

# CRS Report for Congress

## Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations

Updated June 20, 2007

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Prepared for Members and  
Committees of Congress

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## Summary

U.S.-Thailand relations are of particular interest to Congress because of Thailand's status as a long-time military ally and a significant trade and economic partner. The currently-stalled proposed U.S.-Thailand Free Trade Agreement (FTA) would require implementing legislation to take effect. However, the ouster of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra by a military coup in September 2006 and subsequent economic and political instability has cast uncertainty on how U.S. priorities will fare in the future. Future U.S.-Thai relations will likely depend upon how quickly the military rulers fulfill their promise to restore democratic rule.

Despite differences on Burma policy and human rights issues, shared economic and security interests have long provided the basis for U.S.-Thai cooperation. Thailand contributed troops and support for U.S. military operations in both Afghanistan and Iraq and was designated as a major non-NATO ally by President Bush in December 2003. Thailand's airfields and ports play a particularly important role in U.S. global military strategy, including having served as the primary hub of the relief effort following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. The high-profile arrest of radical Islamic leader Hambali in a joint Thai-U.S. operation in 2003 underscores Thailand's role in the U.S.-led war on terrorism. The U.S.-Thai bilateral trade total in 2006 was over \$30 billion.

Until the political turmoil of 2006 and 2007, Thaksin and his populist Thai Rak Thai party had consolidated broad control of Thai politics. Before his ouster, opposition parties and international watchdog organizations had criticized his strongman style as a threat to Thailand's democratic institutions. Thaksin's response to an insurgency in the southern majority-Muslim provinces also came under fire. A series of attacks by insurgents and counter-attacks by security forces has reportedly claimed over 2,300 lives since January 2004. The violence has increased since the military government took power in September 2006.

With its favorable geographic location and broad-based economy, Thailand has traditionally been considered among the most likely countries to play a major leadership role in Southeast Asia and has been an aggressive advocate of increased economic integration in the region. A founding member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Thailand maintains close ties with China, has reached out to India, and is pursuing FTAs with a number of other countries. Given its ties with the United States, Thailand's stature in the region may affect broader U.S. foreign policy objectives and prospects for further multilateral economic and security cooperation in Southeast Asia. In the context of the Pentagon's transformation and realignment initiatives, current logistical facilities in Thailand could become more important to U.S. strategy in the region. This report will be updated periodically.

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# Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations

A long-time American ally in Asia, Thailand has continued to pursue close ties to the United States as the political landscape of the region has evolved. Solidified during the Cold War, the U.S.-Thai relationship strengthened on the basis of shared economic and trade interests and was further bolstered since the September 11, 2001 attacks by a common commitment to fight terrorism in Southeast Asia. At the same time, Thailand enjoys a strong economic and political relationship with China, positioning itself as a potential battleground for influence in the region.

Thailand has been a significant partner for the United States and an important element of U.S. strategic presence in the Asia-Pacific. Designated as a major non-NATO ally in 2003, Thailand contributed troops and support for U.S. military operations in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Thailand has been an active partner in the U.S.-led war on terrorism, a role highlighted by the high-profile 2003 arrest of a radical Islamic leader in a joint Thai-U.S. operation. Other bilateral cooperation on transnational issues such as narcotics trafficking reinforced Thailand's standing as a primary partner of the United States in maintaining stability in Southeast Asia. With the suspension of U.S. military aid to Thailand following the military coup, that cooperation is largely on hold, although the annual Cobra Gold multinational exercises went forward in May 2007. Continuing political uncertainty, ongoing separatist violence in the southern provinces, and bombings in Bangkok in late 2006 have raised concern that Thailand could become increasingly unstable. U.S. policymakers face a difficult balance of pressuring Bangkok to restore democracy and attempting to maintain good relations with a key power in Southeast Asia that affects the stability of the region as a whole.

The start of negotiations in June 2004 for a U.S.-Thailand Free Trade Agreement (FTA) marked Thailand's possible entry into the expanding American web of trade pacts with political allies. The United States and Thailand exchanged \$25 billion in total trade in 2005, a figure that was expected to rise if a proposed free trade agreement (FTA) could be successfully concluded. However, FTA negotiations had already been difficult, and they were suspended following the political crisis that erupted in April 2006. Following the coup, U.S. officials said that the FTA could not go forward without a return to democratic rule.

## **Military Coup Ousts Thaksin**

On September 19, 2006, Royal Thai Army Commander-in-Chief Sonthi Boonyaratglin led a bloodless military coup in Bangkok, ousting the democratically-elected Prime Minister Thaksin and declaring martial law. The coup was the 18th since the formation of the constitutional monarchy in 1932, but the first in 15 years. The new leaders formed the Council for Democratic Reform (CDR), later

changing the name to the Council for National Security (CNS). The revered King Bhumibol reportedly endorsed the takeover after it occurred: in a statement, he appointed Sonthi as head of the temporary council “in order to create peace in the country.” On October 1, the rulers appointed former Army commander Surayud Chulanont to serve as the interim prime minister. Surayud then appointed a cabinet and pledged to rewrite the constitution, hold a referendum on it by September, and hold new parliamentary elections in December 2007.

The ruling military government has struggled to establish credibility and legitimacy. None of the corruption and graft charges (part of the coup leaders’ justification for usurping power) against Thaksin have been proven, and a series of economic policy moves has unnerved investors. Pro-Thaksin forces appear to be regaining support, particularly among the large rural population that voted overwhelmingly for the ousted prime minister. Thaksin has remained out of Thailand, but highly visible in his international travels. The new draft constitution has come under criticism for reversing many of the democratic principles enshrined in the 1997 charter.

**U.S. Response.** Following the coup, U.S. officials faced the challenge of expressing disapproval for the rollback of democracy while not sacrificing what many view as a crucial relationship in the competition for influence with China in Southeast Asia. Many observers saw the response as relatively mild. On September 28, 2006, the U.S. State Department announced the suspension of several assistance programs under Section 508 of the Foreign Operations Appropriations Act (P.L. 109-102): Foreign Military Financing (FMF, for defense procurement), International Military Education Training funds (IMET, provides training to professionalize the Thai military), and peace-keeping operation programs. Also suspended were funds for counterterrorism and other operations appropriated under Section 1206 of the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2006. The suspended programs total over \$29 million, which includes unexpended funds from FY2006 and earlier years. Under Section 508, the funds can be reinstated once democratic rule is restored. Other programs deemed to be in the U.S. interest continue, according to the State Department. After Surayud was appointed, U.S. Ambassador Ralph Boyce was reportedly the first foreign diplomat to meet with him. In May, the annual “Cobra Gold” multinational military exercises went forward despite the suspension of several other military cooperation programs.

**New Year’s Bombings in Bangkok.** As the military government struggled to gain its footing, several coordinated bombs went off in Bangkok on December 31, 2006, killing three and injuring over 30, including nine foreign tourists. Thai officials told reporters that the likely culprits were disgruntled Thaksin supporters unhappy with the change in power. Thaksin, from Beijing, blamed the attacks on elements of the insurgency that has continued in the majority-Muslim southern provinces, while other observers speculated that the bombings could have been from rival factions in the Thai army. Several arrests were made, but subsequently all suspects were released due to a lack of sufficient evidence.

## Violence in the Southern Provinces

Since January 2004, sectarian violence between insurgents and security forces in Thailand's majority-Muslim provinces has left over 2,300 people dead. The toll includes suspected insurgents killed by security forces, as well as victims of the insurgents — both Buddhist Thais, particularly monks and teachers, and local Muslims. The southern region, which includes the provinces of Yala, Narathiwat, Pattani, and Songkhla, has a history of separatist violence, though the major movements were thought to have died out in the early 1990s. Thai Muslims have long expressed grievances for being marginalized and discriminated against, and the area has lagged behind the rest of Thailand in economic development.

After a series of apparently coordinated attacks in early 2004, the central government declared martial law in the region. A pattern of insurgent attacks — targeted shootings or small bombs that claim a few victims at a time — and counter-attacks by the security forces has developed. The pattern crystallized into two major outbreaks of violence in 2004: on April 28, Thai soldiers killed 108 insurgents, including 34 lightly armed gunmen in a historic mosque, after they attempted to storm several military and police outposts in coordinated attacks; and, on October 25, 84 local Muslims were killed: 6 shot during an erupting demonstration at the Tak Bai police station and 78 apparently asphyxiated from being piled into trucks after their arrest.<sup>1</sup> The insurgents retaliated with a series of more gruesome killings, including beheadings, following the Tak Bai incident. Facing a trend of more sophisticated and coordinated attacks, observers note that such confrontations have led to an increasing climate of fear and division along religious lines.<sup>2</sup>

**Violence Continues Despite Surayud's New Approach.** Upon his appointment, interim Prime Minister Surayud identified solving the problems of the South as one of his major priorities. The Thaksin government's handling of the violence was widely criticized as ineffective and inflammatory; critics charge that the Thaksin Administration never put forth a sustained strategy to define and address the problem, repeatedly but arbitrarily shuffled leadership positions of those charged with overseeing the region, and failed to implement adequate coordination between the many security and intelligence services on the ground. Surayud publicly apologized to Muslim leaders for past government policies in the South and resurrected a civilian agency responsible for improving relations between the security forces, the government, and southern Muslims that Thaksin had abolished. Sonthi, the first Muslim commander of the Army, has advocated negotiations with the separatist groups as opposed to the more confrontational strategy pursued by Thaksin.

However, the violence appears to have increased, with the rate of deaths increasing in the months since the coup. Some analysts say that a younger generation of more radicalized insurgents are resisting the more conciliatory approach of the

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<sup>1</sup> Independent forensic experts said that the men died piled on top of each other with their hands tied behind their backs. See Mydans, Seth, "Thai King Urges Premier to Be More Lenient in the Muslim South," *New York Times*, November 2, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Chulalongkorn University professor Panitan Wattanyagorn, quoted in *Christian Science Monitor*. July 20, 2005.

new leadership in Bangkok. As Surayud and Sonthi attempt to win over the trust of the local Muslim communities, increased attacks make reconciliation difficult to achieve. Some analysts have criticized the military government for redeploying troops to Bangkok and the north to prevent a counter-coup, leaving the South undermanned.<sup>3</sup>

**Foreign Involvement Unlikely.** Most regional observers stress that there is no convincing evidence to date of serious Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) involvement in the attacks in the southern provinces. Many experts characterize the movement as a confluence of different groups: local separatists, Islamic radicals, organized crime, and corrupt police forces. They stress, however, that sectarian violence involving local Muslim grievances provides a ripe environment for foreign groups to become more engaged in the struggle. Such experts have warned that outside groups, including JI and other militant Indonesia-based groups, may attempt to exploit public outrage.

## **Background: Thailand Politics and Government**

The Kingdom of Thailand, a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary form of government, is marked by an important historical dissimilarity from its regional neighbors. Although occupied by Japan during World War II, Thailand was the only country in Southeast Asia that was not colonized by Europeans, and it also avoided the wave of communist revolutions that took control of the neighboring governments of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s. Thailand followed a troubled path to democracy, enduring a series of mostly bloodless coups and multiple changes of government in its modern history. Although Thailand became a constitutional monarchy in 1932, it was ruled primarily by military dictatorships until the early 1990s. A military and bureaucratic elite controlled Thai politics during this period, denying room for civilian democratic institutions to develop. Brief periods of democracy in the 1970s and 1980s ended with reassertions of military rule. After Thai soldiers killed at least 50 people in demonstrations demanding an end to military dominance of the government, international and domestic pressure led to new elections in 1992. The 2006 coup was the first in 15 years.

Thailand's government is composed of the executive branch (prime minister as head of government and the king as chief of state), a bicameral National Assembly, and the judicial branch of three court systems. Until Thaksin's election in 2001, the Democrat Party dominated Thai politics by instituting a series of reforms that enhanced transparency, decentralized power from the urban centers, tackled corruption, and introduced a broad range of constitutional rights. King Bhumiphol, who has served since 1946, commands tremendous respect and loyalty from the Thai public and continues to exercise influence over politics in Thailand.

**Thaksin's Rise and Fall.** The Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party, formed by Thaksin in 1999, benefitted politically from the devastation of the 1997 Asian financial crisis on Thailand's economy, and the subsequent loss of support for the

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<sup>3</sup> Zachary Abuza, "Heading South," *The Asian Wall Street Journal*. June 16, 2007.

ruling Democrats. Thaksin's populist platform appealed to a wide cross-section of Thais, and the TRT easily secured a clear majority in the parliament by forming a coalition with a handful of smaller parties. Many analysts contended that Thaksin and his party enjoyed power unprecedented in modern Thai politics.<sup>4</sup> Fueled by positive coverage of Thaksin's response to the tsunami, the TRT won the February 2005 parliamentary elections outright — a first in Thai politics — by capturing 376 of the 500 seats. The main opposition party, the Democrats, captured only 96 seats. Only in the restive South did the Democrats dominate, winning 52 of 54 seats.<sup>5</sup> TRT swiftly dropped its former coalition party and formed a single-party government.

Shortly after TRT's impressive victory, however, Thaksin's popularity faltered due to a weak economy in the face of rising oil prices, coverage of a corruption scandal involving Cabinet members, and his failure to stem violence in the South. In December 2005, King Bhumibol publicly admonished Thaksin for refusing to acknowledge criticism. In early 2006, large public demonstrations calling for his ouster gained momentum. The protestors, mostly members of the urban, educated class, were reportedly unhappy with his authoritarian style, perceived attacks on the free press, mishandling of the violence in the southern provinces, and most of all, the tax-free sale of his family's telecommunications firm to a Singapore state company in a \$1.9 billion deal that many suspected was not taxed because of Thaksin's clout.

Widespread protests led Thaksin to call for a new round of parliamentary elections in April 2006. After a less-than-convincing victory by his Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party in an election boycotted by the opposition, Thaksin resigned, then quickly stepped back into power as a "caretaker" prime minister. After Thailand's king called for the courts to resolve the crisis, the Constitutional Court ruled the elections invalid, and new elections were set for November 2006. Despite widespread discontent with Thaksin among the country's middle class and urban dwellers, Thaksin's strong support in rural areas was expected to propel the TRT to a win in the elections.

## **Aftermath of the Coup: Thai Politics in Upheaval**

After the coup, the bureaucratic and military elite — with the royal imprimatur — controlled Thailand, while the political parties appeared marginalized and disorganized. Then, on May 30, 2007, a junta-appointed constitutional tribunal ruled that the TRT must disband because it had violated election laws in the April 2006 polls and that Thaksin and 110 party executives were banned from politics for five years. The same day, the court acquitted the Democratic Party of a series of other election violation charges, setting the stage for a strong comeback by the opposition party. Many observers criticized the rulings as further delaying the return to democracy by disenfranchising the most popular and by far the largest political party in Thailand.

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<sup>4</sup> See Ganesan, N. "Thaksin and the Politics of Domestic and Regional Consolidation in Thailand," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 26, no. 1 (April 2004).

<sup>5</sup> "Why They All Love Thaksin," *The Economist*, February 12, 2005.



Before the December 2007 elections, a popular referendum on a new constitution is scheduled to be held in September. The draft constitution, drawn up by a junta-appointed committee made up of largely bureaucrats and military officials, has come under criticism from some for overcompensating in its quest to limit executive power. The key issue is whether the Senate (one of two parliamentary bodies) is elected or appointed. Some analysts fear that frustrated TRT supporters will vote against the constitutional referendum in protest, throwing the democratic process further into uncertainty.

## Concern About Eroding Democracy

**Thaksin's Rule.** During Thaksin's rule, detractors consistently voiced concern that his strongman style threatened Thailand's democratic institutions. Charges of cronyism and creeping authoritarianism grew louder as his political power strengthened. Previously independent watchdog agencies reportedly weakened under his watch,<sup>6</sup> and some commentators alleged that Thaksin undermined anti-corruption agencies by installing political loyalists to protect the business interests of his family and members of his cabinet — sometimes one and the same, as Thaksin had a record of appointing relatives and friends to prominent posts.<sup>7</sup> Thaksin insisted that political strength enhances development, citing Singapore's economic success and lack of political opposition as a model for Thailand to follow.<sup>8</sup>

Outside groups warned that press freedom has been squeezed in recent years, documenting multiple cases in which critical journalists and news editors were dismissed, and pointing to a libel suit against an outspoken editor filed by a telecommunications corporation that Thaksin founded.<sup>9</sup> Shin Corporation, Thaksin's family company, bought the only independent television station; the others are owned by the government and armed forces.<sup>10</sup> Human Rights Watch claims that Thaksin has stifled criticism from the media of his Administration's controversial policies, such as the deaths of over 2,000 individuals in the government-sponsored "war on drugs."<sup>11</sup>

**Coup and Aftermath.** By militarily ousting a democratically elected leader, the coup itself raised obvious concerns about the democratic process in Thailand. Much of the Thai press and many long-time Thai watchers embraced the notion that the coup was necessary for Thailand to move forward; that is, that the military coup

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<sup>6</sup> "Thaksin's Way - Thailand's Election," *The Economist*. February 5, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> "Thailand Risk: Alert — Corruption May Still Go Unchecked," *Economist Intelligence Unit*, July 19, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> "One Party Rule: Opposition Does Not Need to Be Strong, Says PM," *The Nation* (Bangkok), August 10, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> "Rights Group Says Libel Suit Deepens Assault on Thailand's Media," *Agence France Press*, August 31, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> "Thai Vote: Democratic Backslide?" *Christian Science Monitor*. February 4, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> "Thailand: Libel Suit Deepens Assault on the Press," Human Rights Watch. September 1, 2004.

represented less of a threat to Thai democracy than Thaksin's perceived systematic dismantling of the democratic system. Concern lingers among many analysts, however, that the interim government has installed primarily former generals and conservative royalists who are unlikely to relinquish full control to democratic politics in the months ahead. This concern intensified after the bombing attacks in Bangkok in late 2006. In addition, much of the state's apparatus, including the key institutions of the parliament, the judicial branch, and watchdog agencies, reportedly has been undermined in the past several years. Uncertainty about the king's succession compound the concern about Thailand's ability to preserve democratic structures and stability in the upcoming years. The 2006 State Department Report outlines how the repeal of the 1997 constitution erodes legal protection of civil liberties and due process.<sup>12</sup> Particularly strong criticism centers on the military government's restrictions on freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of the press, including internet sites critical of the coup.

## **U.S.-Thailand Political and Security Relations**

### **A Long-Standing Southeast Asian Ally**

The military coup and subsequent suspension of military aid by the United States threatens to derail the strong bilateral defense relationship. Resumption of military ties will likely depend on how quickly the military rulers fully restore democratic rule. Several of the programs listed below have been suspended under Section 508 of the Foreign Operations Appropriations Act (P.L. 109-102). (See "U.S. Response" section.) In May 2007, the annual "Cobra Gold" multinational military exercises went forward despite the suspension of several other military cooperation programs.

The 1954 Manila Pact of the former Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), together with the 1962 Thanat-Rusk communique, forms the basis of the long-standing U.S.-Thai security relationship. Although SEATO was dissolved in 1977, Article IV (1) of the Manila Pact, which calls for signatories to "act to meet the common danger" in the event of an attack in the treaty area, remains in force. Thailand is considered to be one of the major U.S. security allies in East Asia, along with Japan, South Korea, Australia, Singapore and the Philippines.

The U.S. security relationship with Thailand has a firm historical foundation based on joint efforts in the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Thailand sent more than 6,500 troops to serve in the United Nations Command during the Korean War, where the Thai force suffered over 1,250 casualties.<sup>13</sup> A decade later, the United States staged bombing raids and rescue missions over North Vietnam and Laos from Thailand. During the Vietnam War, up

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<sup>12</sup> For full report, see [<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2006/78792.htm>].

<sup>13</sup> See [<http://korea50.army.mil/history/factsheets/allied.shtml>] (official public access website for Department of Defense Commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Korean War).

to 50,000 U.S. troops were based on Thai soil, and U.S. assistance poured into the country to help Thailand fight its own domestic communist insurgency.<sup>14</sup> Thailand also sent troops to South Vietnam and Laos to aid the U.S. effort. The close security ties continued throughout the Cold War, with Thailand serving as solid anti-Communist ally in the region. More recently, Thai ports and airfields played a crucial role in maintaining the flow of troops, equipment, and supplies to the theater in both the 1991 and 2003 Iraq wars.

In October 2003, President Bush designated Thailand as a “major non-NATO ally,” a distinction which allows more access to U.S. foreign aid and military assistance, including credit guarantees for major weapons purchases.<sup>15</sup> An agreement concluded with the United States in July 2001 allows Thailand to purchase advanced medium-range air-to-air missiles for its F-16 fighters, a first for a Southeast Asian state.<sup>16</sup> Thaksin authorized the reopening of the Vietnam-era U.S. airbase in Utapao and a naval base in Sattahip, from which the U.S. military can logistically support forces in Afghanistan and the Middle East.

Thailand served as the logistics hub for much of the U.S. and international relief effort after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. U.S. relief operations by air and sea for the entire region were directed out of Utapao air base and Sattahip naval base. Thailand immediately granted full U.S. access to the bases following the disaster.

**Support for U.S. Operations.** Thailand has strengthened its partnership with the United States by contributing troops to two American military operations and the broader war on terrorism since the September 11, 2001 attacks. Thailand sent 130 soldiers, largely engineers, to Afghanistan to participate in the reconstruction phase of Operation Enduring Freedom. Thai forces were responsible for the construction of a runway at Bagram Airbase, medical services, and some special forces operations.<sup>17</sup> Although Thailand remained officially neutral during the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, it contributed to reconstruction efforts in Iraq by dispatching over 450 troops, including medics and engineers, to the southern city of Karbala. The deployment proved unpopular with the Thai public, particularly after the deaths of two soldiers in December 2003. In spring 2004, Thaksin threatened to withdraw the troops early if the security situation continued to disintegrate and resisted U.S. calls to postpone the withdrawal until after the January 2005 Iraqi elections. The withdrawal was completed in September 2004.

Thailand reportedly provided a “black site” where U.S. Central Intelligence Agency officials were allowed to secretly hold suspected terrorists. According to

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<sup>14</sup> *The Eagle and the Elephant: Thai-American Relations Since 1833* (Bangkok: U.S. Agency for International Development, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> Under section 517 of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, the President can designate a non-North Atlantic Treaty Organization state as a major ally for the purposes of the Foreign Assistance Act and the Arms Export Control Act.

<sup>16</sup> Limaye, Satu P. “Minding the Gaps: The Bush Administration and U.S.-Southeast Asia,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 26, no. 1 (April 2004).

<sup>17</sup> “Thai Soldiers Help Rebuild Afghanistan,” *The Nation* (Thailand), July 4, 2003.

press reports, two major Al Qaeda figures captured in Pakistan were flown to Thailand for interrogation by U.S. officials.<sup>18</sup>

**Asia Pacific Military Transformation.** The U.S. Department of Defense initiative to transform and realign the U.S. military around the globe provides potential opportunities for increased security cooperation with Thailand. Pentagon planners are breaking with the quantitative assurance of keeping 100,000 troops on the ground in East Asia in favor of a more mobile, capability-based force. In the past few years, U.S. military planners have emphasized a “places, not bases” concept in Southeast Asia in which U.S. troops can temporarily use facilities for operations and training, without maintaining a lengthy and costly permanent presence. In a State Department press release, a senior Defense Department official points to cooperation with Thailand as an example of the military’s new approach, citing the annual Cobra Gold exercises.<sup>19</sup> Facilities used by the U.S. military in Thailand fall under the Pentagon’s “cooperative security location” (CSL) concept, in which host countries provide access in exchange for upgrades and other aid.<sup>20</sup>

## Bilateral Security Cooperation

**Security Assistance.** The United States has provided funds for the purchase of weapons and equipment to the Thai military through the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) program. (FMF is currently suspended because of the coup.) As a major non-NATO ally, Thailand also qualifies for the Excess Defense Articles (EDA) program, which allows for the transfer of used U.S. naval ships and aircraft. The United States faces stiff competitors in the market for foreign military sales in Thailand, particularly because other countries are more willing to engage in barter trade for agricultural products.

**Military Exercises.** Thailand and the United States have conducted over 40 joint military exercises a year, including Cobra Gold, America’s largest combined military exercise in Asia. In the May 2007 exercises, about 3,000 Thai troops and 2,000 U.S. forces conducted humanitarian, civic action, and peacekeeping missions. Nearly twenty other countries from Europe and Asia either participated or acted as observers for the 2007 exercises.

**Training.** Tens of thousands of Thai military officers, including many of those in top leadership positions throughout the services and in the civilian agencies, have received U.S. training under the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program.<sup>21</sup> (IMET is currently suspended because of the coup.) Designed to enhance the professionalism of foreign militaries as well as improve defense cooperation with the United States, the program is regarded by many as a relatively

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<sup>18</sup> “CIA Operates Secret Prisons Outside U.S.,” *Wall Street Journal Asia*. November 2, 2005.

<sup>19</sup> “U.S. to Transform Military in Parallel with Allies — Capabilities Will Be Emphasized Instead of Numbers of Troops,” *State Department Press Releases and Documents*. August 16, 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Kaplan, Robert D., “How We Would Fight China,” *The Atlantic Monthly*. June 2005.

<sup>21</sup> In 1997, over 20,000 had received IMET training. See *The Eagle and the Elephant*, p. 143.

low-cost, highly effective means to achieve U.S. national security goals. Until the suspension of aid in September 2006, Thailand was among the largest recipients of IMET funding in the world.

**Intelligence.** Intelligence cooperation between Thailand and the United States reportedly increased markedly after the September 11, 2001 attacks, culminating in the establishment of the Counter Terrorism Intelligence Center (known as the CTIC) in 2001. The CTIC, which combines personnel from Thailand's intelligence agency and specialized branches of the military and armed forces, provides a forum for CIA personnel to work closely with their Thai counterparts, sharing facilities and information daily, according to reports from Thai security officials.<sup>22</sup> Close cooperation in tracking Al Qaeda operatives that passed through Thailand reportedly intensified into active pursuit of suspected terrorists following the 9/11 strikes.<sup>23</sup> The most public result of enhanced coordination was the arrest of suspected Jemaah Islamiyah leader Riduan Isamuddin, also known as Hambali, outside of Bangkok in August 2003. Other intelligence cooperation focuses on counter-narcotics or specialized military intelligence.

**Law Enforcement.** In 1998, the International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) Bangkok was established to provide legal training for officials to combat transnational crime.<sup>24</sup> The center is open to government officials from any Southeast Asian country, with the exception of Burma (Myanmar). ILEA Bangkok aims to enhance law enforcement capabilities in each country, as well as to encourage cross-border cooperation. Instruction for the courses is provided largely by the Royal Thai Police, the Thai Office of the Narcotics Control Board, and various U.S. agencies, including the Diplomatic Security Service, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), the Department of Homeland Security, and the Internal Revenue Service.<sup>25</sup>

**Counter-Narcotics.** Counter-narcotics cooperation between Thailand and the United States has been extensive and pre-dates the foundation of ILEA-Bangkok. Coordination between the DEA and Thailand's law enforcement agencies, in conjunction with a mutual legal assistance treaty and an extradition treaty, has led to many arrests of international drug traffickers. Specialized programs include the establishment of Task Force 399, in which U.S. Special Forces train Thai units in narcotics interdiction tactics.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Crispin, Shawn, and Leslie Lopez, "U.S. and Thai Agents Collaborate in Secret — Cold-War-Style Alliance Strikes Jemaah Islamiyah Where It Least Expects It." *Asian Wall Street Journal*, October 1, 2003.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> ILEA-Bangkok is one of four ILEAs in the world. The others are located in Hungary, Botswana, and Roswell, New Mexico.

<sup>25</sup> Course information from [<http://www.ileabangkok.com>].

<sup>26</sup> Chambers, Paul, "U.S.-Thai Relations After 9/11: A New Era in Cooperation?" *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 26, Issue 3. December 2004.

## Human Rights Concerns

Some members of Congress and other U.S. officials have criticized Thailand's record on human rights. Thailand has neither signed the United Nations Convention Against Torture nor joined the International Criminal Court. According to the 2006 U.S. State Department Human Rights Report and to other NGOs' accounts, the excessive use of force by government security forces in the southern border provinces continued in 2006, including the reported "disappearances" of Muslim citizens. The failure to convict police officers of the suspected abduction and murder of prominent Muslim activist and lawyer Somchai Neelapaijit has drawn particular fire. The State Department reports that the new government's Ministry of Justice opened investigations of the approximately 1,300 extrajudicial killings during Thaksin's 2003 "War on Drugs," while Human Rights Watch puts the number at 2,500 and is more harsh in its criticism of the failure to hold any officials accountable for the deaths. The emergency decree on administrative rule announced in summer 2005 alarmed international rights groups: the United Nations Human Rights Committee, among others, has voiced concern that the executive order and other developments were undermining Thailand's democratic process and human rights record.<sup>27</sup>

## U.S.-Thailand Trade and Economic Relations

As a major recipient of foreign direct investment, and with merchandise exports making up over half of its GDP, Thailand's economy depends heavily on its trading partners. The political uncertainty following the coup slowed GDP growth to an estimated 4.3% for 2006. Economic relations with the United States are central to Thailand's outward-looking economic strategy. USTR reports that in 2006 U.S. goods exports to Thailand totaled \$8.2 billion, and corresponding U.S. imports from Thailand amounted to \$22.5 billion. Thailand is currently the 24th largest export market for U.S. goods. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, the United States invested \$8.6 billion in Thailand in 2005 and over 95,000 Thai nationals are on the payrolls of U.S. majority-owned foreign affiliates.

Since taking office, the new government has come under criticism from the foreign business community after imposing currency controls (later partially reversed) and introducing a bill that would restrict foreign ownership of Thai companies. The amendment to the law affecting foreign business ownership, stemming from the negative reaction to the sale of Thaksin's family telecommunications company to a Singaporean state-owned enterprise, will reportedly exclude several sectors. Both moves sent the stock market sharply lower. International drug companies have reacted negatively to a government decision to issue compulsory licenses to develop generic versions of patented HIV/AIDS drugs. In an apparent effort to restore confidence among foreign investors, a former World Bank economist was appointed in March 2007 to replace the finance minister responsible for the unpopular measures.

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<sup>27</sup> See the Office of United Nation High Commissioner for Human Rights website at [<http://www.ohchr.org/english/>].

## A Difficult Road for U.S.-Thailand FTA Negotiations

Bilateral FTA negotiations were suspended by Thailand since the political crisis erupted in April 2006. Following the coup, U.S. officials said that the FTA could not go forward without a return to democratic rule. Even before the suspension of talks, many analysts said that the prospects for an FTA were severely diminished. Although studies indicate that a U.S.-Thailand FTA would increase trade and investment for both countries and yield net benefit for Thailand, negotiations must address a list of challenging issues to reach a successful conclusion. The agreement sought by the United States is the most comprehensive of the multiple FTAs Thailand has attempted; the agenda includes issues such as intellectual property rights, investment, environment, labor rights, textiles, telecommunications, agriculture, electronic commerce, and government procurement.<sup>28</sup> In the six rounds of talks held, market access for sugar, rice, and trucks are among the thorniest of the differences between the two sides. Further, some sources have speculated that Thaksin launched negotiations without consulting adequately with the bureaucracies in charge of the controversial areas. The sixth round of negotiations in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in January 2006 were marked by slow progress, disruptions by thousands of protestors, and the resignation of the chief Thai negotiator following the meetings. Even before the suspension of talks, many analysts said that the prospects for an FTA were severely diminished.

## An Aggressive FTA Strategy

Thailand has aggressively pursued FTAs with countries other than the United States in its campaign to expand trading opportunities. Agreements have been signed with Bahrain, China, Peru, Australia, Japan, and India. Further deals are possible with New Zealand, South Korea, Chile, and the European Union (EU). Thailand has championed ASEAN regionalism, seeing the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA, among ASEAN countries only) as a vehicle for investment-driven integration which will benefit Thailand's outward-oriented growth strategy.<sup>29</sup> Many observers see Thailand's pursuit of FTAs as an indication of its shift away from a multilateral approach, such as working through the World Trade Organization (WTO), and toward a bilateral or regional approach.

## Thailand in Asia

Although the coup's impact has so far spared Thailand any widespread violence or precipitous economic losses, there are concerns about longer-term repercussions for Southeast Asia. Thailand is important to the region because of its large economy and, until the coup, its relatively longstanding democratic rule. Regional observers

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<sup>28</sup> "Ives to Leave USTR to Take Position in Medical Trade Association," *Inside U.S. Trade*, July 16, 2004.

<sup>29</sup> Chirathivat, Suthiphand, and Sothitorn Mallikamas, "Thailand's FTA Strategy: Current Developments and Future Challenges," *ASEAN Economic Bulletin*, vol. 21, no. 1 (April 2004).

fear that the loss of Thailand as a stabilizing presence could hurt democratic efforts in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and elsewhere. Southeast Asia is considered by many Asian experts to be a key arena of soft power competition between the United States and China: the loss of a democratic government, as well as any resulting friction with the United States, could be considered an opening for closer Sino-Thai relations. On the other hand, the Thaksin himself strongly supported establishing closer economic and political relations with Beijing.

The clout of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) may be affected as well. Thailand was a founding member of ASEAN, and, previous to his political troubles, Thaksin was considered to be poised to provide crucial leadership for the organization. Thailand has been an aggressive advocate of increased economic integration in the region: Singapore and other developed economies may fear that any domestic weakening in Thailand could set back those efforts as well.

## Growing Ties with China

Chinese-Thailand ties strengthened considerably under Thaksin's leadership. Thaksin came to power promoting a business-oriented, engagement approach toward the rest of Asia that de-emphasized human rights and democracy.<sup>30</sup> Even while re-asserting its alliance with the United States, Thailand has continued to court China, including signing agreements on technology, environmental protection, and strategic cooperation. Military-to-military ties have also increased through both exchanges and arms sales: China exports major weapons and military equipment to Thailand, continuing a practice originating in the 1980s when both countries supported Cambodian resistance groups, including the Khmer Rouge, against the Vietnamese-installed government in Phnom Penh.<sup>31</sup> Many analysts see the suspension of several U.S. military programs following the coup as an opportunity for China to expand its influence in the Thai defense establishment.

Trade has boomed between Thailand and China: in 2005 bilateral trade totaled over \$20 billion, with Chinese exports of \$7.8 billion and imports of \$14.0 billion.<sup>32</sup> A limited free trade agreement covering mostly agricultural goods but with tariff reductions on industrial products has been in place since 2003. Both countries have aggressively promoted the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Economic Zone by pursuing joint infrastructure projects that link Thailand with China's Yunnan province.<sup>33</sup> In May 2005, Thailand demonstrated its commitment to implement

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<sup>30</sup> Chambers, Paul, "U.S.-Thai Relations After 9/11: A New Era in Cooperation?" *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 26, Issue 3. December 2004.

<sup>31</sup> See R. Bates Gill, "China Looks to Thailand: Exporting Arms, Exporting Influence." *Asian Survey*, Vol. 31, No. 6. June 1991.

<sup>32</sup> Global Trade Atlas Navigator, using Chinese data. Accessed at [<http://www.gtis.com>].

<sup>33</sup> Masviriyakul, Siriluk, "Sino-Thai Strategic Economic Development in the Greater Mekong Subregion." *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 26, Issue 2. August 2004.



promptly the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement (ACFTA, among China and ASEAN countries) by announcing it would open four new consulates in China.<sup>34</sup>

Thailand's strong relationship with China is based on a history far less antagonistic than Beijing's past with many other ASEAN countries. After the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, Bangkok pursued a strategic alignment with Beijing in order to contain Vietnamese influence in neighboring Cambodia. Bangkok restored diplomatic ties with Beijing in 1975, far before other Southeast Asian nations. Thailand also has no territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea, unlike Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. The sizeable overseas Chinese population in Thailand assimilated relatively easily and became a strong presence in the business world, and eventually in the political arena as well. Thaksin himself is a member of a prominent Sino-Thai family. Thai companies were among the first to explore investment opportunities after the Chinese economy opened up in the late 1970s, pursuing ventures with China's state-run enterprises. As other regional powers tentatively began to explore commercial relationships with China, investment from Sino-Thai companies flourished in the 1990s, fueling a rebirth of interest in Chinese language and culture in Thailand.<sup>35</sup>

Given the simultaneous emphasis on building close relationships with the United States and China, Thailand's foreign policy could be construed as a classic hedging strategy designed to avoid dominance by any one power. Some analysts suggest that Bangkok's embrace of China indicates a slow move away from the Cold War reliance on the United States, despite enhanced cooperation in the war on terrorism, and could be an indicator of how Southeast Asia will deal with China's increasing influence.<sup>36</sup>

## **Divergence with United States on Burma (Myanmar) Policy**

Bangkok's approach toward Burma has long been seen as conflicting with U.S. policy. While the United States has pursued strict economic and diplomatic sanctions against the regime, Thailand has led ASEAN's "constructive engagement" initiative, which favors integration and incentives to coax Burma into reform.<sup>37</sup> For Thailand, this policy minimizes the danger of a large-scale military struggle and expands Thai business opportunities in Burma.

Thailand's relationship with Burma grew closer under Thaksin's administration. During the 1990s, Thailand voiced harsh criticism of the military junta ruling Burma, particularly its crackdown on the National League for Democracy, the opposition party led by democratic activist Aung San Su Kyi. Thailand also has chafed at the

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<sup>34</sup> Montaperto, Ron, "China-Southeast Asia Relations: Dancing with China." *Comparative Connections*, July 2005.

<sup>35</sup> Vatikiotis, Michael, "Sino Chic: Suddenly, It's Cool to Be Chinese," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, January 11, 1996.

<sup>36</sup> Vatikiotis, Michael, "Catching the Dragon's Tail: China and Southeast Asia in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 25, no. 1 (April 2003).

<sup>37</sup> See CRS Report RL33479, *Burma-U.S. Relations*, by Larry A. Niksch.

huge inflow of illegal drugs from Burma. But the Thaksin government placed special emphasis on maintaining normal relations with Burma, even as European countries tightened sanctions and other Southeast Asian countries distanced themselves from Rangoon. Critics have also questioned whether Thaksin's engagement with Burma was driven by his own commercial interests: Shin Corp, his family's telecom company, has secured lucrative contracts to provide Internet service and satellite stations in Burma.<sup>38</sup> There is no indication of a significantly different policy toward Burma under the interim government, although Surayud is known to be sympathetic to the plight of Burmese refugees.

Some congressional leaders also have criticized Bangkok for its treatment of Burmese refugees, migrant workers, and political dissidents living in Thailand. Backed by human rights groups' reports, some U.S. lawmakers have leveled charges of arrests and intimidation of Burmese political activists, as well as the repatriation of Burmese who seek political asylum.<sup>39</sup> Congress has passed legislation that provides money to refugees who fled Burma, particularly those in Thailand.<sup>40</sup>

## Refugee Situation

Thailand has long been a magnet for economic and political refugees, particularly from the neighboring countries of Laos, Cambodia, and, most prominently, Burma. Displaced populations of ethnic minorities from Southeast Asia have sought refuge across Thailand's long borders, often attracted by relatively loose immigration controls and often lenient treatment by Thai authorities. A strong network of international humanitarian organizations exists in Thailand to provide assistance to these populations. However, successive Thai governments have expressed frustration with this continuing presence and periodically have clamped down on the incoming asylum seekers. Often this response relates to Bangkok's wish to maintain strong political relationships with other regional governments.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that over three decades around three million asylum seekers have sought refuge in Thailand. Burmese refugees in Thailand come from a variety of ethnic groups that have fled attacks on their villages by the Burmese army and warlords. As of November 2006, 140,000 refugees from Burma live in the camps recognized by the Thai government along the Thai-Burma border and 1,000 asylum seekers are thought to be in urban areas. Thailand has been generally cooperative in helping refugees, but does not want to become an indefinite host, nor does it want to absorb those Burmese who do not qualify as refugees. Moreover, the camps were intended for temporary use and are not considered suitable for permanent habitation. The Thai government views Burma as presenting the most immediate source of refugee problems. Another 200,000 refugees and asylum seekers representing groups (many

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<sup>38</sup> Chambers, Paul, "U.S.-Thai Relations After 9/11: A New Era in Cooperation?" *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 26, Issue 3. December 2004.

<sup>39</sup> See *Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Thai Policy Toward Burmese Refugees and Migrants*, Human Rights Watch Report, released February 2004.

<sup>40</sup> H.R. 4818, Foreign Operations Appropriations, Section II, Bilateral Assistance.

of them Hmong refugees from Laos) live elsewhere in the country. In addition, Thailand's reputation for relative tolerance for refugees, as well as crackdowns in other recipient countries, has attracted an increasing number of North Korean asylum-seekers.

## ASEAN Relations

Thailand's positive engagement with Burma complements its broader strategy of strengthening relations with Southeast Asian countries for economic and political gain. Bangkok has continued to develop strong relations with its Indochina neighbors through infrastructure assistance and other aid. In turn, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia provide raw materials, cheap manufacturing, and expanding markets for Thailand. Thaksin also pursued enhanced relations with Singapore based on a common interest in liberalizing trade in the region and with the Philippines centered on a mutual interest in combating terrorism.

Relations with Singapore were disturbed by the sale of Thaksin's family firm Shin Corporation to Singapore's Temasek Holdings. The tax-free sale angered many Thais and played a role in Thaksin's downfall. The new interim government has pledged to investigate and bring a court case against Temasek. Singapore insists that the deal was legitimate; Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, husband of Temasek chief executive Ho Ching, has defended the deal.<sup>41</sup>

Relations with Indonesia and Malaysia are more complex, particularly since the insurgency in the south flared. The violence has particular impact on relations with Malaysia. Many of the Muslim Thais are ethnically Malay and speak Yawi, a Malay dialect. The Malaysian public has grown increasingly angry at the perceived violence against Muslims in Thailand. Some Thai officials have claimed that there are militant training camps in Malaysia that feed on the violence in the south. Malaysia denies the allegations and has pledged cooperation to stem the insurgency. Cooperation includes more troops and equipment to increase border security, joint border patrols with Thai counterparts, and termination of the joint citizenship privileges that some believe facilitate the passage of terrorists across the border.

## Regional Health Issues

**AIDS.** Thailand's relationship with its neighbors is defined by not only traditional security concerns but also by a series of transnational public health issues that have afflicted the region. Thailand was among the earliest and hardest hit by the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1990s, with infection spreading rapidly among the sex worker industry with adult HIV/AIDS prevalence rates peaking at about 1.5% in 1996. Rates have fallen, due largely to an extensive prevention campaign focused on managing risk in the sex industry. Cambodia undertook similar measures, but

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<sup>41</sup> "Singapore and Thailand in a Standoff," *New York Times*. November 18, 2006.

countries such as China and Vietnam are now threatened by equally dangerous outbreaks, providing another potential arena for regional cooperation.<sup>42</sup>

**SARS.** In addition to its relative success in curbing the spread of AIDS, Thailand has been largely commended by the international health community for its response to outbreaks of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and the avian bird flu. Because of the importance of tourism to Thailand's economy, government officials have, by some accounts, been reluctant to admit a public health problem but have been generally effective once determined to address it. In 2003, seven cases and two deaths from SARS were reported in Thailand, but the kingdom was removed quickly from the World Health Organization's list of at-risk countries in 2003 after taking steps to curb the spread of the virus.

**H5N1 (Avian Flu) Virus.** Among the earliest and hardest hit areas by the avian flu, Thailand has emerged as a leader in fighting the spread of the virus. After an initially sluggish response, Thai authorities have led the effort to respond to the problem and particularly to facilitate regional cooperation. Considerable economic damage from the virus has spurred Bangkok to address the problem. Thailand's poultry exports, the fourth-largest in the world, bring in over \$1 billion annually. Thailand also hosts platforms that are cited as key to the U.S. government response; USAID lists two Bangkok-based organizations as crucial implementing partners: the active regional headquarters of U.N.'s Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) and the Center for Disease Control Field Epidemiology Training Program (FETP).<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Kiat Ruxrungtham, Tim Brown, and Praphan Phanuphak. "HIV/AIDS in Asia," *The Lancet*, vol. 364, no. 9428 (July 3-9, 2004).

<sup>43</sup> "U.S. Government Emergency Response to Avian Influenza: A Plan of Action for Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia - Report from Country Planning Visits July 11-24, 2005." United States Agency for International Development.

**Table 1. U.S. Assistance to Thailand 2003-2007**  
(thousands of dollars)

Account	FY2003	FY2004	FY2005	FY2006 estimate	FY2007 request
DF	—	—	—	1,980	—
CSH	1,500	0	0	0	0
DA	1,250	0	0	0	0
ESF	0	0	992	990	0
FMF*	1,990	881	1,488	1,485	1,300
IMET *	1,768	2,572	2,526	2,376	2,370
INCLE	3,700	2,000	1,608	990	900
NADR	200	1,380	1,782	4,301	2,134
Peace Corps	1,818	1,840	2,143	2,190	2,185
PKO*	0	500	0	0	0
Totals	12,226	9,173	10,539	14,312	8,889

**Sources:** U.S. Department of State, USAID.

\*These programs were suspended on September 28, 2006, under Section 508 of the Foreign Operations Appropriations Act (P.L. 109-102).

**Notes:** DF = Democracy Funds; CSH = Child Survival Health; DA = Development Assistance; ESF = Economic Support Funds; FMF = Foreign Military Sales Financing; IMET = International Military Education and Training; INCLE = International Narcotics and Law Enforcement; NADR = Nonproliferation, Anti-Terrorism, Demining, & Related; PKO = Peace-keeping Operations.

Figure 1. Map of Thailand



Source: Map Resources. Adapted by CRS. (K.Yancey 3/23/04)