

Creating Balance

The Evolution of Thailand's Defense Diplomacy and Defense Relations

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Abstract

Defense diplomacy is the use of defense resources by military/defense officials to promote trust and cooperation with other countries. This study focuses on the defense diplomacy and foreign relations of the Thai defense establishment, a matter of significance in Thailand, a middle power—more than a peripheral state but less than a great power—in Southeast Asia, due to the military's enduring prominence in the political landscape. In parallel with Thailand's historical foreign policy—which initially exhibited a pattern of “bending with the wind” before transitioning to a strategy of balance-seeking (hedging) between the United States and China to safeguard nationalist interests and preserve the monarchy—various forms of defense diplomacy have played a pivotal role in shaping the ideas, discourse, and deliberations within the Thai defense establishment. Adopting a novel approach in the form of discursive institutionalism, this study argues that a policy centered on hedging-based defense diplomacy has often proven beneficial for Thai defense relations, albeit with certain limitations. With direct implications for US operational forces, this research delves into the historical trajectory of Thailand's defense relations and defense diplomacy, encompassing developments up to the year 2023.

In September 2023, Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin, in anticipation of his inaugural foreign trip, made a pivotal choice by including Armed Forces Supreme Commander General Songwit Noonpakdi in his official delegation. This decision underscored the enduring significance of the military within Thai politics—and in the political context of a newly elected civilian Prime Minister. Yet, it held a deeper implication. As emphasized by Thai military expert Dr. Ukrist Pathmanand, “Defense diplomacy matters in international relations these days.”¹ This reflected Thailand's contemporary strategic environment—the rapid ascent of China and its growing military influence in Southeast Asia astride the continuing influence of the United States and Japan in the region.

Indeed, adept statecraft plays a pivotal role in any nation's foreign policy toward other states. Traditionally, statecraft was the domain of foreign ministry profes-

¹ Cited in “Will new foreign policy tilt away from China towards the West?,” *Thai PBS World*, 8 September 2023, <https://www.thaipbsworld.com/>.

sionals, who engaged in the art of fostering cooperation with bilateral and multi-lateral counterparts on the global stage. In those bygone days, the military was predominantly an instrument of foreign policy elites. While during the Cold War, activities such as joint military exercises, military aid, and training served as pragmatic tools to counterbalance adversaries from a realist perspective, the landscape evolved in the early 1990s. Armed forces institutions and defense ministry officials began to take on more active roles in establishing and nurturing cooperative relationships, fostering bilateral and multilateral trust. These defense diplomacy initiatives encompassed endeavors to (1) enhance cooperation with former or potential adversaries (strategic engagement); (2) fortify democratic civilian oversight; and (3) collaborate with states to bolster their capacity for international peacekeeping.²

The concept of defense diplomacy emerged in the post-Cold War era, driven by Western interests in demilitarization, military collaboration, security-sector reform, and human security. Initially coined as a distinct term in the United Kingdom in 2000, most of the literature on defense diplomacy predominantly centered on Europe and the Western world. Only recently, with Asia's growing importance in global affairs, has the study of defense diplomacy in Asia gained momentum. Nonetheless, the relevance of defense diplomacy in Southeast Asia remains relatively underexplored, with Thailand being particularly underrepresented in the existing literature.³

This study serves a crucial purpose by addressing this void, offering a much-needed examination of Thai defense diplomacy. Specifically, it employs the lens of discursive institutionalism to analyze the role of ideas, discourse, and deliberation in shaping political dynamics. These elements, when channeled through defense diplomacy, can instigate institutional changes in defense-related policies, programs, and philosophies, which in turn underpin Thailand's broader foreign relationships. Therefore, defense diplomacy, as an embodiment of Thailand's soft power, holds the potential to positively influence the strategic thinking of other states.⁴

Thailand's significance is amplified by its status as a *middle power* in Southeast Asia, a classification between a peripheral state and great power, defined by Robert O. Keohane as "a state [which considers] that it cannot act alone effectively but may be able to have a systemic impact in a small group or through an international

² Andrew Cottey and Anthony Forster, *Reshaping Defence Diplomacy: New Roles for Military Cooperation and Assistance*, Adelphi Paper 365 (London: Routledge, 2004), 7–8.

³ Evan A. Laksmana, "Regional Order by Other Means? Examining the Rise of Defense Diplomacy in Southeast Asia," *Asian Security* 8, no. 3 (2012): 251–70.

⁴ Gregory Winger, "The Velvet Gauntlet: A Theory of Defense Diplomacy," *IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conference Proceedings* 33 (2014), 1, <https://files.iwm.at/>.

institution.”⁵ Realism, which focuses on power politics among states, perceives Thailand as a unitary middle power in mainland Southeast Asia, actively pursuing the maximization of its economic and military interests.⁶

This study delves into the various forms of defense diplomacy that have played a pivotal role in guiding the decisions of Thai political and military leaders. Such diplomacy has left an indelible imprint on the ideas, discourse, and deliberations within the Thai defense establishment. It views defense diplomacy as a reflection of Thailand’s overarching realist policy of hedging, seeking a delicate balance among great powers and, at times, among Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states.

Thai defense diplomacy differs greatly from that of its regional neighbors (e.g., Burma/Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam) or other middle powers (South Korea). Indeed, its unique aspects include the fact that it undergirds a limited democracy dominated by monarchy and military and seeks not to attach itself to any single great power but instead build balance or “hedge.”

The study contends that while defense diplomacy centered on hedging has often proven advantageous to Thai defense relations, it also highlights certain limitations. It delves into the essentiality of defense diplomacy within Thailand’s broader foreign policy and the extent to which the two have remained aligned. What are the benefits and constraints of Thai defense diplomacy? These are the questions this study endeavors to answer.

Framework of Analysis

The term *defense diplomacy* originated in the United Kingdom, where it held a broad definition as the peaceful utilization of defense resources to achieve positive objectives in cultivating bilateral or multilateral relations with a specific country.⁷ However, this study takes a more refined approach to characterizing defense diplomacy. Here, it is defined as a diplomatic instrument wielded by senior military or defense ministry officials, with the primary objective of fostering bilateral or multilateral cooperation, emphasizing the promotion of trust while mitigating hostilities and suspicions. Andrew Cottey and Anthony Forster initially examined

⁵ Robert O. Keohane, “Lilliputians’ Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics,” *International Organization* 23, no. 2 (1969), 296, <https://doi.org/>.

⁶ Paul Chambers and Poowin Bunyavejchewin, “Complex Positioning: Thailand’s Role in the Context of ASEAN ‘Centrality’ and Indo-Pacific Security,” in *ASEAN and Regional Actors in the Indo-Pacific*, ed. Sueo Sudo and Chosein Yamahata (Singapore: Springer, 2023), 17–37, <https://doi.org/>.

⁷ Tom Dodd and Mark Oakes, *The Strategic Defence Review White Paper*, Research Paper 91 (London: House of Commons, 1998), 22.

ten dimensions of defense diplomacy, primarily in the context of larger powers such as the United States.⁸ Given Thailand's status as a recipient of defense aid, this study distills these ten dimensions into six, specifically relevant to understanding Thai defense diplomacy (see table 1).

Table 1. Thai defense diplomacy dimensions

1	Reception of Foreign Defense Aid
2	Joint Defense Exercises
3	Defense Education with International Partners
4	Defense-related International Agreements
5	Participation in International Peacekeeping Missions
6	Senior Defense Personnel Contacts

The article subsequently examines four of these areas. To comprehend the trajectory of Thai defense diplomacy, this study employs discursive institutionalism (DI) to underscore the significance of ideas, discourses, and deliberations in shaping state interests and perspectives. DI serves as a framework that highlights how ideas, discourse, and interactive communication within the realm of policy coordination can catalyze institutional changes in policies, programs, and philosophies. Ultimately, DI underscores the social construction of policy and/or policy making.⁹ DI plays a crucial role in elucidating the development of defense diplomacy. It accomplishes this by examining the progression of ideas and discourse within institutional settings and demonstrating how they transform into defense diplomacy policies. These policies are formulated with the aim of enhancing various forms of soft power to foster trust and cooperation. The evolution of such ideas and discourse can lead to institutional changes geared towards defense diplomacy. This transformation can be brought about through mechanisms like increasing returns or significant junctures such as regime change, ultimately resulting in the establishment of new defense partnerships.

According to Gregory Winger, "Military diplomats, officer exchanges, training programs, joint exercises, and ship visits are not merely peaceful means of using military force, but efforts to directly communicate the ideas, worldviews, and policy

⁸ Cottey and Forster, *Reshaping Defence Diplomacy*, 7.

⁹ Vivien Schmidt, "Taking Ideas and Discourse Seriously: Explaining Change Through Discursive Institutionalism as the Fourth 'New Institutionalism'," *European Political Science Review* 2, no. 1 (March 2010), 21–22, <https://doi.org/>.

preferences of one country to another.”¹⁰ Ideas and discourse possess the capacity to either impose constraints or offer opportunities that influence institutional resilience or transformation. Defense diplomacy, stemming from defense strategies, has witnessed its agenda and interests undergoing institutional evolution over time. This evolution is a result of the perceptions of defense officials who respond to the shaping and reshaping of defense diplomacy practices.

Thai Defense Relations until 2023

In Thailand, interactions at the military and defense ministry levels have consistently held a central role in the nation’s diplomatic endeavors. This role gained even more prominence, especially after the overthrow of Siam’s monarchical absolutism in 1932, which saw the military emerge as the predominant political actor until 1980.

Thailand’s foreign policy has been deeply rooted in an ideological commitment to a kingdom that has never been colonized. Consequently, Thai foreign policy has often been a product of the dual forces of upholding a Thai “royalist-nationalist” narrative and the pragmatic strategy of “bending with the wind.” These two facets have historically complemented each other. The royalist-nationalist (*rachachatniyom*) discourse venerates the Siamese/Thai monarchy as the heroic guardian, guide, redeemer, preserver, and embodiment of the Thai nation and identity. Central to royalist-nationalism is an irredentist pride in *Thainess*, particularly emphasizing the monarchy since 1957.¹¹ In contrast, “bending with the wind,” a policy dating back to 1851, involves temporary alignments with prevailing foreign powers in Southeast Asia at different junctures.

After the end of the Cold War (1992–2006), Thailand pursued a more calculated foreign policy approach, aiming to maintain independence from superpowers and adopting a realist strategy of hedging to underpin royalist-nationalism. Bangkok transformed into a relatively stable, quasi-democratic partner for major countries and a significant contributor to the ASEAN. During this period, Thai defense diplomacy consistently served as a dependable and supportive pillar of overall Thai foreign policy objectives.

However, the period from 2006 to 2023 witnessed significant transformations. During this timeframe, several pivotal developments occurred: (1) Thailand expe-

¹⁰ Winger, *The Velvet Gauntlet*, 9–10.

¹¹ Based upon: Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994); Pavin Chachavalongpong, *Reinventing Thailand: Thaksin and His Foreign Policy* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2010); and Shane Strate, *The Lost Territories: Thailand’s History of National Humiliation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2015).

rienced multiple changes in government, including two coups; (2) China rose as a major global power; (3) heightened geopolitical rivalry between China and the US in Southeast Asia became evident; (4) Thai-US relations experienced fluctuations, including periods of friction and thaw; (5) the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded; and (6) ASEAN's influence waned. Throughout these years, defense diplomacy remained a crucial component of Thai foreign policy, at times reinforcing it. For instance, in 2023, Army Commander General Narongphan Jitkaewthae, in a meeting with the Chinese defense minister, expressed Thailand's support for China's role in regional security and stability.¹² However, defense diplomacy was also employed to express displeasure, as illustrated by then-junta leader General Prayuth Chan-ocha's response to US criticism of his 2014 military coup: "It saddens me that the United States does not understand the reason why I had to intervene and does not understand the way we work, even though we have been close allies for years."¹³

Thai defense diplomacy has always been intricately tied to civil-military relations. When the military aligns with the foreign policy of the sitting government, defense diplomacy has played a stabilizing role in Thai foreign policy. However, on at least four occasions, civilian and military perspectives on foreign policy have diverged, leading to confusion in external relations. This is not surprising given Thailand's history of experiencing 14 successful military coups since 1932.

First, in 1976, the Thai military did not support the civilian government's preference for accommodation with Vietnam. Second, in 1988, Thailand's pro-Khmer Rouge military did not endorse Prime Minister Chatchai Choonhavan's settlement with Vietnam, which was occupying Cambodia. Third, in 2002-2003, PM Thaksin Shinawatra actively supported the military regime in Burma/Myanmar, while then-Army Commander General Surayud Chulanond did not. Fourth, in 2008, pro-Thaksin PM Samak Sundaravej sought to negotiate a defined boundary with Cambodia, while the Thai military leaned toward demanding border concessions from Phnom Penh.¹⁴ In these instances, defense diplomacy, when at odds with the nation's overall policy direction, led to ambiguity among Thai defense partners regarding the country's true policy stance. However, when Thai defense diplomacy aligns firmly with the nation's foreign policy, it provides a stable indicator of the overall direction of external relations.

¹² South China Morning News, "China and Thailand to expand military ties amid Asia-Pacific 'security challenges,'" *Bangkok Post*, 11 June 2023, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

¹³ Amy Sawitta Lefevre, "Thailand Warns US to Mind its own Business over Politics," *Reuters*, 28 January 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

¹⁴ Paul Chambers, *Praetorian Kingdom: A History of Military Ascendancy in Thailand* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2024, forthcoming).

In 2023, the Thai military leadership views defense diplomacy and alignments in terms of safeguarding the monarchy, ensuring border security, managing military relationships, maintaining a level of skepticism towards elected civilian Thai governments, acknowledging the swift ascent of a militarily potent China, and holding the belief that the United States can provide only partial assurance in counterbalancing China's expanding influence in Southeast Asia.

Four Areas of Thai Defense Diplomacy

Joint Military Exercises

One of the most apparent manifestations of defense diplomacy lies in bilateral and multilateral military exercises. In the context of Thailand, these exercises have historically served at least one of four key purposes: (1) indicating political tilt; (2) demonstrating bilateral or multilateral cooperation; (3) displaying available military hardware and the ability to use it; and (4) efforts to simply improve military capacities in conjunction with other countries. This section delves into military exercises involving the United States, China, and ASEAN.

United States–Thai Military Exercises. Close Thai–US relations have a historical backdrop that extends back to 1950, a period marked by shared anticommunist Cold War interests. Joint exercises between the two nations commenced in 1954, even before Washington deployed US troops to Thailand in 1962, a presence that endured until 1976. In 1982, Thailand and the United States launched Operation Cobra Gold, an annual bilateral military exercise that has since evolved into a multilateral event. Over time, this exercise expanded to include participation from various other countries.

By 2023, Operation Cobra Gold brought together soldiers from 30 countries, including 3,000 from Thailand and over 6,000 from the US military.¹⁵ Another significant event, the annual Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) joint naval exercises, was initiated in 1995. While CARAT typically involves bilateral cooperation between Thailand and the United States, other nations like Singapore have occasionally taken part. In 1997, the Cope Tiger exercises began, held annually in Thailand and featuring the air forces of the United States, Thailand, and Singapore, with aircraft from the US Marine Corps and Navy also participating.¹⁶

¹⁵ Francesca Regalada, "Thailand, U.S. resume Cobra Gold military exercise at full scale," *Nikkei Asia*, 28 February 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/>.

¹⁶ United States Department of Defense, "Cope Tiger," 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/>.

In 2023, Thailand hosted more than 40 different types of defense drills with the United States. These exercises were coordinated and overseen by the Joint US Military Advisory Group Thailand (JUSMAGTHAI), which was established in 1953. Notably, JUSMAGTHAI functions independently of the US Embassy in Bangkok, effectively serving as the US Embassy to the Royal Thai Armed Forces.¹⁷ Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2022, the United States conducted more than 400 military-to-military engagements and exercises with Thailand on an annual basis. With the pandemic's conclusion, by 2023, there were once again approximately 400 annual Thai–US military engagements and exercises.¹⁸

China–Thai Military Exercises. Over the past two decades, mirroring Bangkok's expanding hedging policy in its defense relations, Thailand has displayed a strong inclination toward participating in military exercises with China. Notably, Thailand has engaged in a more extensive series of exercises with Beijing's People's Liberation Army (PLA) than any other Southeast Asian country.¹⁹ Since 2005, the Thai military has been involved in over 20 bilateral and more than 20 multilateral exercises with the PLA. In 2007, Thailand and China inaugurated their first Strike exercise, which focuses on special forces engagements. From 2010 onward, the two countries have conducted semi-annual or annual Blue-Strike joint naval exercises. Similarly, since 2015, semi-annual or annual Falcon Strike joint air force exercises have become a regular occurrence.²⁰

While these joint exercises experienced a temporary suspension in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they resumed in 2022.²¹ In 2023, the Strike, Blue-Strike, and Falcon Strike were held in the same year, with plans for such synchronized scheduling in the future. Notably, China has been an observer at the US–Thai-led Cobra Gold exercises since 2002. In 2014, China's PLA was permitted to participate in Cobra Gold humanitarian training, although it faced objections from Washington regarding China's involvement in Cobra Gold field training.²²

¹⁷ Richard Halloran, "Thailand's Pivot," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 1 September 2013, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/>.

¹⁸ *US Security Cooperation with Thailand* (Washington, DC: US Department of State, 31 October 2022), <https://www.state.gov/>.

¹⁹ Ian Storey, "Thailand's Military Relations with China: Moving from Strength to Strength," *ISEAS Perspective* 2019, no. 43 (27 May 2019), <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/>.

²⁰ Rachaya Tiampracha "จีนในทัศนะของทหารไทย ทัศนะของทหารไทย: ภาพสะท้อนจากเอกสารอันจากเอกสารวิจัยวิทยาลัยป้องกันราชอาณาจักร อานาจักร [China from the Perspective of Thai Soldiers]" (thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 2022), <https://digital.car.chula.ac.th/>.

²¹ Reuters, "Thailand, China to resume air force exercises after pandemic pause," *Euronews*, 8 September 2022. <https://www.euronews.com/>.

²² Storey, "Thailand's Military Relations with China," 9.

Thai Participation in ASEAN Military Exercises. Thailand has played a pivotal role in advocating for military exercises within the ASEAN framework. Additionally, even before the inception of ASEAN, dating back to 1954, Thailand actively supported and hosted military exercises associated with the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), which preceded ASEAN.²³

Unlike SEATO, which was dissolved in 1977, ASEAN had not initially prioritized regional defense cooperation, including regional military exercises. However, by 1994, there had been 25 intra-ASEAN bilateral military exercises.²⁴ It was only in 1992 that security cooperation, including intra-ASEAN military exercises, was formally integrated into the institutional agenda of ASEAN during its fourth summit.

This inclusion of security on the agenda did not significantly accelerate multilateral cooperation and military exercises within ASEAN. Subsequently, in 2010, the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM)-Plus was established “as a platform for ASEAN and its eight Dialogue Partners Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Russia and the United States (collectively referred to as the “Plus Countries”), to strengthen security and defense cooperation for peace, stability, and development in [Southeast Asia].”²⁵

Five years later, the ASEAN Community was established, encompassing the ASEAN Political-Security Community, within which ASEAN military exercises could be organized. However, due to political divergences and other related challenges within ASEAN, multilateral military exercises remained in the planning stage. Consequently, ASEAN’s defense diplomacy, as reflected in cooperative drills and exercises to address security challenges, had not yet fully realized its potential in creating an effective ASEAN defense community.²⁶

Indonesia and Thailand have played significant roles in advancing ASEAN’s efforts to establish intra-ASEAN multilateral military exercises. These exercises, which involved all 10 ASEAN member states, predominantly focused on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.²⁷ Yet, with the increasing focus of geopo-

²³ Office of the Historian, US Department of State, “Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), 1954,” *Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations*, n.d., <https://history.state.gov/>.

²⁴ Bhubhingdar Singh and See Seng Tan, “Introduction: Defence Diplomacy and Southeast Asia,” in *From ‘Boots’ to ‘Brogues’: The Rise of Defence Diplomacy in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 1 January 2011), 7, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

²⁵ ASEAN, “About the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus,” 2023, <https://admm.asean.org/>.

²⁶ See: Rodon Pedrason, “ASEAN’s Defence Diplomacy: The Road to Southeast Asian Defence Community?” (PhD thesis, Heidelberg University, 2017), <https://d-nb.info/>.

²⁷ Ektewan Manowong, Darmp Sukontasap, and Witchayanee Ocha, “Investigating the Contributions of Thailand’s Defence Diplomacy for ASEAN Community Integration,” *Rangsit Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 4, no. 1 (January–June 2017): 17–33, <https://jcs.h.rsu.ac.th/>.

litical rivalry between Washington and Beijing in Southeast Asia, rival ASEAN military exercises centered on maritime security involving all 10 ASEAN states became prominent.

The first ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise in 2018 aimed to enhance defense cooperation and maritime security between China and ASEAN, taking place in China in October 2018.²⁸ Subsequently, in September 2019, the first ASEAN-US Maritime Exercise (AUMX) was conducted. These exercises began in Thailand, traversed portions of the South China Sea, claimed by some ASEAN members, China, and Taiwan, and concluded in Singapore.²⁹

China is planning a multilateral military exercise with ASEAN in late 2023, titled “Aman Youyi” (Peace and Friendship), involving five ASEAN states: Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam.³⁰ Furthermore, in September 2023, ASEAN organized its first all-ASEAN military exercise, with a focus on humanitarian relief. Led by Indonesia, this exercise included all 10 ASEAN member states, with Myanmar as an observer, and also East Timor. It was named the “ASEAN Solidarity Exercise (ASEX 23)” and was showcased as a testament to ASEAN Centrality.³¹

Thailand has actively supported both bilateral and multilateral ASEAN military drills, and the kingdom has demonstrated a keen interest in participating in ASEAN military exercises involving both China and the United States.

In the post-Cold War era, owing to Bangkok’s strategic hedging policy between the United States and China, Thailand in 2023 maintains a position that is not explicitly aligned with either Beijing or Washington. Furthermore, there exists an element of skepticism within the Thai military regarding China’s intentions in Southeast Asia. Consequently, Thailand’s military exercises, integral to its defense diplomacy, have been characterized by a balanced and comprehensive approach that spans the political spectrum. This approach allows Bangkok to utilize these defense drills as a means of projecting soft power, facilitating the communication of military cooperation with both China and the United States, as well as other countries, including Japan, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and Russia.

²⁸ Li Wenfang, “China, ASEAN Begin Joint Naval Drill,” *China Daily*, 23 October 2018, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/>.

²⁹ Agence France-Presse, “US and 10 ASEAN Navies Begin First Joint Military Exercises in Southeast Asia,” *Defense Post*, 2 September 2019, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/>.

³⁰ Muhammed Estiak Hussain, “ASEAN-China Defense Cooperation: Recent Developments,” *The Geopolitics*, 20 July 2023, <https://thegeopolitics.com/>.

³¹ Kate Mayberry, “‘Baby steps’ for ASEAN as it wraps up first-ever joint military drills,” *Aljazeera*, 25 September 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/>.

It is worth noting that Thailand's exercises with the United States are distinguished by their size, frequency, and sophistication, surpassing those conducted with China. China appears to favor bilateral exercises and places a premium on the performative and symbolic aspects rather than substantive engagement.³²

Defense Education with International Partners

In the initial years of Siam's military development after 1852, the kingdom enlisted the expertise of advisors from various European countries, including Britain, Italy, and Denmark, to oversee defense training. Over time, Siam established two military academies, one following a German curriculum and the other based on the French model.³³ As the twentieth century dawned, a significant number of Siamese cadets pursued professional military education (PME) abroad. Most of these cadets opted for Germany, while others traveled to France, and some even ventured to Japan.

Following the conclusion of World War II, the United States emerged as Thailand's favored destination for PME. In the post-Cold War era, Thailand has maintained PME programs with countries spanning the entire political spectrum. Notably, key partners have included the United States, China, Russia, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Israel. In 2023, the top two collaborators in PME for Thailand are the United States and China.

US Military Education. One of the longest-running and most extensive PME programs is the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program, sponsored by the United States. This initiative provides funding for Thai military officials to participate in educational programs conducted at the 23 PME institutions in the United States. The IMET program is guided by several core objectives: to promote regional stability through fostering effective and mutually beneficial military-to-military relations, leading to enhanced understanding and defense cooperation between the United States and foreign nations; to deliver training that enhances the capabilities of participating countries' military forces, enabling them to support joint operations and achieve interoperability with US forces; and to increase the capacity of foreign military and civilian personnel to uphold and up-

³² Ian Storey, "China's Military Exercises in Southeast Asia Belie a Lack of Trust," *ISEAS Fulcrum*, 8 September 2023, <https://fulcrum.sg/>.

³³ Napisa Waitoolkiat and Paul Chambers, "Khaki Veto Power: The Organization of Thailand's Armed Forces," in *Knights of the Realm: Thailand's Military and Police, Then and Now*, ed. Paul Chambers (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2013).

hold democratic values and protect internationally recognized human rights within their governments and armed forces, as outlined by the US State Department.³⁴

IMET aims to familiarize students with US-endorsed concepts of military professionalism and the oversight of the military by civilians. The program acquaints participants with “institutions and elements of US democracy such as the judicial system, legislative oversight, free speech, equality issues, and commitment to human rights.”³⁵ The Expanded IMET (e-IMET), introduced as a subset of IMET in 1990, places particular emphasis on civilian control of the military. It does so by exposing students to the American military justice system and highlighting how the US military collaborates with civilian bureaucrats and legislators. Additionally, the US Field Studies Program, another component of IMET, immerses students in American civic culture, underscoring the significance of democratic values, human rights, and the belief in the rule of law.³⁶

Since 1952, thousands of Thai military officers have received such training, with IMET formally established in 1976. A substantial proportion of Thai military personnel, spanning the army, navy, air force, supreme command, and defense ministry, have undergone training in the United States through IMET. Notably, Thailand’s coups in 1991, 2006, and 2014 led to the suspension of US IMET aid until after elections took place in September 1992, December 2007, and March 2019, respectively. In 2022, the Biden administration approved USD 2.7 million in IMET funding for Thailand for 2021, with an additional USD 2.2 million allocated for 2022.³⁷

Chinese Military Education. China has emerged as an increasingly viable alternative for Thai PME. With nearly 70 military academies in China, approximately half of them cater to foreign military personnel. Notably, these programs differ from the normative approach seen in the United States, as they do not aim to instill values related to democracy or civilian control. Instead, the primary focus

³⁴ Office of Security Assistance, US Department of State, “Key Topics—Office of Security Assistance,” 2023, <https://www.state.gov/>.

³⁵ Office of Security Assistance, *International Military Education and Training Account Summary* (Washington, DC: US Department of State, 2023), <https://www.state.gov/>.

³⁶ “Chapter 14: International Training,” in *Security Cooperation Management, Fiscal Year 2022* (Arlington, VA: Defense Security Cooperation University, 2022), <https://www.dscu.edu/>. This publication is often referred to as *The Green Book*, and this is considered edition 42 of that series. Also see: Defense Security Cooperation Agency, “Request for Certification or Re-Certification of E-IMET Courses,” 2023, <https://samm.dsca.mil/>.

³⁷ Emma Chanlett-Avery and Ben Dolven, “Thailand: Background and US Relations,” *In Focus* (Congressional Research Service), 19 July 2023, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/>.

lies in defense diplomacy—promoting a positive international image of China and its military while concurrently fostering military-to-military connections.³⁸

China's PME initiatives for Thailand gained momentum in 2001. However, in response to the US aid cutoff following the 2006 coup, the number of Thai military officials undertaking courses at Chinese military academies saw a significant increase.³⁹ Following the 2014 coup, when US aid was again suspended, Thailand turned more comprehensively to Chinese academies. This shift was partly a response to Washington's actions and partly due to the cost-effectiveness of Chinese training programs. As a result, the number of Thai military officials enrolled in Chinese military courses grew to approximately "30-50 per year . . . about half the number of Thai military personnel who study in the United States on non-IMET funded courses." It's important to note that Thai military personnel still predominantly favor long-standing US PME over that provided by China.⁴⁰

Following President Donald Trump's invitation of Prime Minister Prayuth to Washington in 2017, there was a rapprochement between Thailand and the United States. Consequently, fewer Thai military officials pursued education in China. However, as the Thai military increasingly employs Chinese military hardware, the demand for Chinese training on its utilization also grows. Moreover, increased reliance on Chinese PME might affect the willingness of the United States to entrust Thailand with its most advanced weaponry, such as the F-35 fighter jet.

In 2023, the United States and China continue to be the top international partners providing PME for Thai military officials. Although the United States maintains a lead in this realm, owing to its long-standing ties and preferences, China closely trails as a strong second option.

Bilateral/Multilateral Peacekeeping Operations

Participation in peacekeeping operations with partner countries has played a pivotal role in Thailand's defense diplomacy. Both bilateral and multilateral defense and police operations conducted in support of Thailand's allies and/or the United Nations have been integral to defense diplomacy, a practice dating back to 1917. However, it's worth noting that Thai troops began participating in specific United Nations peacekeeping missions only after the end of the Cold War in 1989. By 2014, it was estimated that Thailand had deployed over 20,000 military and police

³⁸ John S. Van Oudenaren and Benjamin E. Fisher, "Foreign Military Educations as PLA Soft Power," *Parameters* 46, no. 4 (2016), <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/>.

³⁹ Ian Storey, "China and Thailand: Enhancing Military-Security Ties in the 21st Century," *China Brief* 8, no. 14 (3 July 2008), <https://jamestown.org/>.

⁴⁰ Storey, "Thailand's Military Relations with China."

personnel to serve in more than 20 UN peacekeeping missions worldwide since 1950.⁴¹ These figures have since increased in 2023.

In terms of the history of United Nations peacekeeping in 2023, Thailand ranks 45th out of 124 in the list of uniformed personnel-contributing countries. This ranking encompasses experts on mission, formed police units, individual police, staff officers, and troops.⁴² Simultaneously, Thailand has collaborated with other ASEAN member states on defense diplomacy through the ADMM to establish an ASEAN Peacekeeping Centers Network and promote ASEAN Defense Collaboration. However, despite Thailand and Indonesia co-sponsoring a concept note on this initiative in 2011, no ASEAN peacekeeping operation has been conducted to date.⁴³

In 2000, the Thai armed forces established the Peace Operations Division Department of Military Operations, with its primary responsibility being the supervision, coordination, and assistance in deploying forces for peacekeeping missions. Over time, the unit's structure expanded, and on 1 October 2006, it was renamed the Peace Operations Center. In 2023, the center consists of an operations division, a training and education division, a planning and project division, and an administrative department.⁴⁴ Notably, the Royal Thai Police coordinate the participation of Thai police in peacekeeping missions. Table 2 presents an overview of Thai troop involvement in external support and United Nations efforts.

⁴¹ "Thailand, the Land of the Free, and its International Peacekeeping Efforts," *Asia Society*, 29 October 2014, <https://asiasociety.org/>.

⁴² United Nations, "Uniformed Personnel Contributing Countries by Ranking: Experts on Mission, Formed Police Units, Individual Police, Staff Officer, and Troops As of: 28/02/2023," <https://peacekeeping.un.org/>.

⁴³ Manowong, Sukontasap, Ocha, "Investigating the Contributions of Thailand's Defence Diplomacy," 22.

⁴⁴ Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters, "Peace Operations Centre, Directorate of Joint Operations," 2023, <https://j3.rtarf.mi.th/>.

Table 2. Thai involvement in external support/United Nations peacekeeping missions (1950–2023)

Mission	Period	# of Military/ Police Troops
Sending troops to France in support of Allies during World War I (Siamese Expeditionary Forces)	1917–1919	1,284
United Nations Command (defending South Korea from North Korea)	1950–1955	11,786
United Nations Observation Group in Lebanon (UNOGI)	June–December 1958	?
Free World Military Assistance Forces (FWMAF) to South Vietnam	1965–1972	37,644
United Nations Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) in Namibia	1989–1990	5
United Nations Iraq-Kuwait Observation Mission (UNIKOM)	1991–2002	5-7
United Nations Guard Contingent in Iraq (UNGCI)	1991–1994	50
United Nations Transnational Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC)	1992–1993	705
United Nations Observer Mission in South Africa (UNOMSA) in South Africa	1992–1994	5
United Nations Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina (UNMIBH) in Bosnia and Herzegovina	1995–2002	?
United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL)	1999–2005	5
United Nations Electoral Observation Mission for the Fijian Electoral Mission in August 2001 (UNFEOM)	2001	?
US-led Operation Enduring Freedom	2001–2014	130
International Forces INTERFET (Peace Operations): 1999–2000 United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor: UNTAET: 2000–2002 United Nations Missions of Support in East Timor: UNMISIT	2002–2005	1581
United Nations Operations in Burundi (ONUB): 2004–2006	2004–2006	177
Multinational Force: Iraq	2003–2004	450 (medics, engineers)
United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIS)	2006–2010	15
United Nations Political Mission in Nepal (UNMIN)	2007–2008	7
African Union – United Nations Hybrid Operations in Darfur (UNAMID) 2007–2010	2007–2010	800
United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti	2004–2017	20
United Nations Mission to Liberia (UNMISIL)	2003–2018	7
United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP)	1949–Present	6
United Nations Mission to South Sudan (UNMISS)	2018–Present	268
United Nations Mission to the Central African Republic	2014–Present	?

(Source: compiled from Peace Operations Centre, Directorate of Military Operations, Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters. *The Role of the Thai Armed Forces in Peace Operations* (in Thai), 2023, <https://j3.rtarf.mi.th/>. See also Keokam Kraisoraphong and Brendan Howe, “Thailand’s Participation in un Peacekeeping Missions,” *Journal of International Peacekeeping* 18, no. 3–4 (2014): 236–55, <https://doi.org/>.

Thai participation in peacekeeping missions has increased in both the number of missions and the number of soldiers involved since 1989. This reflects the kingdom's commitment to maintaining international peace and security, as well as promoting regional cooperation. This ideological perspective aligns with the discursive institution of socially constructed collaboration.

Senior Defense Personnel Contacts/ Visits

The most fundamental and traditional form of defense diplomacy involves the use of defense attachés in foreign countries and the visits of senior military personnel to nations abroad. These practices were previously known as *military diplomacy* before being encompassed within the broader term *defense diplomacy*.⁴⁵ In the United Kingdom, defense attachés have the responsibility of promoting discourse and ideation. They work to enhance “UK Defense credibility and capability” while also fostering “close and effective bilateral relationships and regional awareness.”⁴⁶

Four methods to indicate the importance of sending defense attachés to host countries include:

1. whether defense attachés are sent to the host country;
2. the number of defense attachés sent to the host country;
3. the duration for which defense attachés have been sent to the host country; and
4. the military rank of the defense attachés.

While some of Thailand's earliest defense attaché relations were with Britain and Germany, the kingdom currently maintains defense attaché relations with 26 countries, including the United States, China, Germany, the UK, Japan, Russia, Australia, India, and Thailand's immediate neighbors.⁴⁷

Regarding Thai–US relations, Thailand has deployed defense attachés to Washington since 1945. In 1953, the number of attachés at the Thai embassy in Washington began to increase. In 2023, the largest contingent of Thai attaché officials is in Washington, including the defense and military attaché, the air attaché, and the navy attaché. Each attaché has their own staff of lower-ranking officers (for

⁴⁵ Lech Drab, “Defence diplomacy—an important tool for the implementation of foreign policy and security of the state,” *Security and Defence Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (2018): 57–71, <https://doi.org/>.

⁴⁶ UK Parliament, “Defence Diplomacy: A Softer Side of UK Defence,” 7th Report of Session 2022–2023, <https://publications.parliament.uk/>.

⁴⁷ Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters, “ทำเนียบ ผชท.ทหารไทย ณ ต่างประเทศ [Directory of the Thai Military Commander Abroad], 2023, <https://j2.rtarf.mi.th/>

example, the navy attaché had five officers serving under him in 2023).⁴⁸ Prior to 1987, the rank of Thai attachés was lieutenant colonel (or naval commander or air force wing commander). In 1987, the rank was raised to colonel—or its equivalent in the Navy (captain) and Air Force (group captain).

Meanwhile, US defense attachés, navy attachés, and air attachés in Thailand (and their service teams) have consistently held the rank of colonel. In 1953, US attachés have had the luxury of having offices at the JUSMAGTHAI in Bangkok—separate from the US embassy.⁴⁹ JUSMAGTHAI attachés are responsible for overseeing all aspects of US military procurement for and US defense drills with Thailand.

As for Thailand and China, the two countries have maintained attaché relations since the mid-1980s. In 2019, Beijing upgraded its defense attaché to Thailand from a one-star to a two-star general, its highest-ranked military attaché in Southeast Asia. The high ranking for its attaché was significant, especially for China, as it only posts two-star generals in prominent countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and India.⁵⁰ China also maintains a police attaché from Beijing's Ministry of Public Security (MPS) in Bangkok, who is also a two-star police general. This two-star general regularly receives intelligence from Thailand's Department of Special Investigations (DSI).⁵¹ There is concern that the Chinese police attaché has a task beyond simple diplomacy. Indeed, amid growing information about the MPS running illegal overseas police stations in countries throughout the world, some Chinese political exiles living in Thailand have been apprehended by MPS agents and taken back to China. For example, in 2015, Minhui Gui, an ethnic Chinese who had published books critical of Chinese communist leaders and was a naturalized Swedish citizen, was kidnapped by the MPS from his vacation home in Thailand. He later appeared on state television in China, confessing to crimes against the Chinese state, and was imprisoned. The Thai government denied any knowledge of the MPS kidnapping on Thai soil.⁵²

Another form of defense contact occurs when senior military officials undertake visits abroad. While US senior military and intelligence officials had supported the Seri Thai resistance during World War II, they began making formal visits to

⁴⁸ Office of the Naval Attaché, Royal Thai Embassy to the United States, "About the Office," 10 September 2015, <https://www.attachewashington.navy.mi.th/>.

⁴⁹ Joint United States Military Advisory Group Thailand, "What Is JUSMAGTHAI?," 2023, <http://www.jusmagthai.com/>.

⁵⁰ Storey, "Thailand's Military Relations with China."

⁵¹ "Chinese Counsellor and Police Attache Visited DSI" (press release, Department of Special Investigation (Thailand), 11 November 2020), <https://www.dsi.go.th/>.

⁵² Jordan Link, "The Expanding International Reach of China's Police," *Center for American Progress*, 17 October 2022, <https://www.americanprogress.org/>.

Thailand in 1950.⁵³ On the other hand, one of the earliest visits by China's Army General Chief of Staff to Thailand was in 1983.⁵⁴ More recently, Army Commander General Narongphan Jitkaewthae led a delegation of senior military officials to China in June 2023.⁵⁵ The previous month, Narongphan had visited the United States, attending the Land Forces of the Pacific Conference in Hawaii.⁵⁶

In summary, as demonstrated in the cases of the United States and China, defense attachés and military visits have been integral to Thai defense diplomacy, whether involving foreign attachés in Thailand or Thai attachés abroad. Indeed, attachés have represented the most fundamental and personalized form of soft power available in Thai defense relations.

Conclusion

This study has delved into the often-overlooked realm of defense diplomacy, specifically within the context of a middle-power nation in Southeast Asia—Thailand. Through the lens of DI, the article uncovered how the structures of ideas, discourse, and political deliberations are harnessed to effect institutional changes in defense policies, programs, and the broader philosophies of defense relations, which in turn underpin Thailand's wider foreign engagements. Defense diplomacy, as an embodiment of Thailand's soft power, serves as a conduit to align strategic perspectives with other nations.

Nonetheless, Thailand's defense diplomacy is inherently woven into the nation's overarching realist foreign policy of hedging, which seeks equilibrium among great powers and fellow ASEAN member states. However, this study has articulated that this policy of hedging-driven defense diplomacy, while often valuable for defense relations, comes with limitations. It is circumscribed by the fact that the Thai military, which retains a degree of autonomy from civilian control, does not consistently align with the foreign policy agenda of elected civilians.

At the outset of this exploration, two fundamental questions were posed. Firstly, the article inquired about the significance of defense diplomacy in Thailand's overall foreign policy and whether these two facets have consistently harmonized. Secondly, it examined the advantages and constraints of Thai defense diplomacy.

⁵³ Office of the Historian, US Department of State, "The Secretary of State to Certain Diplomatic and Consular Offices" (circular telegram, 24 February 1950), <https://history.state.gov/>.

⁵⁴ "Kampuchea's Agony," *Canberra Times*, 8 February 1983, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/>.

⁵⁵ "Chinese defense minister meets Thailand's army chief," *Xinhua News*, 10 June 2023, <https://english.news.cn/>.

⁵⁶ Wassana Nanuam, "Army Chief Visiting US," *Bangkok Post*, 15 May 2023, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

In response to the first question, it is apparent that, like any nation, defense diplomacy plays a pivotal role in reinforcing and affirming the defense dimension of statecraft, aligning it with the nation's comprehensive foreign policy. This is especially significant in Thailand's case, considering the country's history of military coups, where defense diplomacy has not always seamlessly supported overall foreign policy objectives. Where Thai defense diplomacy has steadfastly endorsed the nation's foreign policy, it has served as a reliable barometer for the direction of Thailand's external relations.

Addressing the second question, Thai defense diplomacy offers the benefit of elucidating the international community and domestic stakeholders regarding the military's commitment to overall civilian control over foreign policy. Moreover, it functions as a soft-power adhesive that bolsters defense ties, fostering bilateral relationships with both major and minor powers, and enhancing collaboration among the defense institutions of ASEAN. Nevertheless, the limitations of Thai defense diplomacy become evident in its occasional symbolism and its tendency to deviate from civilian-led foreign policy. Given the military's relative autonomy in relation to elected civilians, there remains a pressing need to harmonize Thai defense diplomacy with the country's broader foreign policy.

Thai defense diplomacy holds significant implications for the United States and its regional strategy in safeguarding American interests. Washington must understand that Thai defense officials highly prioritize cooperation with the United States, its role in Thailand's security, and the enduring trust in defense relations cultivated since 1950. Simultaneously, Washington must acknowledge that Thailand cannot overlook the rise of a powerful China in close proximity, which also seeks to forge strong security connections. In essence, while the United States remains Thailand's preferred partner compared to other nations, Washington should not take Thailand's alliance for granted.

When Thailand employs defense diplomacy to enhance its perceived security needs and strengthen ties with the United States, Washington should respond positively. A case in point is Washington's recent refusal to allow Thailand to purchase F-35 fighter jets. Such actions may lead Thailand to explore alternative options or potentially pivot closer to China. To foster stronger Thai-US defense relations, the United States should make more effective use of its own defense diplomacy tools, including professional military education exchanges, military exercises, interactions with defense attachés, and even military hardware agreements.

It is worth noting that the long-standing history of close military ties between Thailand and the United States, combined with Washington's ability to offer advanced military exercises and professional military educational exchanges, provides the United States with a unique advantage in its relationship with Thailand com-

pared to other countries. Nevertheless, there are limitations to consider, such as the conditions imposed by Congress on US military aid, past criticisms of the Thai military by the United States that influenced some Thai military officials to shift away from the United States, and Washington's other defense commitments.

Looking ahead, Thailand's defense diplomacy is poised to further institutionalize itself with foreign militaries and nations. However, it is vital for the international community and US operational forces to recognize that the future effectiveness and transparency of this policy hinges on the civil-military dynamics between the recently elected civilian government led by Prime Minister Srettha Thavasin and the military establishment. This is because Thailand's military remains ultimately accountable to the king, rather than the elected government under which it operates. 🌟

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