

Thailand's Maritime Strategy

National Resilience and Regional Cooperation

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By most measures, Thailand is an important maritime nation. Its long coastlines look out toward both the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Coastal tourism, fisheries, aquaculture, offshore oil and gas production, and commercial marine trading are essential drivers of its rapidly developing economy.¹ Furthermore, the Kingdom of Thailand maintains a naval force that is among the most powerful in Southeast Asia. This fleet includes seven frigates, 90 patrol and coastal combatants including seven corvettes, 17 mine warfare and mine countermeasure vessels, three large amphibious ships, a naval aviation section, and about 23,000 marines.² It has also ordered submarines from China. If counting hulls, this order of battle fleet includes a number of principal surface warships similar to that of Singapore and Indonesia. It also includes Southeast Asia's only aircraft carrier, though this ship has operated without fixed-wing aircraft for more than a decade.³ Yet, Thailand retains the strategic mindset of a predominantly continental state. The Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTARF) and its three services, the Royal Thai Army (RTA), Royal Thai Navy (RTN), and Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF), are responsible for external security while also fulfilling a broad set of domestic tasks, including international security, providing support for development, and the completion of projects assigned by the king. Of these, the RTA receives the bulk of the funding and is the politically dominant force. The RTA has also been the service most directly related to Thailand's frequent coups.⁴

From an external security standpoint, Thailand has few state threats.⁵ Since the Cold War, Thailand was able to reach accommodation with its neighbors, and with exception of the 1987 and 2011 landside border clashes with Laos and Cambodia respectively, recent history has been free of interstate conflict. Lacking territorial and jurisdictional claims in the South China Sea, Thailand has also avoided direct confrontations with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Therefore, the RTN's procurement decisions that include naval equipment best suited for blue-water operations and naval combat have drawn analytical attention. Many of these discussions see a navy either developing at the whim of parochial interests or vacillating ambition. This article contends that Thailand's maritime strategy is better understood by reviewing its consistent focus on supporting Thailand's national resilience and following ASEAN-oriented security approaches.

In this context, national resilience is a concept that originated in Indonesia. It connects economic and social development goals with internal and external security activity to create a condition where national power addresses all threats to the integrity of the nation-state.⁶ Within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) context, the national resilience concept means that the member states' national governments are expected to "promote domestic stability on a comprehensive basis so that the resultant secure states can withstand internal and external stresses and thus contribute to the attainment of regional resilience in Southeast Asia."⁷ Thailand's maritime strategy has consistently supported both national and regional resilience. When it has developed higher-end naval warfare and blue-water capabilities, these have not been in response to a particular threat but were the result of opportunities to take advantage of economic conditions to play a leading role in addressing shared regional maritime priorities.

International analysts seeking to explain Thai maritime strategy have generally underplayed its consistent focus on national resilience and the importance it places on supporting regional cooperative norms. These studies often examine Thai strategic decisions through overly Western analytical points of view. More specifically, they seek to adapt terms and concepts that emerged in strategic cultures very different from Thailand's. By relying on overly Western strategic paradigms, these analyses inadequately reflect the uniquely Thai perspective on the role of its navy or the influence of ASEAN-oriented approaches to Thailand's strategic decision-making.⁸ Bearing this in mind, this article approaches the material by drawing on the thinking of Alles Delphine, who critiques the misapplication of Western concepts to the analysis of Southeast Asian strategic behavior.⁹

Although both the authors of this article served long careers in Western militaries and thereby carry some of these same biases, their experiences as students in regional universities and staff colleges, as well as their decades of regular contact with officers of the RTN and other regional militaries, place them at a better vantage point to understand Thai strategic thinking than some outside observers. This article harnesses those perspectives and seeks to reexamine Thailand's maritime security thinking with greater credence given to the perspectives of the RTN leadership. It does not seek to contradict these previous studies but to add an additional layer of analysis.

Some regional analyses have also fallen short when contextualizing individual Thai maritime security decisions in the broader scope of Thai history and strategic culture. For example, Mak and Hamzah saw Thailand's early 1990s naval modernization as a sign of possible intent to dominate its neighbors, but no other actions correlated to the aggression they suspected. Saperstein tells readers that "[t]he trauma of losing large naval procurements shifted blue-water navy

ambitions towards something much more comprehensive: maritime security cooperation, collective defense, and nontraditional security threat management.” However, Saperstein fails to note that the comprehensive approach he describes also predates the purchase of high-end hardware in the 1990s.¹⁰ Chong and Maisrikrod contend that Thai maritime strategy has evolved as a result of inter-cine competition rather than in response to threats, but their analysis measures strategy by the funding received vice the security end states desired. They do acknowledge that RTN operational intentions have remained relatively static.¹¹ In fact, while capability investments are important milestones to consider, these tend to correlate better with Thailand’s economic performance, budget availability, and the relative costs of modernization rather than fundamental shifts in Thailand’s maritime strategy.

Much of the existing literature also relies heavily on secondary sources or the small number of publicly available Thai strategic documents. In the absence of longitudinal exposure to Thai strategic thinkers and maritime security implementers, such analysis can suffer from important contextual gaps.¹² This article seeks to reduce this confusion by providing an overview of modern Thai maritime strategy. It emphasizes that developments must be understood in the context of Thailand’s unique history and strategic culture and shows that national resilience and regionally based cooperative norms are at the heart of its strategy.

Geographic Background

The Kingdom of Thailand occupies a central position in the Southeast Asian landmass. Its east and west coasts total 3,219 km. Its sea area is about 2,230 sq km (approximately 5 percent of the landmass) with an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of 324,812 sq km. Thailand’s western coast faces the Andaman Sea, where Thailand shares agreed-upon maritime borders with Myanmar, India, Indonesia, and Malaysia. This body of water is strategically located at the northern mouth of the Strait of Malacca. Asia’s essential maritime chokepoint, the Strait of Malacca carries about one-quarter of the world’s international cargo trade and one-third of all seaborne oil.

Thailand’s eastern coast rings around the western and northern limits of the Gulf of Thailand, a semi-enclosed attachment to the South China Sea also bounded by Cambodia, Malaysia, and Vietnam. Here Thailand’s 12 nm territorial seas meet those of Cambodia and Malaysia, and its claimed EEZ also reaches that of Vietnam. Competing claims to continental shelf rights and sovereignty disputes regarding islands, rocks, and other features have created a confusing situation where claimed EEZs overlap.¹³ Continental shelf provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) arguably enriched Thai-

land while also creating new headaches for Thai strategic planners as they correlate to the bulk of Thailand's eastern EEZ.¹⁴ Only the boundaries with Malaysia and Vietnam are fully settled.¹⁵

The RTN is responsible for maritime constabulary duties in this vast and complex space. Some of the largest challenges in this domain include illegal, unregulated, and unreported (IUU) fishing, illegal immigration, human trafficking, sea robbery, and drug smuggling. To efficiently organize against these threats, the RTN maintains three geographically oriented Naval Area Commands. Responding to national security threats on the nation's two main rivers, the Chao Phraya and the Mekong, is the task of the RTN's Riverine Patrol Regiment headquartered in Bangkok with operational units posted in provinces bordering Myanmar and the Lao People's Democratic Republic. According to discussions with RTN officers, since the 2021 coup in Myanmar, the riverine units patrolling the Mekong have maintained a higher alert status ready to quickly react to potential border crossings by possible refugees.

This geographical environment is further complicated by the fact that maritime passage between Thailand's eastern and western coasts requires transit around the Malay Peninsula. As a result, Thai maritime strategy recognizes the reality that maintaining the operational flexibility need to sustain peak readiness requires the RTN to maintain an order of battle suitable to address the challenges associated with this geographic feature.

Historical Background

The RTN traces its history back to the Sukhothai period of the thirteenth century. Before the twentieth century, the Royal Forces were divided into land forces and naval forces, but there was only one commander, always drawn from the land component. Some officers from the naval forces took part in the uprising that led to constitutional changes in 1932. The RTN was created by the 30 November 1939 Royal Decree.¹⁶ Since its inception, the RTN has consistently been rated by international experts as the most professional and least political of Thailand's armed services. Its last battle against a regular navy took place during the 1941 Franco-Thai War, when Thailand sought to take advantage of the German occupation of Paris to regain vassal territories that had been ceded to France after the defeat in the Franco-Siamese War 1893. The 17 January 1941 Battle of Ko Chang was one of the final events of this conflict before Japanese conciliation brought about its conclusion.¹⁷ Shortly thereafter, Japan attacked Thailand. The RTN's resistance included the employment of four Japanese-built Thai *Matchanu*-class submarines, but Japan quickly prevailed. Shortly thereafter, Thailand formally aligned itself with the Axis powers.

After World War II, the United States provided Thailand with loans to support the transfer of surplus American war material. Under this arrangement, the RTN gained two corvettes, two antisubmarine ships, some coastal minesweepers, and other equipment. A much greater degree of modernization and capability enhancement was delivered via Cold War military assistance programs administered by the United States beginning in 1951. During the Cold War, the RTN maintained a close alliance with the United States and played a role as a firebreak blocking the spread of communism. In the 1970s, as the United States disengaged from Southeast Asia it reduced the scope of military assistance, prompting the RTN to purchase ships from the United Kingdom, Singapore, and Italy. From the late 1970s, Thailand also began constructing vessels domestically.¹⁸ As the Cold War progressed, the RTN kept a watchful eye on the expanding communist Vietnamese naval power, supported the fight against PRC-backed communist insurgents, kept a wary eye on the Russian Navy stationed in Vietnam, and responded to Russian demonstrations of force in the Gulf of Thailand.¹⁹ In the late 1970s and early 1980s, it also played a major role in the United Nations–endorsed efforts to render aid to refugees fleeing Indochina by sea and actively addressed the horrifying progression of pirate attacks targeting those peoples.²⁰

These Cold War experiences reinforced the value placed on mixing military capabilities to defend the nation against the forces of rival states, with the capacity to support economic development and provide security against nonstate threats. The resultant strategic culture is better understood through a regional lens rather than classic European–style thinking. Thailand’s strategic approach embraced “National Resilience,” a concept related to the Indonesian concept of *Ketahanan Nasional*, a doctrine refined in the late 1960s, referring to the nation’s “tenacity and endurance in the face of all threats, be they domestic or external, that directly or indirectly endanger the survival of the state and the Indonesian nation.”²¹ In Indonesia, the National Resilience doctrine views security as encompassing a wide spectrum of aspects to include economic, political, and social aspects. Building on Indonesian thinking, both national and regional resilience became central objectives of regional cooperation at the first ASEAN summit held in Bali in 1976. Regional leaders, facing internal security challenges, shared an understanding that regional resilience and national resilience were mutually reinforcing projects to be placed under the ASEAN umbrella.²² The Declaration of ASEAN Concord finalized at the 1976 Bali Summit formally enshrined the principle of resilience as a shared approach to domestic and regional security.²³

The National Resilience concept was formally adopted, adapted, and integrated into Thailand’s Fifth National Economic and Social Development Plan (1983–1986).²⁴ Thus, by the late 1980s, the RTN had incorporated decades of postcolonial

operations in the internalization of a strategic culture fully embedded within the national development model. When the notion of “nontraditional security” was formulated, primarily by Western thinkers, in the 1990s, this English-language label was adopted by Southeast Asian states, including Thailand, as an internationally understandable term that, in contrast to previous terminology, better described their already long-standing strategic doctrines.²⁵ Working in the maritime space, Geoffrey Till would associate this sort of strategy with a postmodern navy.²⁶ This, too, is an overtly Western conceptualization that as a label belies the prevalence of this approach in Cold War Southeast Asia.

In 1989, the RTN set up a trial force of one frigate, eight patrol craft, and four aircraft with coast guard–like duties. This reflected a recognition that divergent roles needed within its national resilience mission merited greater specialization. After the trial period, the Coast Guard Squadron was officially introduced on 29 September 1992. The Coast Guard Squadron operates directly under the RTN and its Naval Command Center.²⁷

As the Cold War came to an end, Europe was busy reducing its military stockpiles as the Warsaw Pact broke up and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe negotiations reduced the continent’s internal military threat. However, East and Southeast Asia moved in the opposite direction. Data from international institutes such as the International Institute for Strategic Studies and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute show that those regions’ weapons acquisitions had grown to be, by 1994, over 25 percent of the market. Japan, the People’s Republic of China, and South Korea were leading with an average of 9 percent annual growth in their defense budgets. ASEAN member states followed with growth rates of 6–7 percent from 1992–94.²⁸

Asia’s economic boom provided international weapons dealers with the new markets they were seeking to maintain profits as European buyers showed less demand. Thus, modern weapon systems became more available and more affordable for increasingly wealthy Asian countries seeking to replace their old inventories, some of which had been produced in the World War II era. This was especially valid for Southeast Asia’s air force and naval systems. In 1994, regional acquisition of submarines, frigates, offshore patrol vessels (OPVs), and aircraft had increased up to 20 percent.²⁹ While domestic political factors should not be overlooked, the economic situation was central to this growth.

In 1996, the Thai government announced that the RTN would be expanded to become “capable of playing a significant regional role” with a two-ocean offshore capability.³⁰ In this context, Thailand expanded investment in blue-water naval capabilities, centering its fleet renewal around a new flagship, the Spanish-built aircraft carrier *Chakri Narubet*.³¹ Harrier jump-jet fighters to operate from the carrier, Amer-

ican *Knox*-class frigates, Sikorski SH60 Seahawk helicopters, Italian mine warfare vessels, and Harpoon surface-to-surface missiles were among the follow-on purchases.³² The RTN also procured six frigates constructed in China and fitted with European engines and electric generators between 1991 and 1995.³³ Contrary to some analysis, this did not reflect a national decision to prioritize the RTN over the other branches, but an across-the-board military expansion enabled by good economic conditions. In parallel to the RTN's hardware investments, the RTA grew its personnel strength from 166,000 to 190,000 between 1989 and 1999.³⁴

For some international analysts, the strategic rationale of the RTN's expanded capabilities seemed unclear. In 1994, Malaysian maritime specialists J. N. Mak and B. A. Hamzah questioned why Thailand's military, given the lack of an external national threat, was expanding with a "heavy maritime bias."³⁵ Although Vietnamese and Thai patrol boats exchanged fire in 1995, the relatively small and isolated incident would not seem to warrant such a buildup.³⁶ Indeed, Thailand was already well along the road to resolving maritime sovereignty disputes with Malaysia, Myanmar, and Vietnam.³⁷ Some pundits contended that the primary motivation of the funding was to establish the RTN as a domestic political counterbalance to the RTA.³⁸ Other experts even suggested that this effort, especially the RTN's stated desire to develop a submarine force, was more tied to desires to strengthen their international standing and prestige.³⁹ While all these viewpoints have some validity, it is inappropriate to understand the procurements as a step toward competing with the RTA for domestic leadership. Neither were the procurements simple vanity. Instead, the economic situation enabled a maritime modernization that was a necessary step for the RTN given the quality and age of its operational assets.

Thailand also desired to maintain a leadership position among the ASEAN states and recognized that many of the region's upcoming security challenges would be maritime in nature. While the carrier and submarines may not have been optimal purchases to counter these specific threats, they were important symbols of Thai leadership in a quickly developing region with a great stake in international maritime affairs. Indeed, this was a period when maritime cooperation was rapidly growing in Southeast Asia. Interstate competition was less of a concern than establishing cooperative maritime security capacities to roll back growing transnational threats.⁴⁰

The Twenty-First Century

The ASEAN member states transitioned into the twenty-first century via a series of colossal events. In 1997, currency devaluations and massive flights of capital from Thailand sparked the Asian financial crisis. This put immediate constraints on the RTN's options for procuring, maintaining, and operating the envisaged force structures. Expensive programs were paused or reoriented.⁴¹ Exemplifying this realign-

ment was the transition of *Chakri Narubet* to be solely a disaster relief vessel. Its Harrier jump-jets were eased out of action in 1999 and formally decommissioned in 2006.⁴² The financial crisis also set the stage for transformative events on the regional security scene to include the 1998 end of Suharto's military-centered regime in Indonesia, the 1999 independence of Timor-Leste, and a series of jihadist terror attacks that placed the region at the forefront of the "Global War on Terror" launched by the United States following the 11 September 2001 attacks.

After a short period of dithering, Thailand joined the US-led counterterrorism efforts and pitched in on a variety of other American projects to address the maritime security threats posed by terrorists and criminals. In 2003, Thailand joined the US-organized Container Security Initiative and was awarded designation as a US "Major Non-NATO Ally."⁴³ These decisions both shored up a security relationship with the United States and enabled intelligence sharing and other assistance that could be useful in response to the flaring separatist violence in Thailand's predominantly Muslim southern provinces. Thailand's economy also rebounded with strength. On 31 July 2003, one year earlier than agreed, Thailand completed repayment of the International Monetary Fund loans received in the wake of the 1997 financial crisis.⁴⁴

Evolution within ASEAN's approach to security would also have a major impact on Thailand's maritime security and nudge it into a deeper embrace of regional cooperation. On 7 October 2003, ASEAN's Bali Concord I established the ASEAN Community with the motto "One Vision. One Identity. One Community."⁴⁵ This was a leap forward from the 1976 Bali Concord and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), which were the first steps toward a regional security community yet preconditioned only marginal elements of security cooperation. The establishment of the ASEAN Community also united under one roof all treaties, agreements, and regularized meetings such as the TAC, the 1994 launch of the ASEAN Regional Forum, the 1997 Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (also known as the Bangkok Treaty), the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, and the 2007 ASEAN Convention on Counter-Terrorism.⁴⁶

The Bali Concord II encouraged further cooperation and requested stronger commitments from the member states by creating three pillars that the members must fill with cooperative content: the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community, and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. The ASEAN Political-Security Blueprint (2009–2015) reinforced commitment to national and regional resilience: "ASEAN subscribes to the principle of comprehensive security, which goes beyond the requirements of traditional security but also takes into account nontraditional aspects vital to regional and national resilience, such as the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions of development."⁴⁷

With these agreements, national resilience and regional resilience bonded as the normative approaches dominant in regional security thinking.⁴⁸ Thai thinking was no exception.

With maritime security embraced within the APSC pillar, Thailand's maritime strategy became increasingly supportive of regional maritime security cooperation. In 2004, Thailand was a founding member of the Japanese-initiated Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP)⁴⁹ and in 2008 the kingdom became the fourth partner in the counterpiracy Malacca Strait Patrols (MSP). The RTAF joined the MSP-associated 'Eyes in the Sky' patrols the following year.⁵⁰ One Thai analyst explained: "Thailand has now embarked on a whole new security scheme—maritime security cooperation—that would allow the country to provide full surveillance and protection of its territorial waters as well as ensuring the safety of nearby international sea lanes for communications."⁵¹

The push toward regional security cooperation was also propelled by the 2004 tsunami. The international military force that assembled in the tsunami's wake delivered important relief operations on the western coast of Indonesia and Thailand. Significantly, the operation in Indonesia was delivered from a sea base, whereas those in Thailand primarily flowed through mainland air bases. In 2005, the annual US-Thai alliance exercise Cobra Gold reoriented away from conventional defense training "focused on countering regional aggression" to solidify lessons learned from the large-scale disaster response effort, placing greater emphasis on peacetime military operations and the incorporation of international coalition forces, international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations.⁵² While the decision to transform Cobra Gold was bilateral, it very much suited the RTARF's standing desire to move away from exercising the kingdom's defense against a notional nation-state invader when Thai strategic leaders perceived no such threat. The value of this training was put on show during the relief operations associated with Cyclone Nargis in 2008. Since US forces were not welcomed into Myanmar, American supplies were delivered by Thai vehicles.

In the post-tsunami period, the RTARF led a leading role in the push for regional cooperation to concentrate on disaster relief as an activity that could be easily adapted, adopted, and improved within the ASEAN context. This approach also provided new opportunities for confidence-building measures (CBM) among the ASEAN member states. Thai Supreme Commander General Boonsrang Niumpradit specifically decided to push for disaster relief through ASEAN mechanisms because "Asia is the most disaster-prone region in the world and no country can face the impacts and consequences of a major disaster alone, The US does not provide direct military support to every country in the region—even in disaster relief."

During disaster response planning some ASEAN member states consider their force contributions to be sensitive data. However, the 2005 ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Response and follow-on Standard Operating Procedures for Regional Standby Arrangements and Coordination of Joint Disaster Relief and Emergency Response Operations implementation required reporting of earmarked assets, and all member states reported their respective disaster relief assets (including helicopters).⁵³

A pair of 2008 policy documents, the *Defense of Thailand* white paper and *Total Defense Strategy*, both included a new emphasis on cooperation between the civil and military sectors and cooperative security.⁵⁴ *Defense of Thailand* outlined the policy priorities for strategic, budgetary, and operational decisions for all three RTARF services and noted two main roles for the RTARF:

Military Operations: including protecting the country from both internal and external threats and maintaining the internal security and order Military Operations Other Than War: including developing the country, safeguarding the Monarch, protecting and maintaining national interests, and other security-related operations.⁵⁵

For the RTN, the focus was clearly on nonstate threats and building international cooperation. In 2008, Rear Admiral Suriya Pornsuriya highlighted the threat of maritime terrorism to Thailand's port, fisheries, and offshore petroleum facilities. Among the vulnerabilities, he seemed most concerned with the potential harm to Thailand's frozen seafood exports.⁵⁶ While these concerns may seem misplaced to outsiders benefiting from the hindsight, this assessment came in the wake of renewed violence in southern Thailand and when the insurgents were already exploiting maritime routes for logistics purposes having been found with sophisticated maritime equipment such as submarines.⁵⁷ The interconnected nature of the violent organizations and a recent rash of maritime terror attacks in the Gulf of Aden, around Sri Lanka, and in the Sulu Sea had raised serious concerns about tactical proliferation.⁵⁸ In March 2009, Admiral Khamthorn Pumhiran, then-RTN commander-in-chief, explained:

These threats—maritime terrorism, transnational crimes, piracy, drug-trafficking, illegal immigration, human trafficking, illegal labor, and national and environmental disasters—adversely affect national security. . . . Thailand cannot deal with these issues alone, nor can any one country. The crucial factor in solving these problems lies in cooperation among every country in the region.⁵⁹

Thailand's push to strengthen international maritime cooperation also extended beyond Southeast Asia. In 2009, Thailand became a member state of the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia, and in 2010 it began supplying ships

to the antipiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden.⁶⁰ In 2011, it ratified and entered into UNCLOS.⁶¹ In 2012, an RTN command element embarked on the Royal Navy supply ship *Fort Victoria* and led the multinational Combined Task Force 151 providing maritime security around the Gulf of Aden. Given Thailand's relatively limited stake in the Gulf of Aden shipping routes, the standing contributions of more powerful navies, and Thailand's slow (in comparison to neighbors Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore) response to the developing threat near Somalia, an assessment shared by an RTN officer that Thailand's mission was primarily to gain diplomatic returns and strengthen norms of cooperation against nonstate threats seems entirely reasonable.⁶²

The diagram created by the RTN shown in figure 1 depicts the growth of this diplomatic role in relation to its constabulary and military roles. This depiction draws directly on Kenneth Booth's classic depiction of the functions of navies as visualizing three sides of a triangle representing diplomatic, policing, and military roles.⁶³ Like other navies (e.g., the Royal Australian Navy), the RTN replaced Booth's "policing" with "constabulary" to reflect their national division of responsibility. More significantly, by replacing the three sides of the triangle with a Venn diagram and placing those circles inside another circle, the Thai diagram emphasizes the holistic nature of the RTN national resilience mission. This contrasts with Booth's model that emphasizes the distinction between military, policing, and diplomatic roles even as it seeks to show their interconnections.

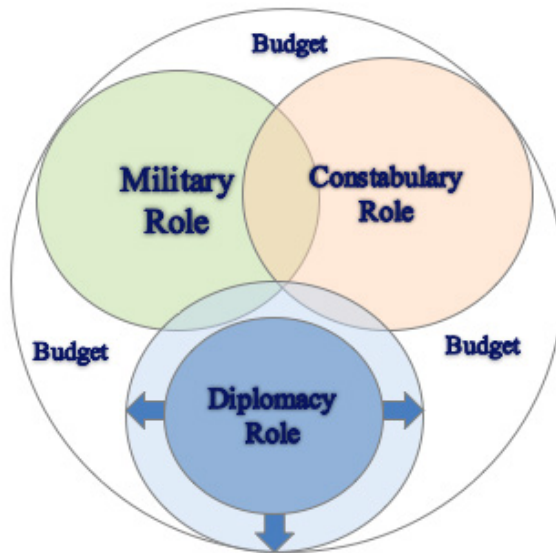


Figure 1: The RTN's Model for the Trinity of Naval Roles. (Source: Saperstein, "The Royal Thai Navy's" (2020), 37.)

In 2015, the Royal Thai Government published the *National Maritime Security Plan of 2015–2021*.⁶⁴ This document squarely nests under Thailand's National Security Strategy and National Development Plan. It focuses on the government's plans to enhance maritime governance over waters for which Thailand has responsibility and authority. In this context, it became clear that closer interagency cooperation was needed at home to increase operational efficiency. This had consequences for other maritime agencies such as the Ministry of Transport's Marine Department, the Royal Thai Police's Marine Division, the Fisheries Department, the Maritime and Coastal Environment Department, and the Customs Department, as they were put together with the RTN under one coordination umbrella.

This drive for efficiency was hastened by a 2015 European Union threat to ban Thai seafood by issuing a "yellow card" for Thailand's lack of progress in combating IUU fishing and human trafficking.⁶⁵ Data from 2017 shows that, at that time, Thailand was exporting around 1.5 million tons of seafood worth nearly \$7 billion and the overall fisheries sector equated to nearly 1 percent of the national GDP and over 9 percent of its agricultural GDP.⁶⁶ Due to the scope of the economic threat of sanctions, this became a top priority for the national government. New networks to monitor fishing activities were established, sea patrols were enlarged, an e-licensing system was introduced, and all fishing vessels were mandated to carry functional radios and GPS transmitters. Between 2016 and 2018, over 4,000 convictions were laid down for fisheries' management-related legal infractions.⁶⁷ The RTN assumed a central role in implementing and managing this activity.

In 2018 and 2019, the command-and-control structure of some of Thailand's maritime agencies was also restructured specifically to focus capacity on countering IUU fishing, illegal migration, and slavery at sea. The Thai Maritime Enforcement Coordination Center (Thai-MECC) had been established in 1997 to help with coordination activities between the RTN and other maritime agencies but held very limited power.⁶⁸ In 2019, Thai-MECC was transformed from a coordination center into a command center and put directly under the prime minister's office.⁶⁹ The strengthened Thai-MECC was tasked to enhance closer and efficient maritime security management, given tactical control of maritime assets, and Thai-MECC officers were empowered to search, arrest, investigate, and make a case for indictment.⁷⁰ The prime minister became the Thai-MECC chairperson and the RTN commander-in-chief became the deputy chairperson.⁷¹

Since the restructuring, there is a clear structural hierarchy that places Thai-MECC above all other agencies including the RTN. Subsequently, the new Thai-MECC became the key arbitrator of authority and jurisdiction.⁷² The Thai-MECC is mentioned alongside the Internal Security Operations Command as one of the "Regulatory Agencies under the Office of the Prime Minister." According to dis-

cussions with serving officers, the old interagency problems have been gradually disappearing, but the RTN remains the dominant maritime force providing the bulk of the operational forces. As shown in figure 2, the Thai-MECC's areas share the same geographic limits as the RTN Naval Area Commands.



Figure 2. THAI-MECC Areas and Naval Area Commands. (Source: Saperstein, “The Royal Thai Navy’s” (2020), 32.)

Since 2018, about \$700 million has been budgeted to support the manning and infrastructure to expand the Thai-MECC’s functionality. Included in these capabilities is the Maritime Information Sharing Center to integrate and fuse maritime domain awareness data and operational direction.⁷³ Subsequently, in 2019 the systems and human-to-human connections have been further developed in order to increasingly connect the Thai-MECC with international information hubs such as the ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre, Singapore’s Informational Fusion Centre, and the US Office of Naval Intelligence as well as domestic private sector information. When conducting outreach with Track II discussions, participating in diplomatic functions, and engaging in capacity-building projects, RTN officers made it

clear that successfully strengthening the Thai-MECC capability to address IUU fishing and maritime slavery was at the very top of its institutional priorities.

In January 2019, the Thai-MECC/s efforts had successfully convinced the EU to retract its yellow card warning.⁷⁴ However, the large-scale effort did not come without costs. Fishing operators have expressed displeasure at marked losses in revenue, the bankruptcy of many fishing businesses, and severe labor shortages.⁷⁵ In December 2019, several thousand fishermen gathered in protest outside the agricultural ministry.⁷⁶ Such market disruptions in maritime industries regularly spill over into emerging criminal threats. At the same time, the RTN's solid focus on the IUU fishing problem has distracted its attention away from threats. As such, the RTN can be expected to move ahead and rebalance priorities within its national resilience mission while supporting the regional ASEAN Community aims regarding "Promoting ASEAN Maritime Cooperation."⁷⁷ The "Immediate Policy of the Minister of Defence for the 2021 Fiscal Year" explicitly states Thai intent to act as a primary regional power that will take the lead in various ASEAN frameworks.⁷⁸

Conclusion

Thailand's maritime strategy must be understood from the context of its unique history and sometimes-misunderstood strategic culture. In accordance with the National Resilience concept of the Thai government and the Regional Resilience concept of ASEAN, the RTN is clearly concentrated on fostering national development by protecting Thailand from the full range of security threats and supporting economic activities.

Only a year after the lifting of the EU's yellow card threat, the COVID-19 pandemic delivered massive budgetary, planning, and operational costs. These costs have led to the cancelation of training, kept ships in port, and caused the postponement of military hardware acquisition plans. One prominent example is the delay of payments for *Yuan*-class submarines from China, although the purchase is not yet canceled.⁷⁹ Other delays have been announced or can be expected in the larger procurement program that was set to include equipment better geared toward constabulary missions to include an amphibious ship configured for disaster response, OPVs, patrol vessels, search-and-rescue helicopters, maritime patrol aircraft, and coastal radar kits.⁸⁰ For those in the RTN's senior ranks, the situation brings back memories of the 1997 financial crisis. The pandemic-enforced pause could offer the RTN an opportunity to reevaluate its priorities and establish a post-pandemic strategic outlook.⁸¹ However, there is little reason to expect a shift away from the long-standing policy of focusing on national resilience while strengthening support for regional cooperation within ASEAN. ❖

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Notes

1. The GDP of Thailand increased from \$120 billion in 2001 to \$502.89 billion in 2020. This reflects an average annual rate of over 8 percent per year, even after the shrinkage that results from the COVID-19 pandemic and US-PRC trade war in 2020. Similarly high rates have been consistently seen since 1960, the major exception being the 1997 financial crisis which will be addressed in this paper.

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