) relative size of the military or economy; b) access to support from an alternate regional power; and c) competing foreign policy issues on the agendas of states that have the potential to exercise external control. This top-down pressure often takes the form of political or diplomatic pressure, political conditionalities, punitive sanctions, or a form of military intervention. They acknowledge the limitations of the first dimension as a stand alone mechanism for exerting external pressure. Weak states were particularly vulnerable

to Western leverage, however subtle abuses of state power were left largely unchecked. Yet leverage rarely alone has much force in steering the course of democratization. Linkage, or bottom-up pressures are needed. Linkage is defined as the strength of state ties and cross-border flows between a state and the West, or Western-leaning multilateral institutions, broken into five separate categories: geopolitical, economic, social, communication, and transnational linkages. (Levitsky & Way, 2006; 379)

The Thai context provides a challenge for the linkage and leverage concepts, similar to many countries experiencing challenges with democratic consolidation. Frustrations at the lack of democratization can be attributed to Thailand's current dissatisfaction with democratic systems. While Thailand has institutions that have democratic traditions, it has a history of anti-democratic military interventions. The 2014 coup d'état became the 12th such intervention since 1932. Further, in June 2014, the ruling Army junta introduced the 2014 interim Constitution that gave sweeping power to the military, including executive, legislative, and judicial authority. (Herman, 2014) Considering these severe restrictions, a more realistic assessment of democratization in the Thai context would expand the definition of democratization to include adherence to some Western democratic norms. This can include some liberalization of government institutions, protecting civil liberties and upholding state obligations to international human rights norms. It is important to note the limitations of this exercise. Galtung and Scott (2008) define democracy as a "feedback loop between rulers and ruled, with signals of consent or dissent, meaning acceptance or rejection. A democracy is as good as its feedback loops. Hence, there are degrees, levels of democracy." (p. 3) Thailand's democratization is a puzzle, and these degrees or levels of democracy are complicated and obscured. As Clark Neher (1995) writes, "No nation in Southeast Asia is as difficult to evaluate in terms of democracy as Thailand." (p. 195) The aim is not to evaluate the extent of Thailand's democratization, or attempt to place or categorize Thailand into a convenient model "competitive authoritarian" or "hybrid" regime as Levitsky and Way (2010) do to other semi-autocratic states. This paper assesses the U.S.-Thai bilateral relationship with regard to these expanded democratic norms after May 2014, using the leverage-linkage vehicle as an assessment.

Thailand has been beset by chronic political instability over the past decade, fractured by two divergent political spheres. The Red-Yellow divide in 2009 highlighted social,

economic and elite divisions punctuated by delegitimized elections, populist uprisings and bloody street violence. Red Shirt protesters, commonly associated with the pro-Thaksin United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) marched in Bangkok claiming then-Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva took power illegitimately, in collusion with the judiciary and the Royal Thai Army. In contrast, the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) formed as a movement against Thaksin, comprised of the urban middle-class, royalists, and anti-Thaksin Southerners. Following the 2014 coup d'état, the UDD populist elements have gone into self-imposed hiding—partially out of fear of reprisal or crackdown from a watchful military government. Thailand is a “parallel state”, (Briscoe, 2008) one quasi-democratic, and the other a military-led Constitutional monarchy putting itself “above politics” yet leveraging its own pervasive influence over civil society. External Western actors, seeking to pressure Thailand through combinations of linkage and leverage, face a difficult climb.

Thailand's relationship with its long-time American benefactor has ripened. The country has emerged as an economic catalyst for ASEAN, and transitioning from ODA recipient to an ODA contributor. As Tan (2016) suggests, democratization in this more mature context is risky. In an environment where the recipient of assistance has significant leverage, the use of any ODA for democracy promotion would likely fail. (p. 155) Thailand fits well into this argument. For example, while Thailand values military assistance from the United States, it has worked to improve its relationship with China, who in turn is motivated by “commercial” and “geostrategic” considerations. (Tan, 2016; 155) The absence or limitations of leverage, Tan argues, makes American demands unlikely to succeed. For Western donors, options appear limited. Aid, Tan suggests, is better spent on “secondary recipients” who do not have the means to counteract external leverage. The deluge of ODA to Myanmar tied to democratization after 2010 is a prime example. Democracy promotion is best “at the margins” rather than “wasted” on primary, and consequently more authoritarian recipients are now less inclined to accept or implement programmes that produce any tangible results. The cost of authoritarian behavior remains low.

## Democratization and Leverage Before the Coup

Thailand has had a long history of difficulties with democratization and the Americans have not consistently pressed the issue. Thailand has shifted from “military meddling to

democratic reignition” (Farrelly, 2013: 283) since its 1932 Revolution, where the Siamese overthrew an absolute monarchy, replacing it with a constitutional version. However, evidence of democratization was limited. By 1938, Thailand had lurched toward dictatorship and bilateral relations with the United States paused during World War II. Field Marshall Plaek Phibunsongkhram, (commonly known as Phibun) a military strongman responsible for ending generations of Chakri absolutism, governed with impunity. Thailand soon backed Japan and declared war on the United States in 1942. An early bottom-up approach involved lending support to the “Free Thai” movement begun by upper middle class Thais educated at American institutions, but had little success in uprooting Phibun. (Darling, 1962; 96)

New realities forced the Americans to alter course. In a post-war environment, democratization efforts were secondary to competing issues of interest. With seminal events in Czechoslovakia in 1948 and the outbreak of war on the Korean Peninsula in 1950 unfolding, the spread of Communism on two fronts occupied American policymakers. As many scholars have noted (Farrelly, 2013; Fineman, 1997), the United States recognized--albeit reluctantly--the legitimacy of the Phibun government in the face of past wartime transgressions because of competing security and balance of power concerns elsewhere. The Americans put significant leverage on Phibun to crack down on suspected Communist leftists (Fineman, 1997: 260). Although some indications suggest that this was Thai pragmatism at work, considering the number of leftist members of the Thai Cabinet at the time and the insatiable demand for American military aid. American fears of a Communist menace were made manifest by political instability and the unfolding civil war in neighboring Vietnam. Thailand’s monarchy later found legitimacy in the convenient security arrangement, with the Americans impressing upon both civilian and military governments alike Thailand’s unique vulnerabilities.

By the mid-1970s, Thailand had again both flirted with and suppressed democratic urges. This period was marked by student uprisings against Thanom Kittikachorn in Bangkok in 1973 which resulted in his removal. This was followed by the massacre at Thammasat University in October of 1976. The legitimacy gained from these interventions began a period of monarchy-military dominance, and the decline of U.S. democratization pressure. While Thailand’s institutions left room for free and fair elections, they also allowed for the rise of populist billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra in 2000. Thaksin’s populist policies routinely upset

the royalist elite class. America wanted Thailand's cooperation on the Bush Administration's war on terrorism, and became pragmatic when Thaksin escalated his war on drugs and military interventions against the separatist insurgency in the restive South. (Chambers, 2001; 472) His Chinese heritage and disdain for Western-dominated institutions, most notably the International Monetary Fund (Kazmin, 2006), ruffled feathers. It was less than surprising that when Thaksin was removed in a coup while visiting the United Nations in New York, the Bush Administration expressed only mild disappointment in receiving the news. (Baker, 2006)

## Rhetorical and Normative Pressure

One month after the May 2014 coup, the Obama Administration made a series of diplomatic moves frequently described as "soft sanctions". In June 2014, the American uninvited three military observers to the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) in Hawaii. Kristie Kenney, U.S. Ambassador to Thailand during that period led to widespread condemnation of the coup, outlining potential immediate sanctions that would be forthcoming. Kenney also hinted the kind of normative pressure that would follow, "encouraging the current governing council of Thailand to move power into civilian hands and stop the restrictive measures." (Campbell, 2014) While these bilateral maneuvers are cursory in nature, there is a lingering power to normative pressure. American rhetoric toward Thailand echoed sentiment from Western partners, including Japan, Australia and the EU, who each threatened broader measures provided that democratic rule did not return within a structured or agreed upon timeline. While extent of the "soft sanctions" are discussed in the next section, the U.S. more frequently used normative and rhetorical pressure as a means of delegitimizing the military government. Kenney's tenure at the Embassy in Bangkok was well regarded, as was her public diplomacy. Kenney used her public image to both burnish her credentials with the Thai public through social media campaigns (Maxwell, 2014) as well as marginalize and isolate Thai autocrats. Her popular Fourth of July party at the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok notably did not include any of the Thai junta's planners. They were purposely not invited. (Maxwell, 2014)

Ambassador Kenney's departure became another medium for American diplomatic pressure. The Obama Administration took several months before nominating Glyn Davies,



a former special envoy to North Korea. While publicly claiming the appointment would take months due to a lengthy Senate confirmation process, Kenney's departure in November 2014 and the Davies nomination did not occur until April 2015, followed by confirmation in September 2015. Multiple channels were used to distance U.S. diplomats from their Thai counterparts, extending to high-level officials at the State Department. Daniel Russel, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs publicly censured the junta in prepared remarks at Chulalongkorn University in January 2015:

*"I'll be blunt here: When an elected leader is deposed, impeached by the authorities that implemented the coup, and then targeted with criminal charges while basic democratic processes and institutions are interrupted, the international community is left with the impression that these steps could be politically driven. Ending martial law throughout the country and removing restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly are important steps as part of a genuinely inclusive reform process that reflects the broad diversity of views within the country. We hope that the result of that process will be stable, democratic institutions that reflect and respond to the will of the Thai people."<sup>5)</sup>*

Russel called for a "process that reinforces the confidence of the Thai people in their government and judicial institutions" and a move toward "stable and participatory democracy." ("Remarks", 2015) A diplomatic war of words ensued, where Prayut forcefully responded to U.S. criticism reiterating that a deterioration of security necessitated the coup, which was "done to save Thai democracy." Thai Foreign Minister General Tanasak Patimapragorn allegedly confronted Russel on what he would do if faced with a similar security scenario. Perhaps the criticism may have been met with less reaction by Thai officials had Russel not met earlier with Yingluck, whom Prayut had three days earlier sought to indict on charges of negligence following a failed rice pledging scheme. This diplomatic war of words continued well into 2015, when the Administration appointed Davies. Thai officials accused the Americans of stalling the appointment and the Americans blamed the delay on Congressional approval. But Davies appointment was a continuation of American political and diplomatic distance. At the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand, the new Ambassador criticized Thailand's "lengthy and unprecedented" prison sentences under draconian lese majeste laws (Yee, 2015). Pressure came from Davies and from royalists, who demanded that the Royal Thai Police investigate the Ambassador for

defamation of the Thai monarchy. Despite the significant political positioning and rhetorical distance between the Americans and Thailand, there was an eagerness to restore normal relations with the Americans, with Thai Ambassador to the U.S., Pisan Manapawat publicly calling for a renewal of a partnership with “shared outcomes.” (Pennington, 2015) U.S. officials also began to soften their tone. Davies, prior to the 2016 Cobra GOLD exercise rejected claims that diplomatic ties were on hold and by 2017, the bulk of rhetoric centered on the U.S. being a “reliable” partner.

### Post-Coup U.S. Military-Economic Pressure

Within hours of Yingluck Shinawatra’s removal from power, the United States immediately began targeting Thailand’s vulnerabilities to leverage through a review of military assistance programs to Thailand. Obama immediately restricted funding for Foreign Military Financing (FMF), a mechanism by which countries can purchase defense capabilities in the form of articles, services, equipment, and training through financing or through commercial contracts. Prior to 2014, Thailand received as much as \$1.6 million in financing; however partly due to restrictions placed upon it by the U.S. Foreign Assistance Act, Thailand was now cut off. Similar actions were taken with \$1.3 million in International Military Education and Training (IMET) funding, which provides training to improve the conduct of foreign militaries—including fostering respect for human rights and democratic values. In total, more than \$4.7 million in FMF and IMET dollars were suspended. (Parameswaran, 2015a) Participation in the annual Cobra GOLD exercises slowed, with just 3,600 U.S. troops participating in 2017. The Defense Department cancelled the CARAT Naval training (Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training) and Hanuman Guardian joint army exercises and withdrew a planned visit by U.S. Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral Harry Harris. (“U.S. Cancels Military Exercise”, 2014) The reaction in Bangkok was one of disappointment, if not shock. The military junta expressed its regret in the outward policy shift, noting that the Obama Administration was seeking to expand ties with Cuba under Raul Castro, and negotiate a nuclear deal with Iran, while also arguing against further economic sanctions.

Washington’s pullback had an additional consequence. Because of the protracted delays in military assistance financing and reduced joint military cooperation exercises, Thailand

began courting China as a potential balance to the United States. Chinese Defense Minister Chang Wanquan visited Thailand in February 2015 in an effort to boost Sino-Thai relations, agreeing to conduct joint military exercises within the next five years (Parameswaran, 2015c). In that same meeting, Chang also agreed to give Thailand favorable prices on military hardware. (Lefevre, 2015) In late 2016, the two countries discussed the possibility of a joint military production facility and additional cooperation in traditional U.S. dominated areas of anti-terrorism, personnel exchanges and training exercises (Parameswaran, 2015c). In 2017, Thailand purchased three Chinese submarines for \$393 million and 10 Norinco VT4 main battle tanks for \$58 million, replacing older U.S. models.

The growing relationship between the Prayut government and the Chinese served to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of U.S. conventional pressures. Prawit Wongsuwan, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister noted, “China will not intervene in Thailand’s politics but will give political support and help maintain relationships at all levels. This is China’s policy.” This underscores weakness in U.S. leverage. Policy pressure backed by rhetorical pressure resulted in a political stalemate—and when Prayut met with Chinese officials himself, he reiterated the Thai position that Washington “does not understand the way we work,” (Lefevre, 2015) a rebuttal to the constant haranguing by U.S. diplomats. Yet, the Americans have had fair warning. Wikileaks-intercepted cables demonstrate U.S. ineptitude on growing Chinese influence in Thailand dating back to 2006. A senior Chinese Colonel told a U.S. diplomat that the Chinese tactic of telling Thailand, “China is your neighbor, we will be here long-term, we will not interfere in your internal affairs,” would give China a competitive advantage. (Schulberg, 2014)

China’s growing counterbalance to the United States not only demonstrates a lack of consistency on the part of two consecutive U.S. administrations, but elucidates the ineffectiveness of traditional leverage without the presence of significant linkage. In the modern context, the cocktail of Chinese Communism and royalist fears of a northern insurgency are stale. The growing economic and military power of contemporary China not only serve as a convenient partner for the ruling junta, but the benefits of partnership are too alluring to ignore. Since 2008, bilateral trade has grown exponentially, with China becoming Thailand’s most important trading partner. The relationship is more significant of late, as China’s partnership with Thailand exceeds all other ASEAN countries. More than \$26.5

billion in Thai goods were exported to China (OEC, 2015) and Thailand represents small, but significant regional destination for Chinese imports. Thailand and China have strengthened bilateral relations, resulting in rapid foreign direct investment flow into Thailand. China is the second largest investor in Thailand after Japan. Part of China's investment is diplomatic, but it sees Thailand as a hub for trade in Southeast Asia. Part of the diplomatic component is a willingness on the part of Chinese investors to wait out political turmoil and uncertainty. While applications for new foreign investors fell from 3,469 projects in 2014 to just 1,038 in 2015, Chinese FDI for 2016 totaled more than 15 percent of all foreign investment (BOI, 2016). In the short term, Thailand is reliant on Chinese business. Political uncertainties have created a sluggish economy that grew only by 0.8 per cent in 2014 and up to 3.2 per cent in 2016. The World Bank projects flat growth in 2018 and 2019, weaker than most of Southeast Asia (Villadiego, 2017).

## **Economics, Human Trafficking and Linkage**

Levitsky and Way (2010) have suggested that the West have typically defaulted on democratization when weighing the potential consequences with strategic partners. Energy producing states, geostrategic partners, and major trade partners have had wide latitude from the West. Punitive considerations are largely not a part of Western leverage. Yet, combined with economic linkages, there is evidence that Thailand has adhered to some democratic norms. The extent of regime compliance is ostensibly proportional to the consistency of American foreign policy. Two recent accounts provide support to this argument. Thailand's deep civil society connections to international human rights NGOs amplify leverage with transnational linkages. Social and communication linkages, both from Thai communities abroad and through civil society organizations have been effective in pushing for meaningful social and political changes. International pressure, through intensive social and communication linkages have been documented in recent human trafficking scandals, which plagued Charoen Pokphand Foods (CP) and four other international food retailers. CP bought fishmeal from local suppliers that operated fishing vessels manned by slave labor. In a separate case, the Natural Fruit Company owned pineapple processing plant was accused in a Finnish NGO report of a number of human rights violations, including forced labour and physical and emotional abuse. These are not isolated cases.

Thailand has been considered both a transit country and major destination for human trafficking and has only made incremental progress in resolving the problem. The United States has used the State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP) as leverage. The European Union (EU) issued a "yellow card" to Thailand in early 2015 over its unregulated fishing and poor treatment of migrant workers. In previous reports, Thailand was granted two waivers under the Trafficking Victims Prevention Act (TVPA) in 2012 and 2013, on the condition that it would meet the minimum standard for the elimination or reduction of trafficking before the issuance of the following report. The 2014 Report notes that 225 people were convicted under the Thai 2008 anti-trafficking law in 2013, but efforts were "insufficient compared with the size of the problem in Thailand, and corruption at all levels hampered the success of these efforts." Consequently, Thailand did not meet the requirements following 2013 and defaulted into Tier 3 status for 2014. The result of these normative measures usually leads to a degree of compliance. In response to the EU and U.S. downgrades, the junta took measures to arrest more than 100 people in the first ten months since punitive warnings from the West were issued.

The U.S. State Department did not downgrade Thailand for purely political reasons, however political considerations did play a key role in both a downgrade to Tier 3 and the recent upgrade to the Tier 2 Watch List. Russell, after his remarks at Chulalongkorn repeated American democratic norms in an interview with the New York Times, but also threatened Thailand would not regain its previous stature. An investigation by Reuters (Szep & Spetalnick, 2015), however, demonstrates how political considerations render U.S. leverage and linkage mechanisms either less effective or moot. Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking In Persons (J/TIP) recommendations were repeatedly overruled by American diplomats on more than a dozen country ratings, including Thailand. Diplomatic efforts to upgrade Thailand from the Tier 2 Watch List were well documented, including reports that both Thailand and Malaysia were candidates for removal due to geopolitical considerations, namely negotiations over the Trans-Pacific Partnership, or TPP (Szep & Spetalnick, 2015). TPP was an essential part of the Obama Administration's pivot to Asia. The maneuver prompted an outcry from civil society organizations who had lobbied the U.S. Congress for months on Thailand's TIP status. The 2016 TIP Report eventually upgraded Thailand's standing, which was received positively by the junta, which expressed greater optimism about joining the Partnership, despite legitimate concerns over intellectual property and

agriculture.

The U.S. retreat on normative pressure sent a mixed message to Bangkok. Political inconsistency, particularly on the 2015 removal of Malaysia from Tier 3 status, suggests that economic concerns are again paramount to U.S. interests. The lack of normative pressure, in the immediate term, some NGOs have argued, have relaxed Thailand's pursuit of human trafficking violators. The Environmental Justice Foundation reported that the number of human trafficking convictions decreased from 206 in 2014 to 169 in 2015. This evidence, however contrasts with a recent Thai criminal court in July 2017, sentencing 62 people to prison for ill-treatment of Rohingya migrants, including a former Royal Thai Army advisor Lt. Gen. Manas Kongpan, who was given a 27 year term. ("Trafficking Convictions", 2017). Further evidence suggests Prayut has overreacted in compliance efforts. In June 2017, Prayut issued the Decree on the Management of Foreign Workers Act, restricting undocumented foreign workers in Thailand. Potential violators would face fines of up to 800,000 baht (\$24,100). Employers may be fined 4,000 baht (\$120) for every foreign employee performing a duty other than what is detailed in the assigned work visa. Leverage, when social and communication linkages are applied enable civil society actors to mobilize against powerful state and corporate interests. Local NGOs frequently interacted with larger international organizations to raise awareness about Thailand's insufficient labor standards and practices. These actors have increased the effectiveness of external pressure by state actors, including the United States. Western pressure, more effectively applied in the EU case, mandated economic and democratic reforms. In the case of human trafficking, the Thai government was much more willing to conform to international norms, or at the minimum, actors were able to compel Thai officials and domestic actors to examine trafficking policies. Normative pressure, via the TIP, was an effective "pressure point". It supports the claim that economic leverage, combined with sufficient linkages will increase the cost of authoritarian behavior.

## Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that traditional forms of U.S. leverage in the Thai context, evidenced in diplomatic rhetorical and normative pressures have limited effects, if not met with significant linkages. Evidence also suggests that any leverage employed, either through economic sanctions, a re-evaluation of political and military ties must also be complemented

by appropriate linkages, follow-up, and coordination. American diplomatic pressure was not without consequences. In the absence of U.S. engagement, Thailand sought legitimacy and stronger political ties with China. While economic pressure through TIP status and a complementary “yellow card” by the European Union put significant stress on Thailand’s economic outlook, American inconsistency (through issues of competing interest) undermined these efforts.

Speculation about U.S. policy toward Thailand after the 2016 Presidential campaign decreased after two significant post-inaugural events. Prayut accepted President Donald Trump’s invitation to visit the United States, almost immediately after offering the same courtesy to Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte. The Trump Administration has not shown the same interest in the Obama-era “pivot” to Asia, withdrawing from TPP. These developments may indicate a return to a traditional U.S.-Thai bilateral relationship, both pragmatic and transactional. Yet, these moves also indicate an unraveling of normative pressure. The withdrawal from TPP provides China additional bilateral linkages with Thailand, similar to that of its neighbors in Southeast Asia. Thailand’s trade surplus is estimated at \$18.9 billion. While the Trump administration has criticized Thailand and others as “cheaters,” (Korte, 2017) U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson’s August 2017 visit did not reveal any economic policy changes. More importantly, any possible shift in bilateral trade policy will not come with Obama-era strings. Scholars have noted that the warming relationship is an attempt to rebalance a strained relationship with China now the primary actor (Yee, 2017). Normative pressure will likely be replaced by security policy priorities, as American preoccupation with events in the South China Sea and North Korean nuclear ambitions.

## Notes

- 1) Secretary of State John Kerry’s Statement on the Coup in Thailand, Washington, DC, May 22, 2014
- 2) Sentiments shared in testimony by Scot Marciel, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, June 24, 2014
- 3) Elections were held in 2007, but were marred by allegations of fraud and vote buying.
- 4) The Thai-U.S. relationship dates back to March 20, 1833 with the signing of the Treaty of Amity

and Commerce.

- 5) Remarks of Assistant Secretary Daniel Russel, Institute of Security and International Studies, Chulalongkorn University, January 26, 2015

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