

**“Ask the Ambassador”
Web Dialogue with Ambassador Eric G. John**

Thank you all for your interest in this, my first web dialogue with the public as the U.S. Ambassador to Thailand. I welcome this opportunity to share my thoughts and experiences with all of you. I received so many thoughtful and interesting questions that sadly I will not be able to get to all of them. I hope you find my responses both interesting and informative. Until the next time. Enjoy!

I am wondering how your career path as an ambassador began, e.g. how did you know you wanted to be a diplomat and what inspired you to become one. *Suwimon Wongsawasdi, Vancouver, Canada*

I was very interested in politics and foreign affairs in high school, and I attended Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service for that reason. While at Georgetown, I worked part-time at the State Department, and realized that I would like to make diplomacy my career. I am very proud to be an American and have always wanted to help improve my country’s relationships with other nations.

How does it feel to be the Ambassador to Thailand during 175th of anniversary of U.S.-Thai relations? Will there be any commemorative celebrations/events for the public to attend? Thank you. *Ampol, Bangkok*

I feel particularly honored to assume the position of U.S. Ambassador to Thailand during this extraordinary point in the history of our two countries. This year is a very special one because it marks the 175th anniversary of U.S.-Thai friendship. On March 20, 1833, the United States and Thailand, then Siam, signed the Treaty of Amity and Commerce. Thailand was our first treaty partner in Asia and remains one of our closest allies and friends in the region.

To commemorate this anniversary we have a series of events planned, many of which we welcome the public to attend. You can visit the [U.S. Embassy website](#) in early March for specific news and updates on upcoming events commemorating 175 years of U.S.-Thai friendship. We look forward to seeing you!

Congratulations on your new posting and best wishes to you and your family. My question, Mr. Ambassador, is has your golf swing improved since your days at Yongsan? *Raymond-Albert Caron, Bang-saen, chonburi*

I firmly believe that my golf swing is better. Unfortunately, my golf scores don’t seem to reflect that.

I read that you served previously at the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok. What is your favorite part about being back in Thailand? *Cheri, Maryland USA*

Everything! We especially love the people and the food, though. Thais are gracious, kind, practical, patient and very wise. I look at every overseas posting as an opportunity to learn, and I have an incredible amount to learn from this country. My family and I also love Thai food – the spicier, the better!

You have a lovely family. Could you tell us more about your family and the secret of your successful marriage? *Rin, Nonthaburi*

Everyone in my family communicates well with each other. Love is the foundation, of course, but you have to be able to communicate in order to develop even greater love and respect. The main secret of my marriage, though, is that I married a wonderful woman!

Your biography states that you served in Bangkok from 1989 to 1992. What were your responsibilities back then? How have you found Thailand has changed since your last tour of duty? *Metta S., Chiang Mai*

I worked in the Embassy's Orderly Departure Program, which helped Vietnamese refugees and migrants move from Vietnam to the United States. I spent about a third of my time in Vietnam, and learned Vietnamese for the job. That, unfortunately, is why I didn't learn Thai at the time.

I believe that Thailand is a better place to live now in many ways. The Skytrain and subway have eased traffic a bit, the air is better in Bangkok, and the incomes of Thais have increased.

What is your approach [as U.S. Ambassador] for fostering good relations between Thailand and the United States, particularly in politics, government, society, culture, and education? *Pranee Lertheerasupakul, Klong San, Bangkok*

Before arriving in Bangkok at the end of last year, I spent several months speaking to congressmen and business groups about Thailand, considering our national interests, and thinking about how we might further strengthen our already strong partnership. From those meetings and the valuable input of my colleagues and counterparts in the Thai government, I have set strategic priorities that will guide our cooperation. Let me touch on a few.

Our bilateral trade with Thailand is over \$30 billion annually and U.S. investment in Thailand has surpassed US \$23 billion. We will remain close partners in the fields of business and trade and will continue working to expand this strong relationship.

In addition, we will continue to cooperate in such important areas as public health and education. This year, the United States will partner with our Thai colleagues on a vast range of public health issue, including HIV/AIDS and avian influenza.

I am particularly interested in getting to know the young people of Thailand and helping them to get a better understanding of the many things that we – Americans and Thais – share, including our strong historical, political, educational, and cultural ties. To further advance mutual understanding, we will continue to promote educational exchange by providing scholarships for Thai high school and university students to study in the United States. I would especially like to call attention to our Fulbright program, which is our flagship scholarship program, jointly administered and supported by the U.S. and Thai governments. The Thailand-United States Educational Foundation [website](#) has more information on these programs.

We will also continue to share American culture with Thai audiences. In January 2008, the Embassy brought to Thailand the Livingston Duo, a Texas country music band, to share this quintessential example of American culture with students, musicians, and other members of the Thai community. These are just a few of the many projects and programs we will undertake in the coming year to help build upon our U.S.-Thai partnership.

What is Thailand's view on the United States? Are they hostile towards our nation or are they friendly? *Liz, USA*

I have found Thais to be remarkably friendly toward the United States. Though many years have passed and much has occurred since we signed the Treaty of Amity and Commerce in 1833, relations between our two countries remain strong and friendly today. This is true on the personal level, as well as the diplomatic one. Tens of thousands of Thais visit the United States each year as tourists and many, many Thais have studied in the United States over the decades. In 2007 alone, almost 9,000 Thais went to study at colleges and universities in the United States. That makes Thailand the ninth leading country of origin for international students studying the United States, which is an impressive reflection of our strong relations.

Just last month, we held a special event with six local schools in which students painted murals capturing visions of 175 years of friendship between our two countries. These images speak volumes about what our two countries and our people mean to each other. I invite you to visit our online [photo gallery](#) to see for yourself the wonderful artwork that was created in honor the special friendship we share.

Do you think Thai-US relations need to be improved, especially after the 2006 coup? *Soraya, Patumthani, Thailand*

We made our opposition to the 2006 coup clear and Congress required us to limit some of our military cooperation until an elected government was restored. But we had no quarrel with the Thai people, and we were able to maintain our official cooperation in many areas. The United States continued to provide millions of dollars in assistance to the Thai government in order to fund development in various areas,

including democracy promotion, disaster assistance, trafficking in persons, and refugee assistance programs. Just one example of this partnership, at the end of January, I attended the inauguration of a new Pier and Longtail Fishing Boat Repair Center in Taplamu Village, Phang-nga Province, an area that was devastated by the 2004 tsunami, and one that the United States and its people have worked together with Thailand to help rebuild over the last year.

Will your expertise in Korean relations aligned with the geographical location of Thailand to Burma and Cambodia allow you to assist [with addressing] the human trafficking abuses/state-sanctioned use of forced labor [in the region]? Is there anti-prostitution and anti-trafficking laws in place for Thailand? *Jason Rhodes IN Green Bay, WI*

Combating human trafficking is a key priority for the United States and, by extension, the U.S. Embassy in Thailand. As you point out, Thailand's trafficking problem arises in part from its geographic location, which makes it a natural migration hub for the region. The fact that Thailand is more prosperous than its neighbors to the North, East, and West, makes it a tempting destination for traffickers engaged in both labor and sexual exploitation. Korea also had a significant trafficking problem and has made great strides in recent years to upgrade its laws and increase prosecutions. Thailand, in my opinion, is following the same path. The Thai Parliament passed a comprehensive anti-trafficking law in December that will substantially increase penalties for traffickers and lay the groundwork for more prosecutions. Prostitution, by the way, is indeed illegal in Thailand, although in practice the law is not strictly enforced for acts committed in ostensibly legal commercial establishments. We are working with the Thai government to help ensure that trafficking victims, especially children, are rescued from this exploitative practice.

The U.S. government has granted over US \$5.0 million since 2002 to Thai organizations, governmental and non-governmental, to raise awareness of trafficking, provide shelter and social services to victims, and train law enforcement officers in handling trafficking cases. Our Department of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) office investigates American citizens engaged in child sexual exploitation in Thailand, and has secured numerous high-profile convictions of these transgressors in U.S. courts. The government of Thailand has made significant progress over the last several years, but there is still much to be done. We look forward to partnering with the Thai government as it implements its new law to provide protection for trafficking victims and rigorous prosecution of the perpetrators of this evil trade in human lives.

Do you have any long term plans to become a U.S. Presidential candidate? *Turakit, Prachaubkirikan, Thailand*

Since I just assumed responsibilities as U.S. Ambassador to Thailand in January 2008, my thoughts are focused on what I am doing here today and what I hope to do in the years ahead. In addition to overseeing our bilateral relations, I will take this opportunity to get to know Thailand better, enhance my understanding of Thai culture and customs and, of course, I look forward to getting to know Thais professionally and personally. I am following the U.S. presidential elections closely – and while it is a very exciting race – I can assure you that I am very happy to be watching it today from the vantage point of Bangkok.

Note: Some questions have been edited for conciseness and clarity.