



“Youth Attitudes on the Thai-US Bilateral Relations”

FINAL REPORT

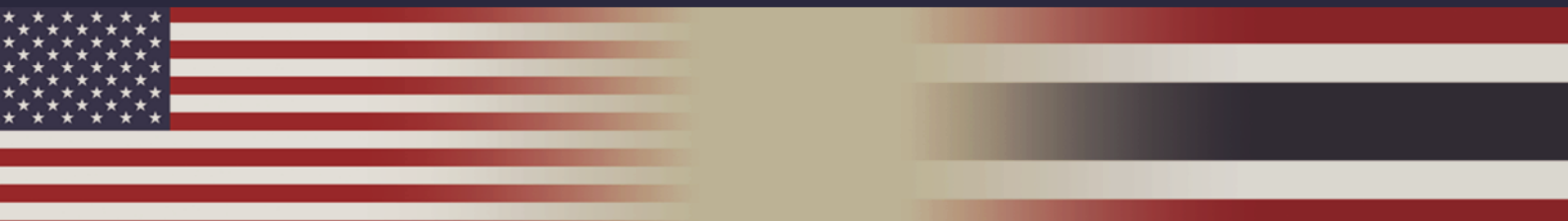
By

American Studies Association in Thailand (ASAT)

Submitted to

The Asia Foundation

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Forward

As part of the Asia Foundation's program to conduct a series of studies to strengthen relations between Thailand and the United States, the Foundation would like to improve the understanding of views of young people in Thailand on the US and Thai-US relations. It is with this objective that the Foundation has commissioned the American Studies Association in Thailand (ASAT) to organize a series of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) among students in 6 universities in Thailand.

This is the final report of the project. It is based on the summary note reports from the focus group discussions from 6 universities in Thailand. The final report will summarize and analyze survey questionnaire responses from all 12 FGDs. The report will also summarize from all focus group discussions from all 12 FGDs. The analysis of the implications of Thai students' attitudes on the Thai-US bilateral relationship will be provided. The final report will come up with recommendations to improve our bilateral relations.

On behalf of the ASAT and the project team, we would like to express our appreciation to the Asia Foundation for providing the support to the ASAT to conduct this project with special thanks to Thomas Park, country representative in Thailand, and Assistant Professor Anucha Chintakanond. We are also thankful for the project team and the project coordinators. And finally, special appreciation to Ms. Anchalee Ekpakdeewattanakul, ASAT secretary-general and deputy head of the project and Ms. Thareerat Laohabut, ASAT staff and project assistant. Without their help, support and encouragement, none of this would have happened.

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Executive Summary

About 120 students participate in 12 Focus Group Discussions from 6 universities in Thailand under the project “Youth Attitudes on the Thai-US Bilateral Relationship”.

Findings

Based upon the survey questionnaire responses and focus group discussions, these are the main findings:

- **Thai-US relations is only at the average level.**
- **The best period for Thai-US relations happened during the Cold War when both countries have mutual interests and common threat.**
- **Drivers for worsened relations is political. For Thailand, it is military intervention into politics. For the US, it is the American interference into Thai domestic politics.**
- **Students encourage American role to promote democracy but oppose US interference into Thai domestic politics.**
- **It is shocking to learn that Thai students think that the US is not a reliable friend to Thailand anymore. They think that the US was once a good friend, but today is not as close to Thailand anymore.**

Recommendations

Based upon these findings, recommendations to improve Thai-US relations are:

- **The perception and attitudes of Thai students should be adjusted to more positive views on bilateral relations.**
- **Both sides should come up with more initiatives, more pro-active policies and should explore new area of mutual interests that would include the emphasis on soft power.**
- **Both sides should find a way to change Thai youth attitudes to see the US as a reliable friend. The keyword is trust. We must come up with mutual strategy to build trust.**
- **Thailand should return to democracy as soon as possible and the US should avoid interference into Thai domestic politics.**
- **More cooperation on constructive and positive aspects of bilateral relations such as cultural exchanges, cultural activities, educational scholarships, and economic and technological cooperation.**
- **Thailand should give more importance to the balancing strategy with the emphasis on supporting the US role as a balancer.**
- **Civil society should be fully supported to conduct public diplomacy to improve Thai-US relations. American Studies Association in Thailand (ASAT) could play a role in this area of public diplomacy.**

1. Introduction

This is the final report of the project “Youth Attitudes on the Thai-US Bilateral Relationship”. Part two of the report is about participating students. There are 120 students participate in 12 focus group discussions (FGDs) from 6 universities in Thailand including Chaing Mai University, Khon Kaen University, Naresuan University, Ramkhamhaeng University, Thammasat University and Walailak University. Part three of the report will summarize and analyze survey questionnaire responses from all 12 FGDs. Part four is the summary of focus group discussion. The fifth part is the analysis of the implications of Thai students’ attitudes to Thai-US relations. The final part of report will come up with recommendations to improve Thai-US relations.

2. Participants

There are 120 participating students in 12 FGDs:

FGD 1: IR students from Chiang Mai University

FGD 2: non-IR students from Chiang Mai University

FGD 3: students majoring in Public Administration who study International Relations, Khon Kaen University

FGD 4: students who have limited background on International Relations majoring in Public Administration, and Sociology and Anthropology, Khon Kaen University

FGD 5: IR students from Faculty of Political Science, Naresuan University

FGD 6: non-IR students from Faculties of Law, Architecture, Sociology, Humanities, Education and Nurse, Naresuan University

FGD 7: IR students from Faculty of Political Science, Ramkhamhaeng University

FGD 8: non-IR students from Faculty of Political Science majoring in Governance, Faculty of Journalism and Faculty of Humanities, Ramkhamhaeng University

FGD 9: IR students from Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University

FGD 10: non-IR students from Faculty of Liberal Arts majoring in Russian Studies, Thammasat University

FGD 11: IR students from Walailak University

FGD 12: non-IR students from Walailak University

Students participate in the following steps:

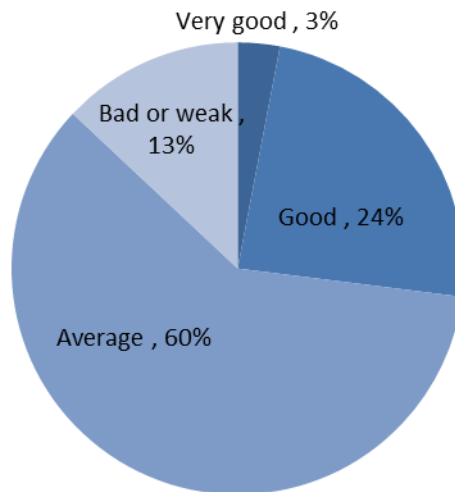
step one: survey questionnaires: when students arrive at the meeting room, students would complete the survey questionnaires form.

step two: focus group discussion: after completing the questionnaires, students join the focus group discussion.

3. Overview of survey questionnaire responses

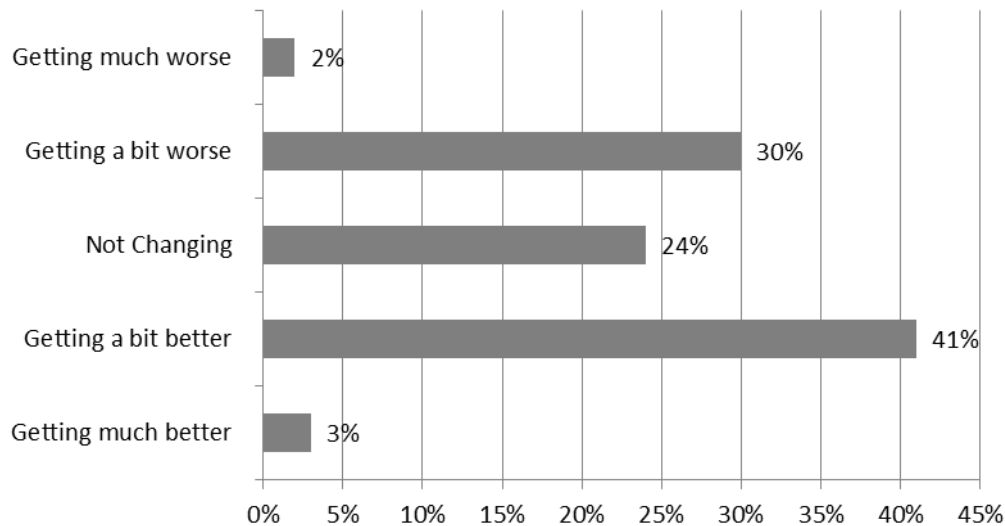
Survey questionnaire responses from all 12 FGDs are summarized and analyzed as follows:

Question 1: How good is the relationship between the Thai and US Government?



60% of the respondents think that Thai-US relations is only at the average level. However, 24% of the students think that bilateral relations between Thailand and the US is good and 13% think that the relations is bad.

Question 2: How is the relationship between the Thai and the US Government changing?



41% of the students see that Thai-US relations is getting a little bit better. However 30% of the respondents are of the views that bilateral relations are getting a bit worse.

Question 3: Have there been events or actions in the past 20 years that have changed Thai-US relations?

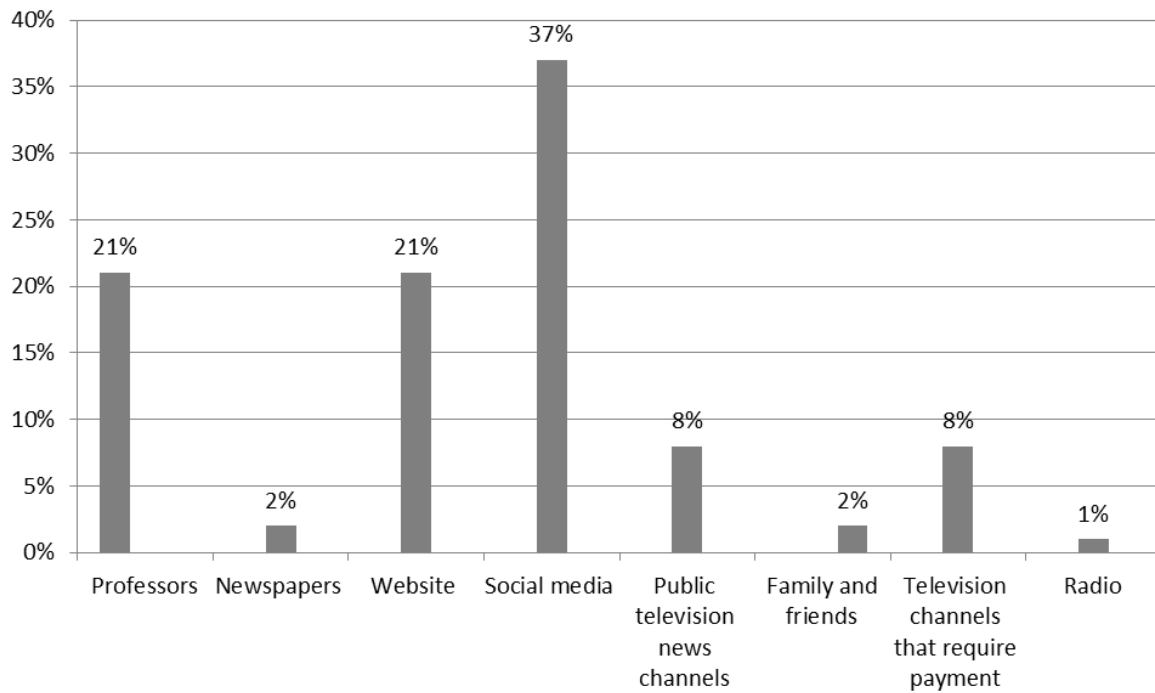
Students think that events and actions that have led to better relations are:

- Trump’s telephone call to General Prayut and invited Thai leader to visit Washington D.C in 2017
- Obama’s Pivot to Asia and his visit to Thailand in 2012
- During the Cold War, Thai-US relations is very close because both sides share mutual interest seeing Communism as a big threat
- American soft power is a factor for close Thai-US relations

However, most of the students agree that military intervention and coup d’état in Thailand in 2006 and 2014 and the setback of Thai democracy have worsened bilateral relations in recent years

The bilateral relations is getting worse when the US interferes into Thai domestic politics. In addition, closer economic relations between Thailand and China is another factor leading to the decline in Thai-US relations

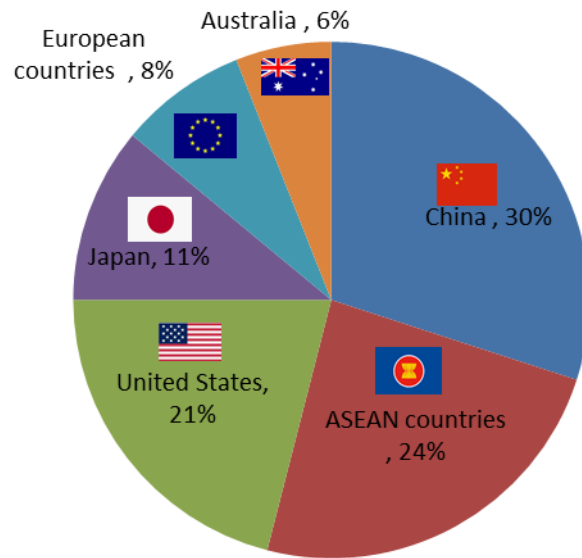
Question 4: What are your main sources of international news?



37% of the students use social media as the main source of international news and 21% of students get access to news through website.

Question 5: For each of the following areas, please rank the countries in terms of influence on Thailand?

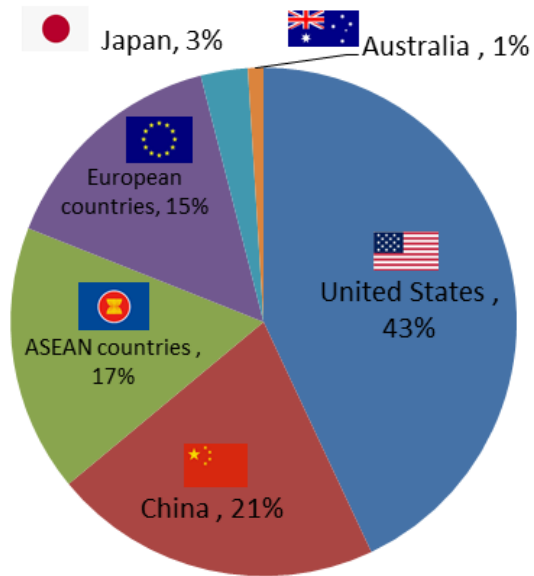
Influence on Thai foreign affairs



Students rank countries influencing Thai foreign affairs as follows:

- China 30%
- ASEAN countries 24%
- the US 21%
- Japan 11%
- European countries 8%
- Australia 6%

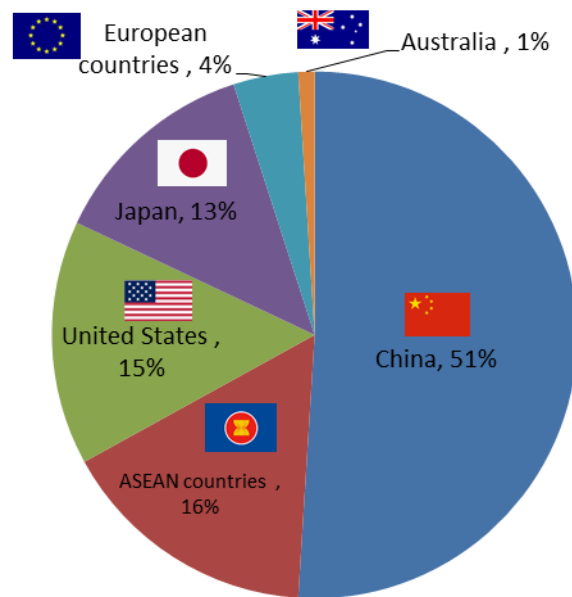
Influence on Thai politics



Students rank countries influencing Thai politics as follows:

- the US 43%
- China 21%
- ASEAN countries 17%
- European countries 15%
- Japan 3%
- Australia 1%

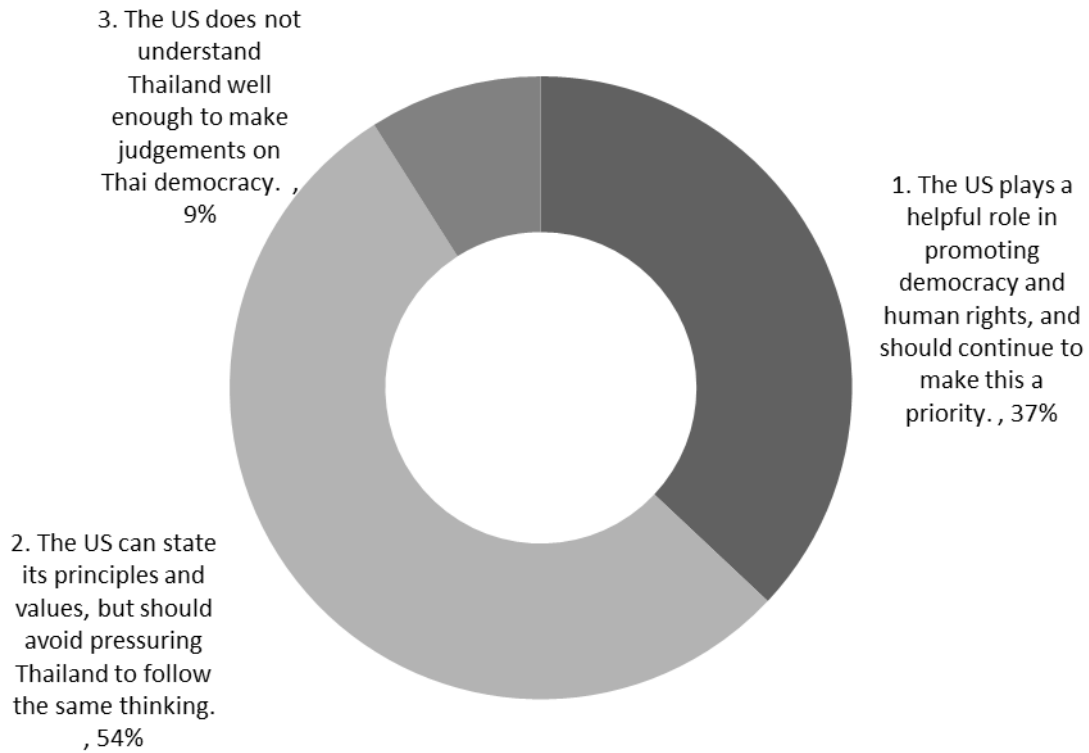
Influence on Thai economy



Students rank countries influencing Thai economy as follows:

- China 21%
- ASEAN countries 16%
- the US 15%
- Japan 13%
- European countries 4%
- Australia 1%

Question 6: The United States has often promoted democracy and human rights in its foreign relations. As a Thai citizen, what do you think of this part of US foreign policy?

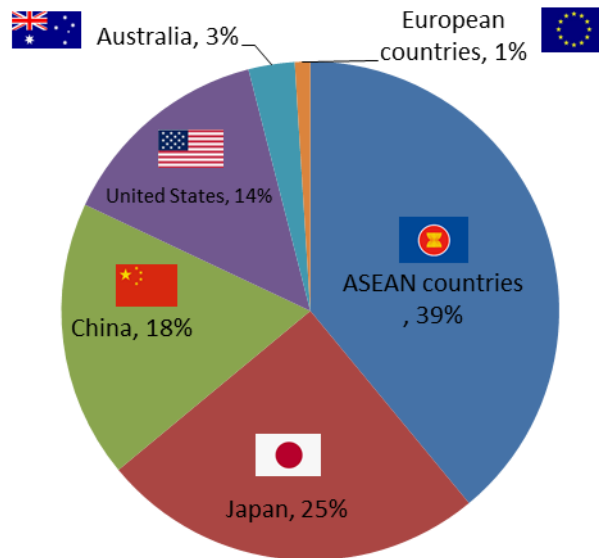


54% of the participants think that American emphasis on the principle and democratic value is to be encouraged. However, this group of students suggest that the US should avoid pressuring Thailand to follow the American thinking. In addition, 37% think that the US role in promoting democracy and human rights is helpful.

Question 7: Do you know of any aspects of Thai history where the US played an important and positive role?

Students mention the Cold War period as the important period in Thai history where the US plays an important and positive role. During the Cold War, the US plays an important role for Thailand's development.

Question 8: Which foreign country do you think has been Thailand's most reliable friend?



The ranking of countries that students think of being Thailand's most reliable friend are as follows:

- ASEAN countries 39%
- Japan 25%
- China 18%
- the US 14%
- Australia 3%
- European countries 1%

Question 9: Do you have suggestions for improving the relationship between Thailand and the US?

What should Thailand do?

Students come up with recommendations for Thailand to improve bilateral relations as follows:

- Thailand should return to democracy as soon as possible
- the Thai government should give more importance to human rights policy
- Thailand should promote exchanges at all level including cultural exchanges, cultural activities and educational exchanges and scholarships

What should the US do?

Students come up with recommendations for the US to strengthen US-Thai relations as follows:

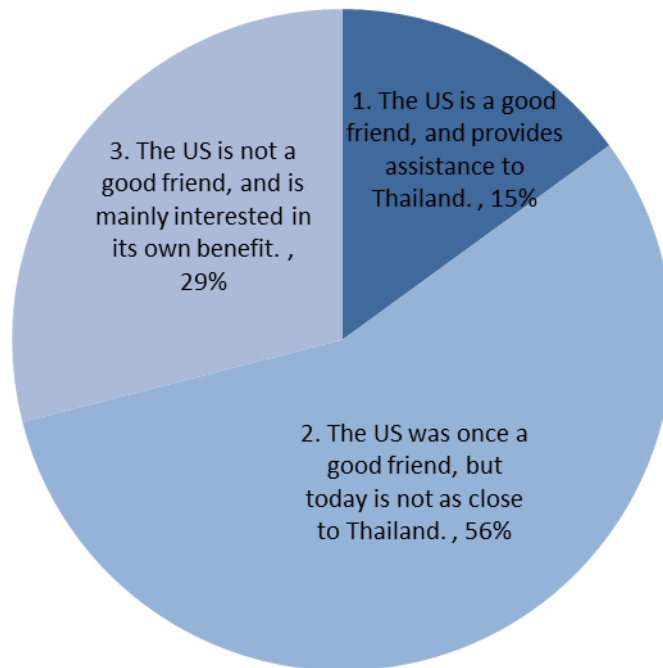
- the US should not intervene into Thai domestic politics
- the US should be more sensitive toward Thailand's political environment and should allow time for Thailand to adjust and have sustainable democracy in a long term
- the US should have a less aggressive policy toward Thailand
- the US should put more emphasis on constructive and positive aspects of bilateral relations such as educational exchanges, cultural exchanges and economic cooperation
- the US should consider setting up the American corner in campuses to be on par with the Chinese Confucius institute
- the US should use its soft power to promote more positive attitudes of Thai youth toward the US

Question 10: Do you have suggestions for improving Thai foreign policy?

Students have suggestions on improving Thai foreign policy as follows:

- Thailand should conduct a policy on balancing major powers
- Thailand should not get too close to any big power
- Thailand should play a leading role in ASEAN
- Thailand should have more emphasis on having closer relations with neighbouring countries
- Thailand should emphasize increasing economic cooperation

Question 11: In general, which of the following statements is closest to your opinion about the United States?



56% of participating students think that the US was once a good friend, but today is not as close to Thailand anymore. Whereas, 29% of the respondents view that the US is not a good friend and is mainly interested in its own benefits. Only 15% think that the US is a good friend and always provides assistance to Thailand.

4. Focus group discussion

After completing the questionnaire, participating students join the focus group discussion which has been conducted to ensure maximum participation and to encourage frank and open discussion. There are 10 questions included in the focus group discussion. The summary of focus group discussion questions are as follows:

Question 1: What is your feeling about the present relationship between Thailand and the United States? Has the relationship improved or deteriorated in recent years?

Thai-US relations is getting better under Trump administration. Trump's telephone call to General Prayut is a turning point for Thai-US relations. Students also discuss the rise of China that is the main factor driving the US to give more importance to Thailand.

Question 2: How is the Thai-US relationship changing? What are the drivers of this change?

Drivers of the change in Thai-US relations are divided into internal and external factors

- the most important internal factor is domestic politics in both countries
- the most important external factor is the China factor
- the rise of ASEAN is also the important external factor driving the US to give more importance to Thailand
- Thailand will become the center of attention to the US due to the fact that Thailand is becoming a hub among ASEAN countries

Question 3: Have there been any occurrences, positive or negative, which you feel caused changes in Thai-US relations? Please explain.

During the Cold War period, Thailand and the US became close military allies and this is the period of very close relations. However, in the Post-Cold War period, Thai-US relations is on the decline.

Question 4: Do you have time to listen to news or access news on regular basis? How often? What is your source of information?

Students get access to international news through social media and websites. Several students mention that they get in-depth analysis of international news from professors in the classrooms.

Question 5: Do you feel that Thailand is being overly influenced by any nation? Is the influence harmful or positive?

Students think that the US is influencing Thailand in terms of security, military, politics and technology. The US plays an important role and interfere into Thai domestic politics. As a result, the US has been very influential in Thai politics. The US is also influential in its soft power. American culture and values are very powerful in Thailand. But the US economic influence in Thailand has dramatically declined. This is because of the expansion of the Chinese economic influence in the region. Thailand has been very close to China economically.

Question 6: The United States has often promoted democracy and human rights in its foreign relations. As a Thai citizen, what do you think of this part of US foreign policy? Is there a role for this in the future?

Students think that the US is trying to promote democracy and human rights but the US is also interfering into Thai domestic affairs. Many students disagree with this interference.

Question 7: Are there any aspects of Thai history in which the US had a significant/influential role? Please explain.

Students reiterate the significance of Thai history that the US plays an important role. A number of students emphasize the history during the Cold War which is the important period on Thai-US relations.

Question 8: How have other major powers influenced Thailand's international relations? Do you feel that such relations are positive or negative to Thailand? Please explain.

Participating students think that China plays a very important economic influence toward Thailand in recent years. However, a number of students do not trust China and think that if Thailand is getting too close to China, Thailand will have to depend economically to China in the long run. Some students mention the negative aspect of the negotiation between Thailand and China on infrastructure projects. In this sense, some feel that China is not a reliable trading partner. Some also point out that trading with China could lead to an influx of cheap Chinese goods that could overwhelm Thai domestic market.

As for Japan, students have more positive attitudes toward Japan. Some think that Japan is the major economic power that can be trusted. In the past, Japan has played a very important role in Thailand's economic development.

As for ASEAN, students see ASEAN as the organization that Thailand will gain a lot of benefits from and Thailand has played a leading role in ASEAN since 1967 when ASEAN was established.

Question 9: What are your suggestions on how Thai-US relations can be strengthened?

What should Thailand do? What should the US do?

Recommendations to improve Thai-US relations are

- Thailand should give more importance to the US as America will play a very important role to balance the Chinese influence in the region

- the US should not push too hard to promote its values and democracy

- the US should emphasize constructive aspects of Thai-US bilateral relations such as technological development, educational and cultural exchanges

- Thailand should work with the US to make Thailand a business hub of ASEAN

- the US should welcome more imports from Thailand and increase investment in the country

- the US should provide supports that lead to more effective Thailand 4.0 economic policy

Question 10: What do you think Thailand's policy on international relations should be?

Thai foreign policy has emphasized balancing or balance of power for long time. Students suggest that this strategy should be continued. Thailand is in the unique geopolitical position among big powers. Thailand should engage the US to play a balancing role particularly balancing Chinese influence in the region.

5. Implications for Thai-US relations

Based upon the survey questionnaire responses and focus group discussions, we have analyzed the findings and has come up with implications of student's attitudes for Thai-US relations as follows:

5.1 Participating Thai students think that Thai-US relations is only at the average level. The implication from this is that Thai-US relations must be improved and the perception and attitudes of Thai students should be adjusted to the point that, in the future, Thai students will be more positive toward bilateral relations between the two countries.

5.2 It is very obvious that factors or drivers for better relations will come from initiatives and pro-active policies from both countries. It is also very clear that the best period for Thai-US relations happened during the Cold War when both countries had mutual interests and common threat. American soft power is another factor for good relations. Based upon this finding, it is imperative that, in the future, in order to improve Thai-US relations, both sides should come up with more initiatives, more pro-active policies and should explore new area of mutual interests that would include the emphasis on using soft power to better Thai-US relations.

5.3 The third implication concerns the drivers for worsened relations. Political factor is the key. For Thailand, it is military intervention into politics that damages Thai-US relations. For the US, it is the American interference into Thai domestic politics that has led to worsened relations in recent years. China factor is another driver for worsening Thai-US relations. Therefore, in order to improve Thai-US relations in the future, both sides should avoid politics. Moreover, the two countries should improve bilateral economic cooperation in order to compete the Chinese economic influence.

5.4 The US is ranked very low in influencing Thai economy compared to China. Therefore, Thailand and the US should improve bilateral economic cooperation in order to compete the Chinese economic influence.

5.5 Students encourage American role to promote democracy, but oppose American interference into Thai domestic politics. We agree that the US should continue to promote democracy but avoid interference into Thai domestic affairs.

5.6 The Cold War is the period of closest relations between the two countries because both countries have mutual interests during this period. Thailand and the US should explore new areas of mutual interests that will be the key to sustainable long term close relationship.

5.7 It is shocking to learn that Thai students think that the US is not a reliable friend to Thailand anymore. We think that this will lead to serious repercussions for Thai-US relations. It is a critical and serious implication for our bilateral relations. That is why it is very crucial that both sides should rectify this and find a way to change the attitude of Thai youths to see the US as a reliable friend. The key word is trust. Young Thais do not trust the US anymore. Both sides must come up with mutual strategy to build trust.

5.8 The last implication that is also a very serious implication is that the majority of participating Thai students think that the US was once a good friend, but today is not as close to Thailand anymore. We think that this will lead to serious repercussions. Both countries should find ways and means to improve relations particularly to change attitudes of young Thais to be more positive on our bilateral relations.

6. Recommendations for Thai-US relations

6.1 General recommendations

Based upon the findings from this study, we come up with recommendations to improve Thai-US relations as follows:

6.1.1 Thailand should return to democracy as soon as possible.

6.1.2 We would like to see more constructive and positive aspects of bilateral relations such as cultural exchanges, cultural activities and educational scholarships for Thai and American students, and economic and technological cooperation.

6.1.3 The US should have a less aggressive policy toward Thailand.

6.1.4 The US should avoid interference into Thai domestic politics.

6.1.5 Thailand should give more importance to the balancing strategy with the emphasis on supporting the US role as the balancer.

6.2 Public diplomacy

One of the most important recommendations that we would like to propose concerns public diplomacy. In our views, public diplomacy will be the most important tool to improve Thai-US relations, to improve public's and students' attitudes and to improve people-to-people relations.

The purpose of public diplomacy is to win hearts and minds of the publics with the emphasis on positive aspects and facts. Public diplomacy can include many areas of cooperation such as cultural activities, sport exchanges. In recent years, the American government and the Thai government, both give the importance to public diplomacy with a lot of outreach programs such as projects on informing the publics and projects on receiving the feedbacks from the people.

However, the government is not in the best position to conduct public diplomacy alone. Civil societies in both countries should be promoted to play a role in public diplomacy in cooperation with the government. Public diplomacy will be more effective when it is conducted among civil societies. It is obvious that if the government conducts public diplomacy alone, it will be perceived or misperceived as propagandas. It is with this in mind

that we would like to propose that civil society should be fully supported to conduct public diplomacy to improve Thai-US relations.

In this connection, American Studies Association in Thailand (ASAT), perhaps the only civil society organization in Thailand that totally devotes its activities in the area of American studies, could play a role in this area of public diplomacy. ASAT can broaden and recruit new members that would include young Thais and students. ASAT could be able to set up the American studies centers or American studies clubs in Thai universities all over the country. These clubs or centers could provide a very important platform to inform and educate young Thais on American affairs that would make Thai students better understand American society and American foreign policy. A long term expectation is that, in the future, Thai students will have more positive attitudes toward the US.

7. Conclusion

About 120 students participate in 12 Focus Group Discussions from 6 universities in Thailand under the project “Youth Attitudes on the Thai-US Bilateral Relationship”.

Based upon the survey questionnaire responses and focus group discussions, these are the main findings:

- Participating Thai students think that Thai-US relations is only at the average level
- Driver for better relations come from initiatives and pro-active policies from both countries. The best period for Thai-US relations happened during the Cold War when both countries have mutual interests and common threat. American soft power is also a factor for good relations
- Drivers for worsened relations is political. For Thailand, it is military intervention into politics that damages Thai-US relations. For the US, it is the American interference into Thai domestic politics that has led to worsened relations in recent years
- US is ranked very low in influencing Thai economy compared to China.
- Students encourage American role to promote democracy but oppose US interference into Thai domestic politics
- It is shocking to learn that Thai students think that the US is not a reliable friend to Thailand anymore. They think that the US was once a good friend, but today is not as close to Thailand anymore

Based upon these findings, recommendations to improve Thai-US relations are:

- The perception and attitude of Thai students should be adjusted to more positive views on bilateral relations
- Both sides should come up with more initiatives, more pro-active policies and should explore new area of mutual interests that would include the emphasis on soft power
- Thailand and the US should improve bilateral economic cooperation in order to compete with the Chinese economic influence

- Both sides should find a way to change Thai youth's attitudes to see the US as a reliable friend. The keyword is trust. We must come up with mutual strategy to build trust.
- Thailand should return to democracy as soon as possible and the US should avoid interference into Thai domestic politics.
- The 2 countries should cooperate more on constructive and positive aspects of bilateral relations such as cultural exchanges, cultural activities, educational scholarships, and economic and technological cooperation.
- Thailand should give more importance to the balancing strategy with the emphasis on supporting the US role as a balancer
- Civil society should be fully supported to conduct public diplomacy to improve Thai-US relations. American Studies Association in Thailand (ASAT) could play a role in this area of public diplomacy