

Columnists

## Behind The Headlines

Published: Sunday December 21, 2014

### Balancing between superpowers



By Bunn Nagara

**Major countries make major strategic errors, often to the advantage of other major powers, smaller nations in between or all of the above.**

TO the casual reader, Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang's visit to Bangkok last Friday was the arrival of just another foreign dignitary in Thailand for a regional conference.

But that would be to miss the woods for the trees. In the strategic context of relations playing among China, the United States and countries in South-East Asia, more is happening particularly with Thailand than is reported.

Officially, Li was in Bangkok for a two-day summit with the leaders of Thailand and the other countries of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS): Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam.

However, the summit was also an opportunity for China and Thailand to fine-tune bilateral plans for the construction of a dual-track railway in Thailand as well as exports of rice and rubber to China.

Almost incidentally, Li is the highest-ranking foreign leader to visit Thailand after last May's army coup. That China also happens to be the biggest economy in Asia and the world's largest emerging superpower only add weight to his visit.

China's generosity extends to lending Thailand the money to pay for the railway construction. For Thailand, this means easy payment terms, while for China it means extending closer ties with Thailand over several years.

Improving bilateral relations anywhere is a common enough experience. But in today's post-coup Thailand, the large invisible factor is the tug-of-war between the US and China over influence in this region.

On the day that Gen Prayuth Chan-ocha launched the coup against Yingluck Shinawatra's government on May 22, the US condemned it and hastened to review its military and other assistance to Thailand.

Secretary of State John Kerry declared there was "no justification" for the coup, adding that it would have negative implications for US-Thai relations. For many Thais, Kerry was half (the second half) right.

Nine days later Australia, Washington's "deputy sheriff" in the region, acted accordingly. Canberra cut defence ties with Thailand and imposed a travel ban on Thai military leaders.

This US-based Western position was uniformly inflexible and unaccommodating of the rationale for the coup. Even individual Western academics in foreign seminars rejected any possible justification for it.

On June 11, Prayuth sent a delegation of military commanders to China to discuss regional security and joint training. While some US reports referred to Thailand as Washington's "closest regional ally", other reports from Thailand called China's People's Liberation Army "one of (Thailand's) oldest regional allies".

Subsequently, Prayuth and Li held three other meetings abroad – in China, Myanmar and Vietnam – before Friday's meeting in Bangkok.

The dispatch of the Thai delegation to Beijing in June led to speculation in Bangkok that the US State Department had wrong-footed itself again. This was followed by a shell-shocked silence in Washington over Thai affairs.

Countries in the region, however, were more perceptive of Bangkok's predicament leading up to the coup.

Within days, Malaysian Defence Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein visited, marking the first foreign ministerial visit after the coup. Bangkok commended the visit as Malaysia's "good understanding of the Thai situation".

Among Asean countries at least, it seemed obvious that the Yingluck government's growing illegitimacy amid scandals led to rising tension as Bangkok streets welled with anti-government protests. It was something of the immediate pre-coup atmosphere just prior to the 2006 coup.

But for policy pundits in Washington, textbook responses to military coups substituted for the lack of familiarity with events occasioned by distance. Thus the knee-jerk response was to punish the coup leaders regardless.

As a sign of how out of touch Washington had been with Thailand, a senior Defense Department official for this region declared on May 13 that the US was "reasonably confident" there would be no coup in Thailand.

Exactly one week later, Prayuth declared martial law. Within another 48 hours, a coup had taken over the country.

In her scepticism towards any coup, the US official said the Thai army would have learned some lessons from the 2006 coup. Lessons had been learned, but about how to better nip a situation in the bud – not about never staging a coup again.

Among the problems with US foreign relations is Washington's policy inconsistency. There are some coups it would oppose outright, such as Thailand's latest, while there are others it would accept by refusing to comment on them.

Central to this anomaly are US interests and its law banning aid to coup governments. Thus some coups in Latin America and the one in Egypt against an elected sitting president are not considered coups for those countries to continue receiving US aid.

Egypt is Israel-friendly and therefore a vital US ally in the region. Any coup that does not produce a government against the US or Israel is not a "coup" – for the government to continue being sponsored.

Unlike the US and Australia, countries in South-East Asia are more familiar with developments in the regional neighbourhood and understand local conditions better. Besides, Asean countries are imbued with the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of fellow member nations.

This principle is often misunderstood as an Asean condition when it is a universal principle enshrined in the UN Charter. Many countries observe it but some choose not to.

The latter violate it at will also because they can. They are either large and powerful enough to brush away criticism and censure, or they know they can still get away with ignoring the principle.

Such is the imperious attitude of some major powers that smacks of a neo-colonial attitude. They are not shy about practising the law of the jungle while ignoring international laws and norms.

There is a further misperception that criticising another country's conduct constitutes meddling in another country's affairs. This confusion is fairly universal, being prevalent in Asean countries and elsewhere.

Even condemnation of another country's policies is not intervention. But downgrading ties by such actions as cutting off aid and imposing sanctions and blockades is clearly intervention.

In a recent private encounter, a US academic remarked that US-Vietnam relations are now where they should have been for a long time. He did not mean the bilateral peace and goodwill so much as Vietnam's perceived position as a virtual US ally relative to China.

It is unlikely that Hanoi sees healthy relations with Washington in exactly those terms. The Vietnamese are a proudly nationalist people with no inclination to serve one major power against another.

Hanoi's first priority in relations with the US has been to lift the US trade embargo. Its other priority has been to develop its economy by introducing market elements and then to take full advantage of the vast US market.

Whether or not US policymakers have learned anything from the Vietnam war, Vietnam is no less savvy than the next country. In this case, the next country is neighbouring Thailand.

Countries in South-East Asia may be small but they are highly adaptable and capable of swift policy movement. In contrast, the US seems to be a lumbering giant whose distance from the region puts it at a further disadvantage.

Tomorrow, Prime Minister Prayuth will be in China for a two-day meeting. His agenda, and Beijing's, will be long-term plans for close and sustained relations between Thailand and China.

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