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In This Issue:

ARTICLES

THAILAND: Key US Regional Partnership at Risk

BRIEFS

JAPAN: Provocative Naval Drill Likely Trailblazing for Other Asian Nations

MACEDONIA: Referendum on European Integration Faces Alleged Russian Influence Campaign

NICARAGUA: President Unlikely to Act on Public Unrest as Months of Protests Continue

SYRIA: Russia and Turkey Institute Demilitarization Zone in Rebel Stronghold

UKRAINE: Russian Forces Continue Attacks on Donbas Despite Inner Turmoil

ARTICLES

THAILAND: Key US Regional Partnership at Risk

Summary: In the next six months, Thailand will attempt its first democratic elections in over four years. Political turmoil in Thailand will likely have an impact on US economic and strategic interests due to the prospect of China gaining more influence in the country.

Development and Analysis: After five years of political turmoil, which has resulted in hundreds of casualties, the Military Government has announced a possible election date in February 2019. The Kingdom of Thailand has struggled politically since 2006 when a military coup deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. With the more recent military coup in 2014, the former military chief, Prayut Chan-o-cha failed to allow a civilian government. In past coups, the military returned power to the people within one year of a coup. This time, however, increases in terrorism throughout the country have allowed the military to keep a grip on power and delay the government's attempts to draft a new constitution and hold elections.

Thailand has a constitutional monarchy, and the line between the government and the monarch remains blurry. Often seen as a symbol of stability, King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand in the past bridged the gap between military governments and civilian protesters. However, after his death in 2016, much uncertainty has filled Thailand. Since the succession of Bhumibol Adulyadej's son King Maha Vajiralongkorn, to the throne, Thailand has experienced a cessation of political competition, and he has instructed the military ruling council of Thailand to add certain provisions to draft constitutions, a rare move taken by sitting monarchs. In the past, political prisoners in Thailand were often given pardons by the king, but Vajiralongkorn, in a break from his father, often responds more strictly regarding political prisoners.

With further influence of the monarch on the government, both the opposition, who identify as the "Red Shirts," and government loyalists, who identify as the "Yellow Shirts," face a challenge to gain any ground. Because the military has continuously disapproved of election results putting pro "Red Shirts" back in power, the current government will attempt to change future results. Prime Minister Chan-o-cha will be pushing for better results in future elections because of the failed outcome in the 2006 coup that eventually led to the 2011 election of Yingluck Shinawatra. The death of King Adulyadej put many Thais in the dark as they only knew Bhumibol Adulyadej as their king, and many in the country do not have a favorable view of his son. To earn the respect King Bhumibol Adulyadej had, King Vajiralongkorn will need to appeal to the masses and become more active like his father.

Over the past year, Thailand has experienced several protests calling for democratic elections, with the frequency of protests increasing. However, the ruling military government released a statement saying, if protests continue, they could delay elections. Most of the population has proven frustrated with the delaying of elections as a distraction from many serious issues within the country. Terrorism has targeted the southern region of Thailand as well as Central Thailand. Although terrorism is not a serious threat now, the current political climate has drawn most of the attention to Bangkok and away from the Islamic Insurgency in the south. Recurring protests

throughout the country often turn violent, which terrorists could use as sites for attacks as seen in the 2015 bombing in Bangkok that killed 20 people. Insurgents in the south of the country have the possibility of traveling north to more densely populated areas of the country in order to carry out attacks; moreover, these parts of the country have a high tourist presence, and many American citizens. In addition to attacking the government, the insurgents are adopting the strategy of attacking first responders by having multiple explosive devices at the scene of the attack.

The current Thai government will likely attempt new elections within the next 12 months after learning from past mistakes. Prime Minister O-Cha will likely not make the same mistakes his predecessor made and will allow the military to influence parliament and the writing of a new constitution. The Thai military now controls 143 out of 250 parliamentary seats which easily gives the military government a majority in the say of the next written constitution and future government. The effects of the 2014 coup in the streets of Bangkok are still seen today with a heavy presence of police and military soldiers in key areas of the capital city. The military government has promised to hold elections before the end of 2018, however, many Thai's have expressed doubt that such elections will occur. If the current members of parliament with a high military influence can write and approve a constitution, the likelihood of future military coups decreases. The current government made of former high-ranking military officers will most likely face heavy backlash in the future from pro-democracy "Red Shirts". With the continuation of the enforcement of lèse majesté laws that forbid critiquing of the monarch and government, the anti-government movement will likely continue to grow as a younger population moves up in the rankings and rice farmers become more frustrated with the status quo. Throughout the remainder of 2018, more frequent widespread protests will likely occur, and the government will face heavy backlash.

Thailand occupies a strategic location in Southeast Asia near the South China Sea, making it of interest to Beijing in its competition with US influence. With the incidents of terrorism, interior protests and governmental differences, China has increased its role inside the country with military imports and infrastructure projects. Meanwhile, Thailand considers US rice subsidies a threat to its economy in which almost two-thirds of Thai citizens grow rice.

As China continues to assert itself throughout Asia, President Xi Jinping may see Thailand as ripe for expanding his policy of the One Belt One Road initiative and Chinese dominance over the South China Sea. China already arranged to build high speed trains in Central Thailand as well as a railroad connecting Thailand and China, probably reflecting Beijing's desire to seize the opportunity provided by the current Prime Minister for foreign investments in Thailand. With the increasing military sales from China to Thailand, the military government will likely seize this opportunity as more economical and reliable. The US and Western sanctions will push Thailand to seek imports from other countries within the region. China has seen that the military takeover of the Thai government has proven frustrating to Western leadership. China will likely become even more active in Thailand as it has in the Philippines and the Maldives. All three of these countries share an advantage over others in Asia, as they are either major non-NATO US allies or have proximity to US power projection, such as the Maldives, which lies 200 miles away from the US naval installation Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean.

In February of every year, Thailand hosts the largest military exercise in Southeast Asia, a wargame simulation called Cobra Gold. In cooperation with many East Asian countries, US Marines can conduct jungle warfare simulations to enhance training, survival, and combat readiness. With more proactive influence from China, the Thai government may see it as a more useful ally in the region as China increases its role as a trading partner with Thailand and increases investments within the country each year. In 2015 the Thai Navy expressed its interest in purchasing Chinese made submarines to become on par with other Southeast Asian countries' naval capabilities. After recent visits of Chinese officials to Thailand, both countries have agreed to allow railroad investments in the country and greater rice exports from Thailand to China.

A more polarizing environment in Thailand may likely allow the Chinese government to slowly advance its agenda within the small but strategic Southeast Asian country. The current situation of political instability has created a unique situation in which even loyalists to the monarch have given up much of their support due to the death of King Adulyadej. As well as troubles within the government, the Islamic Insurgency in the South and threats of terrorism in Central Thailand force the government to continue the ban on elections. In late 2018 or early 2019 when the government attempts new elections, the support for Thaksin and Yingluck Shinawatra will most likely have increased substantially, with a majority from rural areas, working class voters, and a younger population. Even with a military influence in parliament, a pro-Red Shirt candidate will always stand in an election, and the military or courts will have to decide whether to remove the officeholder from the position. This unique scenario has forced the US to distance itself from Thailand, thus creating an opportunity for China. A more influential Chinese government may soon begin to export military equipment, construct rail lines, and increase economic cooperation with Thailand, making it harder for the US and Thailand to remain key allies.

[Tyler Wilkins]

BRIEFS

JAPAN: Provocative Naval Drill Likely Trailblazing for Other Asian Nations

Summary: Japan's naval drill in the South China Sea (SCS) protesting China's dominance in the waters may influence other Southeast Asian countries and claimants of the SCS to take part in other such "freedom of navigation" protests initiated by the West.

Development: On 13 September, Japan conducted a naval drill in the SCS which included a submarine for the first time. The submarine Kuroshio took part in the exercise along with several

Japanese warships and the Kaga helicopter carrier, which previously drilled alongside the US Navy in the SCS in 2017. Tokyo conducted the drill to send a “strategic message” to China and other countries surrounding the SCS. China responded with its own warning, advising Japan to “act with caution” and avoid any acts that would “damage peace and stability in the region.” China claims more than 80 percent of the SCS, through which about \$3.4 trillion of global trade travels each year. Although Japan does not claim territory in the SCS, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Taiwan all do claim parts of it, often criticizing China’s aggressive presence and military build-up in the region. Western powers, such as the US, UK, and Australia, have in the past conducted “freedom of navigation” patrols in the SCS and have urged more countries to “challenge” China as well. At the end of the drill, the Kuroshio made its way to Vietnam for a five-day port visit at the Cam Ranh Bay naval base. Additionally, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe will visit Beijing next month to mark the 40th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the two nations.

Analysis: Japan’s naval drill in the SCS will likely spark a chain reaction among the other claimants (Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Taiwan, and the Philippines) to answer the West’s call to challenge China’s territorial claims of the international waters. Considering the Kuroshio docked at a strategic naval base in Vietnam for a five-day visit, Japan will probably begin talks with Vietnam about possibly joining the protest or improving the country’s security in the face of Chinese domination of the waters they share. The Kuroshio may or may not make more stops to other countries on its way back to Japan, as Tokyo has not disclosed its route home. Regardless, if Vietnam conducts a naval drill in the future with Japan, the West, or on its own, surrounding claimants may participate in the movement. China will likely respond with the same contempt as it has with every other “freedom of navigation” drills conducted so far: giving the demonstrator a stern and unapologetic warning. Beijing, unlikely to show any sign of weakness or retreat, will probably even up its presence in the waters and show more aggression in establishing its dominance over the SCS if it feels any more threatened by other nations. To what extent China will go, however, remains unclear, as it may try to avoid completely straining or breaking its relations with the surrounding claimants. Given the trade tensions between Beijing and Washington, China likely looks to increase cooperation with Japan and may not wish to further disrupt their already strained relationship from this event and their common distrust over security. While Japan may also see China as a stable market, Tokyo’s show of defiance towards Beijing and support for the West’s “freedom of navigation” protest already sends a strong message indicating where Japan stands in this dispute. Nevertheless, Abe’s visit to China in October may patch up any wounds inflicted on Sino-Nippon relations in the celebration of their 40-year-old friendship treaty.

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[MACEDONIA: Referendum on European Integration Faces Alleged Russian Influence](#)

Summary: Macedonia will hold a referendum this month that will almost certainly determine if it will join NATO and the EU. Russia considers Macedonia as part of its sphere of influence and almost certainly will seek to undermine support for the referendum.

Development: On 30 September, Macedonia will hold a referendum on joining NATO and the EU. Greece had vetoed all previous efforts by Macedonia to join the EU because Macedonia shares its name with Greece's northernmost province and because Greece sees Macedonia as appropriating Greek culture. In July, however, Greece and Macedonia agreed that if Macedonia changes its name and removes phrases from certain laws that refer to Macedonia as an indigenous people, Greece will no longer veto Macedonia's EU and NATO membership. The wording of the referendum explicitly mentions support for EU and NATO membership, so the referendum will measure public support for more integration with Europe. German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Secretary-General of NATO Jens Stoltenberg support the referendum. Russia opposes the referendum because it sees Macedonia as within its traditional sphere of influence.

Analysis: Russia likely will seek to influence the outcome of the referendum, reflecting a pattern of attempting to influence Western governments and societies. Leaders in the UK, France, Germany, and several Baltic states, as well as in Washington, have alleged Russia meddled in their governments or political systems. Given limited consequences of these allegations, Russia likely feels emboldened to meddle in other nations' affairs. If the referendum fails, the rise of nationalism in Europe will likely continue to gain momentum, leading to Russia's benefit, as it can more easily exert its influence on a decentralized Europe without a strong central body.
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[NICARAGUA: President Unlikely to Act on Public Unrest as Months of Protests Continue](#)

Summary: Political reform against the public's best interests has caused Nicaraguans to demand new leadership. President Daniel Ortega will likely not surrender his power until a new election in 2021.

Development: On 16 September, thousands of anti-government protestors marched the streets of Nicaragua's capital city, Managua, to demonstrate strong opposition to President Daniel Ortega's authoritarian regime. For five months, civilians have protested Ortega's minor pension reform to raise taxes between one and four percent, effective on 18 April. The pension reform sparked public unrest when a pro-government militia group attacked a small opposition party, beginning a week of deadly protests with more than 30 civilian fatalities. Now five months later, social chaos plagues the country and civilians blame Ortega for the hundreds of unlawful arrests, police brutality, and live ammunition fired into the streets to suppress opposition movements.

Analysis: While Ortega denies supporting the violent, pro-government groups, he will very likely not act to counter the allegations of human rights abuses and civilian assassinations by his administration. This is not the first time the people of Nicaragua have demanded for Ortega to resign from his presidency. On 7 July, Ortega announced his refusal to bring forward national elections by two years for a new leader to be chosen, likely foreshadowing that he will probably not resign now, even amid Nicaragua's most bloody and chaotic crisis since the 1980s. The country will probably continue to face extreme violence in the months to follow, as Nicaraguans try to flee from their country to stay alive. In turn, Costa Rica, a neighboring country, will likely see a mass influx of Nicaraguan refugees, due to the country's President Carlos Alvarado Quesada's promises to welcome migrants with open arms.

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[SYRIA: Russia and Turkey Institute Demilitarization Zone in Rebel Stronghold](#)

Summary: Moscow and Ankara have agreed to a demilitarization zone to assist Idlib, a war-torn Syrian province, but the Syrian government may not uphold this agreement.

Development: On 17 September, Russian defense minister Sergei Kuzhugetovich Shoigu announced that the Syrian government would halt assaults on Idlib, the last remaining major rebel stronghold in Syria since the start of the civil war in 2011. The announcement came after Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reached an agreement to establish a demilitarization zone there, approximately nine to twelve miles long. Putin and Erdogan created this demilitarization zone to thwart Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's months-long preparation for a military offensive against the insurgents situated there. Turkey opposes increased attacks on Idlib as it will create more refugees fleeing into Turkey. The UN cautiously approved the agreement made by Turkey and Russia, stating that an assault on Idlib would cause more casualties and suffering. Over the past few weeks Russia sent out stern warnings to the people of Idlib whom Russia claims are planning a staged attack to frame the Syrian government.

Analysis: Due to a historic precedent of failed ceasefires and the Syrian government increasing offensive actions, the Syrian government will likely still attack the demilitarization zone of Idlib. However, it seems President Assad will wait a few weeks before doing so to appease Russia. Putin recently stated that weaponry and radical militants must withdraw from the demilitarized area by 10 October, likely meaning that Assad and Russian military forces will remain defensive in Idlib at least until 10 October. If the militants and rebels do not concede by 10 October, the Syrian government may move forward on its planned offensive, to which Putin did not state a clear punishment. Additionally, it appears that the rebels in Idlib will not proceed with fake attacks to frame the Syrian government as that would increase casualties that Idlib could not sustain. However, the agreement between Turkey and Russia only appears to prolong the inevitable conflict and continued war over Idlib.

[Hunter Binkley]

UKRAINE: Russian Forces Continue Attacks on Donbas Despite Inner Turmoil

Summary: Numerous Russian militant attacks on Donbas cities reap limited results due to infighting and instability within the unit, leading many to believe Russia comes closer to cutting ties with the combatants and consequently the prospect of a nearer end to the war.

Development: On 18 September, Russian militias carried out 21 attacks on Ukrainian cities in the Donbas region according to Ukrainian sources. The attacks began on the morning of 17 September and continued through to the next morning. Ukrainian media reported that the attacks resulted in Ukrainian forces killing one Russian separatist and injuring another. This comes amid reports that the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) is experiencing an increasing amount of infighting following the assassination of its leader Alexander Zakharchenko in an explosion in a restaurant on 31 August.; DPR fighters claim that a "Ukrainian trace" was left behind in the blast while Ukrainians suspect that Russian Special Forces may have carried out the attack because of local feuds. In a recent incident, the Russian fighters allegedly shelled their own position by accident, leading to a brawl among the forces, resulting in two dead and ten hospitalized

Analysis: As the Russian militants become more disorganized, their attacks become less and less effective. These renewed attacks could rally their forces again and inspire unity. However, with the extremely limited results of the 18 September attacks, it seems likely that more chaos will ensue among the DPR. The war in Donbas has slowly deescalated over the last few years, perhaps showing a decrease in interest from Russian President Vladimir Putin in the region, as he grows tired of supporting a military endeavor counterproductive to his goals of creating a pro-Russia Ukraine. The annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Donbas have only made the Ukrainian people more nationalistic and sympathetic to the West. As Russia has already secured Crimea and forces fighting for the Donbas region continue to toil, it makes little sense for Putin to continue to back DPR. Thus, an end to the war may be coming somewhat soon as the Ukrainians continue to grow stronger and the rebels become more and more erratic and ineffective as a fighting force. Once the external threat of Russia is quelled, the Ukrainian people will likely turn their focus inwards to solve the internal corruption they were protesting during the Euromaidan Revolution in 2014 when the war first broke out.

[Elizabeth MacManus]

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