

Administration of Barack Obama, 2012

The President's News Conference With Prime Minister Yinglak Chinnawat of Thailand in Bangkok, Thailand

November 18, 2012

Prime Minister Yinglak. Ladies and gentlemen of the media, let me start by once again welcoming President Barack Obama and his delegation to Thailand.

Thailand is the first country President Obama chose to visit following with his decisive reelection less than 2 weeks ago. We appreciate the significance of the gesture, Mr. President. And we all thank you for being here today.

President Obama's visit is the perfect occasions to launch a celebration of 180th anniversary of Thai-U.S. diplomatic relations next year. I thanked both President Obama and Secretary Clinton for actively promote Thai-U.S. relations and for the United States constructive engagement in Asia.

This afternoon I had the honors of accompanying the President for an audience with His Majesty the King, reflecting the close relationship between our two countries at the highest level.

Lastly, at the bilateral meetings, we had productive and wide-ranging discussions in an atmosphere of friendly partnership. Thailand is the oldest treaty ally of the U.S. in Asia and a long-lasting one because of our shared commitment to democracy, human rights, and free markets.

I expressed to the President that it is my firm commitment to the people to preserve and protect democratic systems, and I appreciate the President's support of democracy in Thailand. And I agree with him that democracy will lead to economic process, as we agree that celebrating last success is not enough. We look to the future and to build an even stronger strategic partnership that benefit both countries and indeed the broader regions, ASEAN and Asia-Pacific.

On the economic front, to generate growth and create jobs for both Thai and Americans, the President and I agree to redouble our effort to promote trade and investment and people-to-people exchanges. We will also strengthen our cooperation in energy and food securities. Furthermore, we agree that Thailand is a strategic location and a hub for ASEAN connectivities and the ASEAN economic communities, AEC. We will work together to make the regions an engine of growth, contributing toward global economic stabilities and sustainabilities.

Within this context, I informed the President that Thailand will initiate negotiations on the Trans-Pacific Partnership, or TPP, which will engage all stakeholders, and undertake the necessary domestic legislative process to make it become a reality.

The President and I had wide-ranging discussions about regional issues, and I welcome his upcoming historic visit to Myanmar and Cambodia. We welcome the United States renewed focus on Southeast Asia and believe our bilateral partnership can help contribute to regional peace, securities, and prosperities.

But our cooperation goes beyond the regions. At the global level, Thailand is concerned with the trade of weapons of mass destruction, or WMD. Therefore, I informed the President

that Thailand will join the Proliferation Security Initiative, or PSI. We believe that PSI will help prevent WMD from following into the wrong hands, which is in the shared interest of all.

The President and I also discussed on how to tackle transnational crimes, and in particular, human traffickings. I reaffirmed my commitment to fight human trafficking, which equals to modern slavery. We also discussed cooperation on combating terrorisms and how to deal with the climate change issue, especially in the term of disaster relief.

Finally, we recognized the importance of continued high-level exchange and consultations between our two countries. As part of our growing partnership, the President and I agreed to stay in close touch and to have our ministers and agencies to do the same on the rich agenda we discussed today.

Thank you for your attention.

President Obama. Well, thank you very much. Good evening to the people of Thailand who have welcomed me so graciously. Let me say *sawatdee krab*. [Laughter] I will say that the Prime Minister's English is much better than my Thai. [Laughter] But I want to say thank you so much, Madam Prime Minister, for your very warm welcome, your generous words, and the sense of partnership that you bring to our work today.

As you indicated, Asia is my first foreign trip since our election in the United States, and Thailand is my first stop. And this is no accident. As I've said many times, the United States is and always will be a Pacific nation. As the fastest growing region in the world, the Asia-Pacific will shape so much of our security and prosperity in the century ahead, and it is critical to creating jobs and opportunity for the American people. And that's why I've made restoring American engagement in this region a top priority as President.

And the cornerstone of our strategy is our strong and enduring treaty alliances, which includes our alliance with Thailand. Thailand is America's oldest friend in Asia. Next year will mark 180 years of diplomatic relations. We've been treaty allies, committed to our common defense, for nearly 60 years. Our men and women in uniform have stood together, and they've bled together. Our businesspeople and our entrepreneurs work together to create jobs for both of our peoples. Our diplomats, development experts, researchers, and student partners every day work together so that our citizens and the people across this region can live in peace and security and dignity.

Most recently, the people of Thailand have worked to restore and strengthen your own democracy, and we are very admiring of the efforts that have been made. Earlier today I had the great honor of having an audience before His Majesty the King, a leader of wisdom and dignity who embodies the identity and unity of this nation.

And today I'm proud to stand beside the democratically elected leader of Thailand and to reaffirm the importance of upholding democracy, governance, rule of law, and universal human rights, all of which I know, Madam Prime Minister, that you believe in very deeply. When we met in Bali last year, the Prime Minister and I discussed how we could deepen and broaden the partnership between our countries. And with this visit, I'm pleased that we've agreed to a series of efforts that revitalize our alliance to meet the challenges and opportunities of our time.

First, we're deepening our security cooperation. Our militaries already train and exercise together, and we're already close partners in preventing terrorism and combating narcotrafficking. Now we have a new, broader vision for our alliance. We're going to improve

the ability of our militaries to operate together, and we'll help Thai forces assume even greater responsibilities in the region, from maritime security to disaster relief to preventing piracy.

I especially want to commend Thailand for joining the Proliferation Security Initiative that prevents the spread of weapons of mass destruction. And taken together, these steps advance our shared vision of a secure and peaceful Asia-Pacific where the rights and responsibilities of all nations are upheld.

Second, we're taking new steps to expand trade and investment. The United States is already one of Thailand's biggest trading partners, and we're already one of the biggest investors in Thailand. But we believe we can do even more, so we've agreed to reconvene our trade and investment council to explore new ways that our companies and our entrepreneurs can do business together.

We'll continue to work with our APEC partners to reduce barriers and move toward a seamless regional economy. And we'll work together as Thailand begins to lay the groundwork for joining high-standard trade agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership. All of this will advance our vision of a region where trade is free and fair and all nations play by the rules.

Third, on this 50th anniversary of the Peace Corps in Thailand, we're moving ahead with new partnerships to promote development and human dignity. We'll focus on public health, developing a vaccine for HIV/AIDS, and ensuring that development is sustainable, especially in regions along the Mekong River.

I recently announced new steps that the United States is taking to confront the scourge of human trafficking: modern slavery. Thailand is also taking new steps to address this challenge, including measures to better protect and empower women and girls. And I'm very pleased to see the leadership that the Prime Minister has taken on what—I think we all agree—is a very important issue.

And given Thailand's role as an emerging donor country, I'm very pleased that our two nations will be working more closely to promote development in other countries, including fighting malaria along the Thai-Burma border. We also welcome, by the way, the leadership that Thailand has taken in protecting wildlife around the world; it's something that Thailand should be very proud of.

Finally, we discussed a range of regional challenges. Thailand has supported the cause of democracy in Burma, protecting dissidents, hosting refugees, and promoting reform. And I very much appreciate the Prime Minister's insights as I prepare to visit Burma tomorrow.

As a founding member of ASEAN, Thailand will play an important role in our meetings in Cambodia. And I especially want to thank our Thai friends for being so supportive of our role in the East Asia Summit, which should be the premier forum for discussing regional challenges, including maritime security.

So once again, Madam Prime Minister, I want to thank you for your hospitality and your partnership. Because of the progress that we've made today, I think we've put the U.S.-Thai alliance on an even firmer footing for many years to come. And tonight I look forward to celebrating the bonds of friendship between our peoples and also enjoying some Thai food, which is one of my favorites.

So thank you very much. *Kob khun krab.*

Democracy and Political Rights in Thailand/Thai Cuisine

Q. Good evening. This question goes to both of you, Mr. President and Mrs. Prime Minister. Right, you both talked about democracy in Thailand, but my question is this: Are you both satisfied with how democracies—I mean, this situation of democracy right now in Thailand? I'm talking about the situation that those who are responsible for 2010 crackdown is still not pursued by laws, and you still have these laws that criminalize any criticism against the King very harshly, including an American citizen, Joe Gordon. You have many political prisoners and recorded human rights abuse. I mean, in your opinion, I mean, how do you call this situation satisfying?

And, Mr. President, which Thai cuisine dish is your favorite again? Could you be more specific? *[Laughter]* Thank you, sir.

Prime Minister Yinglak. Okay. Let me answer the question on democracy today. I think the destination of ours is the stability of democracy, because democracy, we believe that this would be fundamental of economic growth in the future. So the destination to go with that vision is that the national reconciliation. But for Thailand's situation, I think we will stick with the principle of true democracy by using the apply of the rule of law and the due process and make sure that all the things will be equal and fair basis.

And in Thailand, also, we aim for—would like to see the national reconciliation. So our position will be with the passion and with the peaceful way, and using the democracy way will be the place to solve the problem.

Thank you.

President Obama. Well, let me just say, first of all, that democracy is not something that is static, it's something that we constantly have to work on. The United States has the oldest democracy in the world, but we constantly have to, as citizens, work to make sure that it is working to include everybody, to make sure that the freedoms that are in our Constitution—the freedom of speech, the freedom of worship—that those are practiced and observed.

And so the work of democracy never stops. And I think that what you're seeing here in Thailand is a democratically elected Prime Minister who is committed to democracy, committed to rule of law, committed to freedom of speech and the press and assembly. But obviously, what's true in Thailand, as is true in America, is that all citizens have to remain vigilant and there's almost—there's always improvements to be made.

And I very much congratulate the Prime Minister on her commitment to democracy, and I know that many of the reforms that she continues to be interested in are ones that will strengthen democracy even further in Thailand and will serve as a good example for the region as a whole.

In terms of Thai cuisine, I like it all. And I've looked over the menu for this evening's dinner, and it looks very good, which is good because I'm also very hungry. *[Laughter]* So I think I saved my appetite, and I'm looking forward to having some authentic Thai food.

Q. Thank you very much. Madam Prime Minister, thank you for hosting us with the American media as well as the rest of the President's delegation.

Mr. President, you will make history tomorrow as the first U.S. President to visit Burma. But human rights activists have warned that your trip is premature given the escalating ethnic violence that have left hundreds dead and up to 100,000 people displaced in that country. Your own NSC Director for Human Rights said the other day that people are "living in fear and terror." Why are you moving so quickly to endorse the Burmese leadership and reward them

with a personal visit? And given some of the recent setbacks to democratic movements in the Middle East, why are you so confident that Burma will continue down the path of reform?

And to the Madam Prime Minister as well, as a U.S. ally and a neighbor of Myanmar and Burma, are you satisfied that President Sein is doing enough to stop the ethnic violence and protect human rights there? And do you believe Obama—President Obama's visit is premature or appropriately timed? Thank you.

Human Rights in Burma/Democracy Efforts

President Obama. Well, first of all, I think it's important to recognize, David [Nakamura, Washington Post], this is not an endorsement of the Burmese Government, this is an acknowledgement that there is a process underway inside that country that even a year and a half, 2 years ago, nobody foresaw.

President Sein is taking steps that move us in a better direction. You have Aung San Suu Kyi now an elected Member of Parliament. You've seen political prisoners released. There is an articulated commitment to further political reform. But I don't think anybody is under any illusion that Burma has arrived, that they're where they need to be. On the other hand, if we waited to engage until they had achieved a perfect democracy, my suspicion is we'd be waiting an awful long time. And one of the goals of this trip is to highlight the progress that has been made, but also to give voice to the much greater progress that needs to be made in the future.

So when I address the Burmese public as the first President who has ever visited that country, what they'll hear from me is that we congratulate them on having opened the door to a country that respects human rights and respects political freedom, and it is saying that it's committed towards a more democratic government. But what they'll also hear is that the country has a long way to go. And I'm not somebody who thinks that the United States should just stand on the sidelines and not want to get its hands dirty when there is an opportunity for us to encourage the better impulses inside a country. And in part, I'm taking my guidance from what Aung San Suu Kyi—who I think knows quite a bit about repression in Burma—sees as the best means to continue the development and progress that's being made there. When she visited me in the Oval Office, she was very encouraging of the prospects of a visit.

And one of the things that we've learned in countries around the world is that change can happen very fast if a spotlight is shown on what's going on in a country and the people there start believing that their voices are heard around the world. And one of the things that we can do as an international community is make sure that the people of Burma know we're paying attention to them, we're listening to them, we care about them. And this visit allows me to do that in a fairly dramatic fashion.

But we understand this is going to be a work in progress. And what we've done is calibrate our concrete policies and responses based on the understanding that more work needs to be done. And if we see backsliding and slipping, then we're in a position to respond appropriately. But my hope is that we will continue on a positive track, and hopefully, my visit will be able to encourage that.

Prime Minister Yingluck. For myself, I think on the case of the Myanmar situation, I think now we can see that—from my observation, and also, I have several chances to visit in Myanmar—we see a lot of progress on the political reform from the Government. And I think from the basis that we have been told, I think we believe that the fundamental of economic growth and prosperity is stability of democracy. Because we people in the region, we believe

that democracy will be the way for the country to keep free and fair and also reduce the gap of the people. So that's why we believe this is the right destination.

So in the case of Myanmar, Thailand is our neighbor country of Myanmar, so we want to help our neighbor with very sincerity. And truly, we want to see people of Myanmar to have the better life, to have the better education, to have better development. If we leave them far away and we close that gap, so I don't think we can be able to raise up the profile of our regions. And especially, on the year 2015 will be the year of the communities of ASEAN as one. So it is—will be necessary for us to work closely with Myanmar to make sure that their political reform will come in the right track.

But for us alone, I think we need the support from international to keep the way, because Myanmar also already opened the door. So I think this is important for international country to work with them, helping them, and make sure that they reinstall—they bring the true democracy in terms of—the real democracy that the international law with the practice and close the gap and make sure that people will have better life and better jobs.

Thank you.

U.S. Role in the Asia-Pacific Region

Q. Thank you, Madam Prime Minister and Mr. President. First question I'd like to ask Mr. President: What are your priorities in your new Asia policy, and where does Thailand fit in that policy?

And to Madam Prime Minister, what is the plan of the Thai Government in pursuing TPP with the U.S? Thank you.

President Obama. Well, when I announced our desire to pivot and focus on the Asia-Pacific region, in part it was a response to a decade in which we understandably, as a country, had been focused on issues of terrorism, the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan. And as a consequence, I think we had not had the same kind of presence in a region that is growing faster, developing faster than any place else in the world.

And we've historically been an Asia-Pacific power, and I wanted to make sure that all our friends and partners throughout the region understood that we see this as a central region for our growth and our prosperity, and it's not one that we can neglect.

So in terms of my priorities, number one: expanding trade and investment. We believe that in working with countries in the region, we can create more jobs and more opportunity for our own people in the United States and for people in the region. And obviously, we already have a strong trade and investment relationship with a country like Thailand, but we think we can do even more. And the trade and investment council that we've set up will further explore ways in which we can synchronize our economies so that entrepreneurs and businesspeople who want to trade and want to produce products, want to take advantage of opportunities in both countries, will have an easier time doing so.

A second priority is maintaining the stability that allows for prosperity, and that means that our security arrangements in the region are extremely important. Once again, Thailand is a central part of that as our oldest treaty ally in Asia, one that has not only worked with us here regionally, but also does outstanding work performing peacekeeping activities around the world.

I want to make sure that we continue to strengthen those relationships, not only for purposes of dealing with potential security threats, but also humanitarian responses. We've seen in this region a number of devastating natural disasters, and when we have strong cooperation and training between our countries, then we're in a stronger position to respond quickly. And Thailand, I think, having experienced its own floods, understands the importance of this.

A third area that's important is human development. We've already discussed how important it is for us to work together on issues of human trafficking and forced labor. We all believe that our countries will prosper if children are getting a good education, if public health systems are set up to deal with issues like HIV/AIDS or drug-resistant malaria. Those are all issues where countries working together can do more than countries working by themselves.

And so scientific exchanges, medical exchanges, working together on development issues—all of that becomes very important. And because Thailand, I think, is more successful economically than some of its neighbors, it's now in a position to be a donor country. And for us to be able to partner with Thailand—for example, USAID working with the Thailand—the Thai development agency to help people in the Mekong River area develop and be able to prosper, to have greater food security, to deal with public health challenges—that's an outstanding partnership for us.

And finally, I think our goal in the region is to make sure that there is an international—or a regional architecture through mechanisms like the U.S.-ASEAN dialogue or the East Asia Summit that allows us to work through tensions, conflicts, differences in a constructive way, in a way that is—allows us to resolve these differences in a peaceful and orderly fashion. And I think that Thailand's leadership in those institutions has been extraordinarily important.

So we expect to work with all the countries in the region. But obviously, the cornerstone of our work in Asia begins with our alliances, and the longstanding friendship between our two countries makes this a very appropriate place for me to stop in my first trip after my reelection.

Prime Minister Yinglak. Thank you. For talking the point of the TPP, one thing that—we believe that on the economic growth in the future, I think we need more growth. And the way to more growth is on the basic of the—economic on the free and fair basis and also the free market. This is—I think, all the other countries who have been growing off the economic and stability of the economy saw this is very important for the country who bring growth and who—more the future and stability of the economic growth.

We'll be—what we would like to work on share and fair and also free market, so that's why Thailand saw the TPP is very important for the future. But of course, that—I think in the beginning, of course, the concern and the readiness of the company—or the readiness of the country will be another issue that we can work parallelly, by the way, by using, like, the capacity-building and also the readiness of the things.

And after that, I think we can work along and understand—because sometimes, the benefit would be better to invite all other countries. So it means that you have more market, you have new market to work. So that's why we see this is important. But along the way, we can work with the capacity-building by the time we get ready. Thank you.

Situation in the Gaza Strip/Arab Spring/Democracy/

Q. Thank you. I'm Margaret Talev with Bloomberg News. Mr. President, you're here of course to talk about Asia, but much of the world's attention and yours is also being diverted

back to the Middle East now and the situation in Gaza. You're calling for a deescalation of the violence between the Israelis and the Palestinians. I'd like to ask you, do you believe that a movement of Israeli ground troops into Gaza would be an escalation, and do you support such a move anyhow? And do you—are you concerned that the Arab Spring, at least in the near term, has made matters worse? And does the violence there complicate your pivot to Asia?

And, Madam Prime Minister, you may know, the President's first visit today was to the royal monastery where he told a monk that he will need a lot of prayer to help the U.S. avoid a fiscal crisis. It was sort of a joke, kind of, right? What can emerging democracies in Asia take away from how difficult it has been for the President to get Congress to agree to budget negotiations with him? And why shouldn't China's system of government look more appealing in this region when you confront a situation like this in the U.S.?

Thank you.

President Obama. Well, let me start with Gaza. Let's understand what the precipitating event here was that's causing the current crisis, and that was an ever-escalating number of missiles that were landing not just in Israeli territory, but in areas that are populated. And there's no country on Earth that would tolerate missiles raining down on its citizens from outside its borders. So we are fully supportive of Israel's right to defend itself from missiles landing on people's homes and workplaces and potentially killing civilians. And we will continue to support Israel's right to defend itself.

Now, what is also true is, is that we are actively working with all the parties in the region to see if we can end those missiles being fired without further escalation of violence in the region. And so I've had several conversations with Prime Minister Netanyahu. I've had several conversations with President Mursi of Egypt. I've spoken to Prime Minister Erdogan of Turkey, who was visiting Egypt right in the midst of what was happening in Gaza. And my message to all of them was that Israel has every right to expect that it does not have missiles fired into its territory. If that can be accomplished without a ramping up of military activity in Gaza, that's preferable. That's not just preferable for the people of Gaza, it's also preferable for Israelis, because if Israeli troops are in Gaza, they're much more at risk of incurring fatalities or being wounded.

We're going to have to see what kind of progress we can make in the next 24, 36, 48 hours. But what I've said to President Mursi and Prime Minister Erdogan is that those who champion the cause of the Palestinians should recognize that if we see a further escalation of the situation in Gaza, then the likelihood of us getting back on any kind of peace track that leads to a two-state solution is going to be pushed off way into the future.

And so if we're serious about wanting to resolve this situation and create a genuine peace process, it starts with no more missiles being fired into Israel's territory, and that then gives us the space to try to deal with these longstanding conflicts that exist.

In terms of the impact of the Arab Spring, let's just remember that the exact same situation arose just a couple of years ago, before the Arab Spring. So I don't think anybody would suggest somehow that it's unique to democratization in the region that there's a conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians. That's been going on for several decades now.

I do think that as Egyptians, Tunisians, others have more of a voice in their government, it becomes more important for all the players, including the United States, to speak directly to those populations and to deliver a message that peace is preferable to war; that this is an issue that can be resolved if the parties are willing to sit down and negotiate directly; that violence is

not an answer; and that there are no shortcuts to the hard work of trying to bring about what I think is the best option: two states living side by side in peace and security.

And that's a message that you can't just direct at a single figure in these Arab countries; now you've got to be able to deliver that message across the board. And that will probably be a little bit harder. But the truth is, is that for any peace that was going to last, that was going to be necessary anyway.

Last point: I know it wasn't directed at me, it was directed at the Prime Minister, but I'm just going to make this point. First of all, I always believe in prayer. I believe in prayer when I go to church back home, and if a Buddhist monk is wishing me well, I'm going to take whatever good vibes he can give me to try to deal with some challenges back home. I'm confident that we can get our fiscal situation dealt with. And I think it's important to recognize that, yes, democracy is a little messier than alternative systems of government, but that's because democracy allows everybody to have a voice. And that system of government lasts, and it's legitimate, and when agreements are finally struck, you know that nobody is being left out of the conversation. And that's the reason for our stability and our prosperity.

And the notion somehow that you can take shortcuts and avoid democracy and that that somehow is going to be the mechanism whereby you deliver economic growth, I think is absolutely false. I think over time, when you look at the most prosperous nations on this Earth, they are the ones in which every individual, every citizen, feels like if they put in the effort, if they're working hard, that those efforts bear fruit; that a government respects them and observes rule of law and doesn't take their property without due process; and they don't have to pay a bribe to start a business or get a telephone installed.

And it's worked for us for over 200 years now, and I think it's going to work for Thailand and it's going to work for this entire region. And the alternative, I think, is a false hope that, over time, I think, erodes and collapses under the weight of people whose aspirations are not being met.

I know you didn't direct that question to me, but I just wanted to make sure the Prime Minister didn't get put on the spot without me having something to say about that. All right?

Prime Minister Yinglak. For my answer, I think I'll talk about the basics of the economic growth. I think we still believe that, from my statements, that democracy will be the fundamental. I think this is still valid. But this is the one way of the basic—of the fundamental, because as long as you have the stability in the political, so it will be the stability of economic.

But anyway, in the economic, we'll be—have to understand the cause and the root cause of the problem in the right way to solve the problem. And also that, as far as you work with the—stick with the principle of the financial, but along the way, you need to balance the growth of the economy. Because I think still have any place on the blue ocean so we can—as long as you fight the right place and the right time. So the growth, it's still growing.

So I think that I believe like that. Thank you.

President Obama. Kob khun krab. Thank you.

Prime Minister Yinglak. Kob khun ka.

NOTE: The news conference began at 7:18 p.m. at the Government House. In his remarks, the President referred to King Phumiphon Adunyadet of Thailand; President Thein Sein and Member of Parliament and Leader of the National League for Democracy party of Burma;

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel; and Chaokun Suthee Thammanuwat, abbot, Wat Pho Royal Monastery in Bangkok, Thailand. Reporters referred to Joe Gordon, a U.S. citizen who was cleared of Thai antidefamation charges and released from prison on July 7; and Samantha Power, Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights, U.S. National Security Council.

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