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April 7, 2013

Ask most Americans which country is the oldest ally of the United States in Asia and many would probably answer Korea or Japan, where US troops are still stationed. In fact, America's first friend in Asia was and remains Thailand.

Our initial contact came in 1818, when Thailand was known as Siam, and there were just 21 United States. Our treaty alliance was signed in 1833, under President Andrew Jackson.

At the time, we were exotic and mysterious to one another. Our bonds of friendship, however, were strong. In the 1860s, our King Mongkut offered to send elephants as a sign of friendship. Although President Lincoln politely declined the offer, the gesture exemplified the goodwill that led to decades of growing interaction and cooperation.

Today, as America "pivots" towards Asia, it is turning once again to old allies. True friendship stands the test of time. This year, as the United States and Thailand mark 180 years of official relations, there can be little doubt that our friendship is genuine and holds great promise for the future. Going forward, the United States and Thailand can advance and expand our relationship in ways that can benefit both countries.

Trade and investment are pillars of our engagement. Thailand has long provided America with a bounty of rice, sugar, rubber, shrimp, tin and other commodities. Modern Thailand, with its manufacturing and higher-technology industries, is also

providing America with electronics, computers and parts, medical equipment and other higher-value goods. Some are made in joint ventures with American companies.

With shared interest in promoting innovation, our two countries also work on such forward-looking initiatives as the Thailand-US Creative Partnership, which connects our universities and businesses to expand new areas of cooperation. And Thailand, with its strategic location and infrastructure, is helping US firms penetrate markets across Asia, creating jobs in both of our countries.

Security is also a cornerstone of the US-Thai relationship. As President Barack Obama noted during his visit to Bangkok last November, our soldiers “have fought together and bled together.” We also train together in the Cobra Gold joint military exercises held each year in Thailand. And we have stood for peace together, with Thai peacekeepers joining operations in Darfur and in counter-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden.

Beyond military affairs, our two nations have worked together in addressing challenges and threats to peace and stability that can come through poverty, epidemics, natural disasters, discrimination, and transnational crime.

The United States and Thailand are moving ahead with new partnerships to promote development and human dignity. We recently signed an agreement to support human resources development in Southeast Asia.

Thailand’s public health system has been praised as a model for developing countries. Our doctors and scientists are working with their American counterparts to

conduct large-scale research and trials to help find vaccines, treatments and cures for diseases such as HIV and AIDS, malaria and dengue fever. We are also cooperating on projects, including fighting malaria along the Thai-Myanmar border.

Many challenges center on transnational crimes such as human and wildlife trafficking, money laundering and intellectual property theft. Thailand, with its porous borders, freedom of movement and extensive transportation links, is vulnerable to criminal syndicates engaged in these activities. But with firm commitment, we are making significant progress against them. The United States has been and will continue to be among Thailand's important partners in all these efforts, and vice-versa.

From food to technology, political turmoil to democracy, the US-Thailand relationship has flourished and grown based on our shared values of representative government, universal human rights and free markets. Through bilateral collaboration and other regional and international frameworks, including those in which the United States and members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) participate, the groundwork has been laid for even greater cooperation.

Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wrote that this is America's Asian Century — and Thailand will clearly play a central part in that outreach. Our shared priorities of peace, prosperity and rights for all define us as allies for a better future.

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