

The US and Thailand's military coup

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The US response to last week's military coup in Thailand was utterly cynical. Secretary of State John Kerry declared that he was "disappointed by the decision of the Thai military to suspend the constitution and take control of the government," urged "a return to democracy" and warned that military and other assistance programs would be reviewed.

Kerry's "disappointment" had nothing to do with any concern for the democratic rights of the Thai people. Rather the Obama administration's overriding concern throughout seven months of political upheaval in Bangkok has been to preserve its close, longstanding relations with the Thai military as part of its broader "pivot to Asia" and military build-up against China throughout the region.

The army's seizure of power on May 22 is the culmination of what can only be described as a creeping coup by Thailand's traditional elites centred on the monarchy who were bitterly hostile to the elected Pheu Thai government and its chief backer, former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Anti-government protests that began in November demanding the ousting of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's sister, were accompanied by partisan court decisions that have tightened the noose around the government.

The Obama administration did not object in March when the Constitutional Court nullified the results of the February 2 election that had been disrupted by anti-government protests and a boycott by the opposition Democrat Party. The court ruling left the government in limbo with limited caretaker powers. Nor did Washington criticise the Constitutional Court decision on May 7 that ousted Yingluck and nine cabinet ministers on trumped-up charges in what amounted to a judicial coup. On May 20, the US State Department endorsed the army's imposition of martial law and accepted the word of Army Chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha that it was "not a coup."

Kerry only expressed his disappointment two days later when Prayuth dispensed with the caretaker government, detained political leaders, imposed blanket censorship, banned public gatherings and assumed power as prime minister himself. It was no longer possible for the US to pretend that a military coup had not taken place, putting the Obama administration in a position where it was legally obliged to act. Under the Foreign Assistance Act, the White House is required to cut aid to countries in which a "duly elected head of government is deposed by military coup."

The US has since announced a token suspension of \$3.5 million in military aid to Thailand, the cutting short of a joint naval exercise underway last week, and the cancellation of a police training program and two high-level exchanges. There is no doubt, however, that behind the scenes the Pentagon's close collaboration with the military will continue unabated with the resumption of full ties at the earliest possible time.

All of this will have been worked out well in advance between the Obama administration and the Thai commanders. US Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel was in Bangkok last month to meet with "a range of leaders and stakeholders." He appealed publicly for a compromise between the government and its royalist opponents demanding an un-elected "people's committee" to run the country. Behind the scenes, however, US officials were undoubtedly briefed by military leaders.

Last week's coup follows the same pattern as the military's ousting of Thaksin in 2006. WikiLeaks cables later revealed that US ambassador Ralph Boyce had been briefed about the military takeover several weeks in advance and had given the nod of approval. Both sides understood there would be cosmetic US aid cuts. However, US funding continued for law enforcement, counterterrorism and non-proliferation programs. Thailand kept its preferential treatment as a major non-NATO ally and the joint Cobra Gold

military exercises, one of the world's largest, went ahead as planned in 2007 under the junta. The Obama administration undoubtedly gave the green light for the latest coup as the Bush administration did in 2006.

The military's actions are not aimed primarily against the pro-Thaksin faction of the ruling class, but against the working class and the rural poor. The fear in Thai ruling circles, and also in Washington, is that the protracted factional infighting could open the door for a movement of workers and peasants in conditions of negative economic growth, rising social tensions and corporate demands for austerity.

While giving tacit support to the coup, the US is also seeking to minimise the impact on relations with the military. Thailand is a formal military ally and has sent troops to fight in neo-colonial US wars in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq. During the Vietnam War, 50,000 American troops were based in Thailand and US bombing raids took off from Thai airbases.

The importance of Thailand to the Pentagon's war plans were underscored by a 2009 WikiLeaks cable from US ambassador Eric John which noted that "our military quietly access the [Utapao] air base over 1,000 times per year for flights in support of US operations, including missions in Afghanistan and Iraq." He also noted that the US military used the same air base "for flights on targets of intelligence interest, and we received permission for these operations as a matter of routine, without having to answer questions to the purpose of the flights. It is hard to imagine another Asian nation so easily permitting such operations. While we avoid publicising our use of Utapao to avoid Thai sensibilities regarding the perception of foreign basing, Utapao and other Thai air fields and seaports remain vital to our force projection objectives in Southeast Asia."

Washington's implicit support for last week's military coup in Thailand is a warning to the working class throughout Asia and internationally. Far from being a champion of democracy, US imperialism is increasingly relying on right-wing regimes, such as the Japanese government of Shinzo Abe and South Korea's President Park Geun-hye, daughter of former US-backed dictator Park Chun-hee, as it seeks to reassert US hegemony through the "pivot to Asia" and prepares for war against China. The Thai junta is the latest.

The political struggle for democratic rights and against austerity is necessarily bound up with the fight against the US drive to war. Workers in Thailand can only defend their class interests and basic rights by turning to the working class throughout the region and above all in the United States in a common struggle for a socialist and internationalist perspective.

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