



# America's Boots on the Ground Do Not Want a Thailand Coup

**By: Richard S. Ehrlich**  
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**BANGKOK, Thailand** -- The U.S. military begins its biggest training exercise in the Asia-Pacific region next week in Thailand where Washington does "not want to see a coup" by Bangkok's armed forces amid post-election protests attempting to overthrow a crippled democracy.

U.S. forces team up with two of their closest former Vietnam War allies, Thailand and South Korea, in a three-team "field training exercise...designed to enhance interoperability and strengthen regional relationships," the American Embassy said, announcing Exercise Cobra Gold 2014 which runs from Feb. 11-21.

Military services from Singapore, Japan, Indonesia and Malaysia join them for training "in a multinational force team that responds to a simulated scenario, executing a pre-developed operations plan."

Away from the heaviest training, military personnel from China "will participate in humanitarian and civic assistance projects designed to improve the quality of life and local infrastructure for the Thai people," alongside forces from the other countries.

Cobra Gold's annual multinational military exercise uses locations across Thailand -- an American treaty ally -- which offers jungles, beaches and other tropical terrain to test equipment and personnel for amphibious landings, strategic air drops, live-fire of weapons, and other activities.

Cobra Gold coincides with ongoing confrontations in Bangkok's streets after violent anti-democracy protesters on Sunday (Feb. 2) blocked 10 percent of Thailand's polling booths, mostly in Bangkok and the south, to damage the election and prevent formation of a new government.

The protesters want to seize power by creating an unelected council which will blacklist current politicians and "reform" the system so unidentified appointees can dominate Parliament, the judiciary and other institutions.

Three months of increasingly bloody clashes in Bangkok among protesters, supporters of voters' rights, and police have left 10 people dead and hundreds injured.

On Tuesday (Feb. 4), protesters vowed to continue blockading central Bangkok where they are camping in a park they fortified and at other sites.

Unable to win at the polls, they are trying to lure sympathizers in the polarized military to stage a coup, mirroring events in 2006 when a bloodless military putsch toppled the elected government.

"Well, we certainly do not want to see a coup or violence," said U.S.

State Department spokesperson Jen Psaki in Washington on Monday (Feb.3) responding to journalists' questions.

"We are speaking directly to all elements of Thai society to make clear the importance of using democratic and constitutional means to resolve political differences," she said.

"We do regret, of course, that many voters were prevented from exercising their right to vote, and we reiterate our call for all sides to refrain from violence and exercise restraint to avoid further injuries, loss of life, and destruction of property," Ms. Psaki said.

"We remain concerned that political tensions in Thailand are posing challenges to the democratic institutions and processes of Thailand."

Anti-election protesters "are the modern equivalent of Benito Mussolini's Black Shirts, who seized power through the infamous 1922 march on Rome," Doug Bandow, senior fellow at the Washington-based Cato Institute warned hours after the polls closed.

"Establishment thugs" leading the protest are backed by factions among Thailand's powerful royalists, military and wealthy elite, intentionally creating "dangerous political turmoil," Mr. Bandow said.

Caretaker Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra is trying to arrange fresh elections in blocked zones, so a new House of Representatives can join the existing half-appointed Senate to form a new government which is expected to reinstate her despite some election losses.

"Chaos in Bangkok, and especially violent clashes with Yingluck supporters, might cause the military to stage another coup, though the armed forces leadership so far has remained neutral," Mr. Bandow wrote on Cato's website.

Protest leader Suthep Thaugsuban gives daily speeches at rallies in Bangkok's streets, while avoiding a court indictment for alleged multiple murders committed in 2010 when he was deputy prime minister for security affairs in the previous government.

Mr. Suthep is also wanted by police on a warrant for leading the current "insurrection" which is punishable by life imprisonment or lethal injection.