

Home

- Current Issue

- TNI Blogs

- Subjective Evaluation
- The Washington Realist

- Features

- The Realist
- Reporter-at-Large
- Books and Film
- Symposia / Interviews
- Web Exclusive

- Focus By Region

- East and Southeast Asia
- Europe / Eurasia
- Latin America
- Middle East / Africa
- North America
- South and Central Asia

- Focus By Topic

- Collective Security
- Defense / Intelligence
- Democracy / Governance
- Diplomacy and Balancing
- Economics / Trade
- Energy / Environment
- History / Culture
- Proliferation
- Sole Superpower
- Terrorism

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- Our Goals
- Masthead
- Employment/Internships
- Press Citations
- Submission Guidelines
- Permissions
- Advertising
- Contact Us

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- Search Issues
- Order Old Print Issues

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Need to Renew?

Stay Out of Bangkok

by Doug Bandow

05.17.2010

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One of the statements of faith of U.S. policy makers is that American bases and troops act to “stabilize” surrounding regions. Indeed, the U.S. presence in Okinawa, now a major political controversy in Japan, is said to be “vital” to the future of East Asia. If so, what about Thailand?

The situation in Bangkok continues to deteriorate. The city has been disrupted for weeks by protests. With a breakdown of negotiations between the so-called Red Shirt demonstrators and the government, a leading commercial district in Bangkok has become a battleground.

One of the Red Shirt leaders was killed by a sniper. At least 24 people died over three days of street fighting. The military announced a “live firing zone.”

However, the current conflict ends, the result is not likely to be pretty. The dispute is complex, but essentially reflects a long-running political struggle between the rural poor and urban elite, centered around the royal court, military and business. The former view as illegitimate the current government of Abhisit Vejjajiva, who took power after establishment interests manipulated “Yellow Shirt” street protests, the legal system, and the security forces to effectively overturn the results of the previous election.

For a time it appeared that the demonstrators were ready to go home after the government agreed to call new elections in the fall. The collapse of that accord led to the military’s ongoing attempt to disperse the protestors.

Even if this effort succeeds, new demonstrations are likely in Bangkok and other cities. Elections eventually must be held. Absent rampant cheating or military intervention, the Red Shirts are likely to win and take revenge on their opponents.

Thailand’s entire political system is at risk. The establishment has lost much credibility. There is sympathy in the military’s ranks for the Red Shirts. The judiciary has been exposed as partisan.

Not even the monarchy is safe. The once sacrosanct institution faces severe damage: eighty-two-year-old King Bhumibol Adulyadej is ailing, the Crown Prince lacks his father’s popularity, and the court has come under increasing criticism for tilting toward the establishment and against the people.

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Worse, Thailand could descend into widespread violence. Already the country faces a Muslim insurgency and suffers the spillover from neighboring Burma's long-running ethnic conflict. Any attempt by urban elites to suppress rural protest and restrict democracy could trigger expanded civil strife and possible civil war.

In short, great instability looms. In an important and long-time U.S. ally. Isn't this, then, the moment for Washington to act? Isn't this the time to deploy America's military, to strengthen a critical friend and stabilize an important region? Isn't this the opportunity for which the U.S. government has been waiting for sixty-five years, ever since establishing the first American military installations in Okinawa and elsewhere as World War II concluded?

Apparently not. So far, at least, no one in Washington is talking about doing anything in Thailand.

For good reason. The mind boggles at the thought of intervening. What the regime in Bangkok lacks is not military force but political legitimacy. Having manipulated the system for its own advantage, Thailand's ruling elite is defending its prerogatives ever more fiercely. That is only sparking greater popular anger and demands for greater political change.

For America to take sides would be foolish beyond measure. Yet genuine neutrality would be impossible—intervention inevitably would be seen as helping one group or another. Any attempt to impose a settlement, however reasonable in Washington's eyes, would offend most everyone in Thailand. In short, intervention not only would be a bad option—it really isn't an option.

But if not in Thailand today, then where and when? In justifying the U.S. military presence in Okinawa, Pentagon briefers draw circles around the island to demonstrate where American marines could be sent. Yet what conceivable circumstance would warrant such deployments, irrespective of Washington's theoretical reach?

The traditional mission of the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Force is to back up South Korea. But the South is manpower-rich and needs no U.S. ground forces. If Seoul requires reinforcement, it should draw upon its own reserves.

The most fashionable replacement duty for the MEF is to contain Beijing. However, a few thousand Marines have no plausible use against the People's Republic of China should the worst happen and conflict erupt.

Which leaves everything else—the kitchen sink argument of promoting “stability.” Advocates of an American presence talk as if only U.S. forces prevent the region from descending into chaos and conflict.

Yet today's deployments have no obvious impact on the course of regional events. East Asia and the South Pacific currently have more than their fair share of potential trouble-spots.

Dictatorship in Fiji. Civil strife in the Solomon Islands. Enduring divisions in multi-ethnic Indonesia (in truth, the “Java Empire”). Political conflict in Burma. Authoritarian rule in Cambodia. Continuing fragility in East Timor. A semi-failed state in the Philippines. Assorted movements pushing for autonomy or independence in Burma, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines. And now, chaos in Bangkok streets.

Having failed to prevent such problems, America's military presence offers no solution for any of them either. Precisely what could

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Washington do in any of these cases? None of these disputes plausibly warrants American military intervention.

But if not any of them, then what realistic scenario would justify American military intervention?

It's time to reverse the presumption of U.S. policy. Rather than assume American involvement in other nations' conflicts, Washington should plan to keep out. Rather than position U.S. military personnel to intervene promiscuously half a world away, America should redeploy its military to defend the United States.

Americans will long remain active in East Asia. But U.S. interests do not require military plans to intervene in local strife, whether within or among nations. Thailand demonstrates how the region's most likely problems lie well beyond America's control.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Reagan, he is the author of several books, including *Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire* (Xulon).

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