

Can Thailand's Military Evolve?

Moving Beyond Domestic Interference, Institutional Corruption, and Personal Gain

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Abstract

The Thai military maintains a close interdependence with the monarchy and a history of recurrent extra-constitutional interventions in domestic politics, marked by numerous successful coups throughout Thailand's modern history. A culture of greed, corruption, and self-enrichment pervades the armed services, often sidelining professionalism and institutional integrity in favor of personal ambitions. Thailand's military faces continuous and unaddressed challenges, with security-sector reform and modernization efforts frequently disrupted by influential elites seeking to assert control. High-ranking military officers exceed their authority, engaging in activities that are ostensibly exploitative and detrimental to Thailand's external relations. This article critically assesses efforts to implement security-sector reforms and foster a military aligned with its intended purpose, examining three distinct eras in Thailand's military development. It extrapolates insights from each era to the context of a new semi-democratic Pheu Thai-led government.

The Thai military has played a significant role in shaping Thai society for many decades. From its development under the reign of King Chulalongkorn in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the era of Phibun Songkhram, who played a central role in the 1932 Khana Ratsadon revolution, the military initiated a period of Thai-style nationalism and centralized control.¹ The military's influence has persisted through various regime types, including military-dominated regimes like those of Sarit Thanarat and Thanom Kittikachorn, democratic administrations, and contemporary junta rule from 2014 to 2023.

¹ Stithorn Thananithichot, "Understanding Thai Nationalism and Ethnic Identity," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 46, no. 3 (1 June 2011): 250–63, <https://doi.org/>; Jack Fong, "Sacred Nationalism: The Thai Monarchy and Primordial Nation Construction," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 39, no. 4 (1 November 2009): 673–96, <https://doi.org/>; Thongchai Winichakul, "Nationalism and the Radical Intelligentsia in Thailand," in *Developmental and Cultural Nationalisms*, ed. Radhika Desai, 176–92 (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), <https://doi.org/>; and Daniel M. Fineman, *A Special Relationship: The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947–1958* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2020), 77.

The Thai military's close association with political power is partly due to its pragmatic relationship with the monarchy.² Military-dominated institutions, often described as a "parallel state" or "deep state," have hindered democratization and peaceful transfers of political power.³ Military-aligned political parties and semi-democratic parliamentary bodies have played a key role in legitimizing military control, facilitating military elites' influence, and allocating resources for military purposes.

Measuring progress in any military involves assessing modernization, adaptability to evolving threats, and the professionalization of the armed forces, which can be defined as security-sector reform (SSR). Civil-military relations have been influenced by Samuel Huntington's concept of the professional soldier and civilian control, while the idea of SSR is more of a post-Cold War concept, particularly in Southeast Asia.⁴ According to a joint US agency briefing, SSR encompasses a "set of policies, plans, programs, and activities that a government undertakes to improve the way it provides safety, security, and justice. The overall objective is to provide these services in a way that promotes an effective and legitimate public service that is transparent, accountable to civilian authority, and responsive to the needs of the public."⁵

However, reform is primarily the goal of democratic nations. Southeast Asia lacks comparable democracies, and comparable SSR reform efforts following the downfall of authoritarian regimes have seen limited success. This is evident in the cases of the Philippines in 1986 after the fall of the Ferdinand Marcos regime and in 1998 with the collapse of the Suharto dictatorship in Indonesia. Although Marcos significantly expanded the Armed Forces of the Philippines during his rule, a nonviolent "People Power" revolution, with the support of General Fidel Ramos declaring allegiance to Corazon Aquino, eroded loyalty to the Marcos regime.⁶ Nonetheless, this did not create a conducive environment for SSR, as

² Duncan McCargo, "Network Monarchy and Legitimacy Crises in Thailand," *Pacific Review* 18, no. 4 (2005): 499–519, <https://doi.org/>; Paul Chambers, "Military 'Shadows' in Thailand Since the 2006 Coup," *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 40, no. 2 (1 April 2013): 67–82, <https://doi.org/>.

³ Ivan Briscoe, "The Proliferation of the 'Parallel State,'" *Fundación Para Las Relaciones Internacionales y El Diálogo Exterior*, no. Working Paper 71 (October 2008); and Eugénie Méricau, "Thailand's Deep State, Royal Power and the Constitutional Court (1997–2015)," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 46, no. 3 (2 July 2016): 445–66.

⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil–Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1981).

⁵ USAID, "Security Sector Reform: USAID, DOD, DOS Policy Statement," US Department of State, February 2009, 3.

⁶ Hedman, Eva-Lotta, and John Sidel, eds. *Philippine Politics and Society in the Twentieth Century: Colonial Legacies, Post-Colonial Trajectories* (London: Routledge, 2000), 26, <https://doi.org/>; and Mark S. Cogan, "Dic-

Aquino faced multiple coup attempts, and subsequent governments grappled with corruption issues. Maintaining control over the military has been a political imperative for administrations such as Rodrigo Duterte and Ferdinand “BongBong” Marcos, Jr.

Similarly, following the Suharto regime’s fall, Indonesia made substantial efforts to reform the Tentara Nasional Indonesia (TNI) with the aim of professionalizing the military and reducing its influence in domestic politics.⁷ However, this has proven challenging, as the TNI’s composition largely remained unchanged. Recent efforts by the Indonesian military to connect with the public, particularly at the village level to enhance local conditions, have shown promise.⁸ Yet, the economic aftermath of COVID-19 has hindered this progress and strained Indonesia’s legitimate modernization endeavors for its armed services.⁹

Opportunities for democracy in Thailand are infrequent, and when they do occur, they are often short-lived. The rise of Thaksin Shinawatra in 2001, with his populist support base, dominated legitimate elections in 2001 and 2005. However, the chance for military reform during his tenure was missed due to elite competition for control of the military, power consolidation, and a rivalry with former Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda.

The growth and evolution of Thailand’s military have been shaped by an enduring culture of self-preservation, characterized by persistent efforts to exert influence over domestic political affairs and internal elite interference, rather than being driven by the presence of emerging internal or external threats. This article explores these dynamics through an examination of three distinct eras of military development in Thailand.

It assesses the extent to which SSR has been implemented, focusing on its significance for civil-military relations, the interplay between development and democratization, and the impact of defense measures on these processes. Additionally, it scrutinizes the modernization efforts of the Thai military in response to relevant and emerging security challenges.¹⁰

tatorships and Authoritarian Regimes, Insurrections Against,” in *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace, & Conflict* 3rd ed., ed. Lester R. Kurtz (Oxford: Academic Press, 2022), 425, <https://doi.org/10.1016/>.

⁷ Jun Honna, *Military Politics and Democratization in Indonesia* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

⁸ “Indonesian Politicians Are Giving the Armed Forces a Big Role in Government,” *The Economist*, 31 October 2019, <https://www.economist.com/>.

⁹ Andi Raihanah Ashar and Muhammad Fauzan Malufti, “Indonesian Military Modernization: A Race Against Time,” *The Diplomat*, 23 June 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

¹⁰ Alex J. Bellamy, “Security Sector Reform: Prospects and Problems,” *Global Change, Peace & Security* 15, no. 2 (1 June 2003), 102, <https://doi.org/>.

Finally, the article evaluates the potential for reform under a new semi-democratic government led by Srettha Thavisin, a former real estate businessman who has transitioned into the realm of Pheu Thai politics.

US Development of the Thai Military: 1950–1980

The early development of the Thai military became intertwined with Thailand's national economic growth, monarchical influence, and robust support from the United States. As Daniel Fineman details, both American pragmatism and geo-strategic considerations were key factors in the “special relationship that was cultivated under the military regimes of Phibun Songkhram and Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat between 1947–1958. For the Thai government and its military, described by Fineman as both “corrupt, undemocratic” and “brutal,” the rationale for the close relationship with the United States was based on finding allies to fight communism, and for Washington, the prevailing belief was that Thailand needed strong leadership to accomplish that task.¹¹ Pragmatism, coupled with Thailand's central location in a region marked by conflict, has long been a driving force behind US foreign policy in Southeast Asia. Thailand emerged as a stronghold against communist influence and, subsequently, as a pivotal base for both overt and covert military operations. This significance remains critical, despite the regime's lack of commitment to democratization and its clear repression of the population.

Sarit fostered a mutually beneficial relationship with the young King Bhumibol Adulyadej, marking a period in Thailand's history when the military collaborated harmoniously with the monarchy to legitimize what is now referred to as a “monarchized military” or a “parallel state.”¹² Sarit, an autocrat often described as a “cinematic picture of the Third World generalissimo,” enjoyed the backing of the Thai monarchy, which had grown disenchanted with the concept of democracy.¹³ Though the term *security-sector reform* did not gain common usage until after the Cold War, Washington held major concerns about the professionalism of Thai military leadership and its commitment to democracy and the rule of law. These concerns were later validated by the arbitrary arrests of journalists, politicians, and regime critics in November 1952.¹⁴

¹¹ Fineman, “*A Special Relationship*,” 1–5.

¹² Paul Chambers and Napisa Waitookiat, “The Resilience of Monarchised Military in Thailand,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 46, no. 3 (July 2, 2016), 425, <https://doi.org/>.

¹³ Paul Handley, *The King Never Smiles* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 139.

¹⁴ Craig J. Reynolds, *Thai Radical Discourse: The Real Face of Thai Feudalism Today*, Studies on Southeast Asia (Ithaca, NY: SEAP Publications, 1987), 27.

However, the United States prioritized its need for a client state and an ally against a resurgent China over normative considerations.¹⁵ Sarit's 1958 coup also raised worries in Washington, as they feared that their long-term investment in Thailand under Phibun might go to waste.¹⁶ Pragmatically, the Eisenhower administration downplayed the Thai coup, characterizing it as an "orderly attempt by the present ruling group to solidify its position."¹⁷ Washington needed assurances of Thailand's support, particularly as US efforts to establish a stable Laos against communist influence encountered political divisions in Vientiane. In response, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) initiated a covert war to disrupt supply lines between Laos and Vietnam.¹⁸

Balancing the potential for crises in their neighborhood, Thailand reaffirmed its commitment to consecutive American administrations. It hosted American troops and, in return, received substantial military assistance packages totaling over USD 1 billion between 1950 and 1971.¹⁹ Convinced of Thailand's role in creating an "anticommunist bastion," the United States initiated the development and modernization of the Thai military. By 1951, 28 arms shipments had arrived, sufficient to equip nine Royal Thai Army battalions, with US aid exceeding 2.5 times the size of the Thai military budget. An early CIA program also bolstered the police under Phao Siyanon.²⁰

The presence of the US military also directly benefited the emerging Thai economy. Thousands of Thais found employment in connection with the construction of military facilities, along with substantial economic assistance packages during this early period. For example, in the mid-1960s, more than 200 American combat aircraft were based in Thailand, with 9,000 US Air Force personnel. The construction of the B-52 air base at Utapao employed more than 2,000 Thais.²¹ Total US economic assistance amounted to USD 500 million through the end of 1970, with an additional USD 800 million in direct military assistance

¹⁵ Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 147, <https://doi.org/>.

¹⁶ Handley, *The King Never Smiles*, 139.

¹⁷ Baker and Pasuk, *A History of Thailand*, 147.

¹⁸ Fredrik Logevall, "Laos: America's Lesser Known Human and Political Disaster in Southeast Asia," *Washington Post*, 2 February 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

¹⁹ Bjorn Hagelin, "Military Dependency: Thailand and the Philippines," *Journal of Peace Research* 25, no. 4 (December 1, 1988), 433, <https://doi.org/>.

²⁰ Baker and Pasuk, *A History of Thailand*, 145.

²¹ Arne Kislenko, "A Not So Silent Partner: Thailand's Role in Covert Operations, Counter-Insurgency, and the Wars in Indochina," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 24, no. 1 (2004), 73, <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/>.

during the same period.²² The United States was the sole foreign supplier of arms to Thailand during this era.²³

The scope of American involvement in professionalization and modernization efforts is extensively documented in the 1974 CIA *National Intelligence Survey* on the Thai Armed Forces. To start, Thailand had meticulously patterned its service schools after those of the United States, incorporating instruction and direct translations of materials delivered by US-trained instructors. By January 1974, over 9,000 Thai military personnel had undergone training in US military schools, with many subsequently assuming instructional roles in Thai-led training institutions.²⁴ Washington initially equipped the Royal Thai Army with weaponry from the Korean War era, including 155mm, 105mm, and 75mm howitzers, 40mm anti aircraft guns, 4.2-inch mortars, and .50 caliber machine guns. Armaments included M41A3 Walker Bulldog tanks and M-113 personnel carriers. Through 1974, the United States was the source of 90 percent of the Thai Army's materiel requirements.²⁵

A pivotal development during this phase of Thailand's military evolution revolved around the recognition of both internal and external threats. These threats encompassed subversion from within and an externally mobilized and aggressive threat emanating from communism. While Thailand initially had limited concerns about its internal security until 1965, the emergence of Southeast Asia as a new theater in the Cold War brought Thailand's foreign policy into closer alignment with Washington.²⁶ The US Department of State and the CIA collaborated to forge an anti-communist partnership, with the United States, during the Johnson administration, authorizing a comprehensive counterinsurgency (COIN) program. This program shifted its focus away from central or urban areas to Thailand's northeast. In 1964, 64 percent of grant aid was directed at Thailand's borders with Cambodia and Laos, a figure that rose to more than 68 percent by 1967. The USAID program encompassed two primary categories: COIN and nation building, with the former designated as the higher priority.²⁷

²² George J. Viksnins, "United States Military Spending and the Economy of Thailand, 1967-1972," *Asian Survey* 13, no. 5 (1973), 441, <https://doi.org/>.

²³ Hagelin, "Military Dependency: Thailand and the Philippines," 435.

²⁴ "Thailand: National Intelligence Survey" (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, April 1974), 3.

²⁵ "CIA, "National Intelligence Survey," 14.

²⁶ Bob Bergin, "Defeating an Insurgency—The Thai Effort against the Communist Party of Thailand, 1965–ca. 1982," *Studies in Intelligence* 60, no. 2 (June 2016), 26.

²⁷ R. Sean Randolph, "The Limits of Influence: American Aid to Thailand, 1965-70," *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 6, no. 4 (1979), 247.

Later, in August 1965, the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) announced its intention to overthrow the military government and establish a Marxist-inspired regime.²⁸ This sense of urgency prompted the first-ever visit by a US president to Thailand, as Lyndon Johnson toured the newly-constructed USD 75-million naval base in the Gulf of Siam.²⁹ The substantial US presence in Thailand was not only highly visible but also raised concerns that due to the volume of ordnance dropped on Vietnam from Thai-based facilities, American bases might inadvertently foster a local insurgency.³⁰

However, from the American perspective, as outlined in a Contemporary Historical Evaluation of Combat Operation (CHECO) Division report on COIN in Thailand from January 1967 to December 1968, the origins and rationale of the insurgency remained speculative at first. The number of clashes along border areas was difficult to confirm and did not clearly indicate the extent of activities such as clandestine operations, propaganda, or recruiting. The Thai government categorized all criminal activities as “subversive” without distinguishing their nature. In fact, it was challenging for the US Air Force to ascertain the existence of a communist insurgency threat.³¹

The CHECO Report highlighted similar views held by scholars of that era, suggesting that Thailand was not an ideal recruiting ground. The population, despite being economically disadvantaged, was neither malnourished nor prone to violence or militancy.³² According to a US Department of Agriculture report from January 1968, Thailand’s rice crop for 1967 was approximately 10 million metric tons, which was close to Burma’s annual output.³³

However, as US operations continued in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, the American military began to perceive an insurgent threat. This threat did not arise from the conversion or recruitment of Thais, but rather from the destabilization of Laos and significant military offensives, such as the Tet Offensive by the Viet Cong (VC) in January 1968. During this period, US Ambassador Leonard Seidman Unger noted, “[even] though we have no solid information regarding [plans

²⁸ Jeffrey M. Moore, “The Thai Way of Counterinsurgency” (dissertation, University of Exeter, 2010), 65, <https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/>.

²⁹ Frank C. Darling, “America and Thailand,” *Asian Survey* 7, no. 4 (1967), 213, <https://doi.org/>.

³⁰ Al McCoy, “Subcontracting Counterinsurgency,” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 3, no. 2 (February 1971), 57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/>.

³¹ “COIN in Thailand: January 1967–December 1968” (San Francisco: HQ PACAF Directorate, Tactical Evaluation CHECO Division, 1969), 1–2, <https://apps.dtic.mil/>.

³² “COIN in Thailand: January 1967–December 1968,” 6.

³³ “Rice Situation,” RS-12 (Washington, DC: Economic Research Service, US Department of Agriculture, 1968), 7.

to attack installations in Thailand by air, mortar, or other means] we cannot afford to take any unnecessary risk.”³⁴ While only minor incidents occurred, the United States grew concerned that its military presence in Thailand was reaching a critical point, especially among those labeled as subversives by the Thai government.³⁵

Taking a broader view, the establishment of a joint COIN effort provided a renewed sense of purpose for the Thai military. Its primary objective was to safeguard newly-constructed American bases against potential, yet unforeseen adversaries. The COIN strategy comprised three major components: administration, rural development, and rural security. Notably, the rural security aspect constituted the largest element of the USAID-funded program.³⁶ Arguably, the provision of training, equipment, and logistical support to new segments of the security apparatus, including the Thai Border Patrol Police, institutionalized a lasting presence of both military and paramilitary elements within the fabric of Thai society. This also reinforced the concept that the military should play a central role in the development of the Thai state, driven by an insular vision in which it held responsibility for safeguarding national security and preserving the Thai monarchy.³⁷

The COIN effort redefined the boundaries of military involvement, exemplified by the formation of the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), a political arm of the Thai military. ISOC not only supervised the conflict with the CPT but engaged in paramilitary activities aimed at suppressing dissent, leading to widespread political violence in 1973 and 1976.³⁸ The military and the monarchy collaborated on various fronts, disseminating pro-monarchy, ideology-driven propaganda to counter CPT efforts in the northeast and establishing village-oriented groups and paramilitary organizations to identify and curb subversive elements within Thai society.³⁹

³⁴ “COIN in Thailand: January 1967–December 1968,” 16.

³⁵ Jayakrishna Baral, “U.S. Involvement in Thai Security,” *China Report* 9, no. 4 (1973): 16–28, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/000944557300900403>.

³⁶ Ralph Thaxton, “Modernization and Counter-Revolution in Thailand,” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 5, no. 4 (1 December 1973), 32, <https://doi.org/>.

³⁷ Napisa Waitookiat 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, 2013), 82.

³⁸ Siwach Sripokangkul and Mark S. Cogan, “Political Demonology, Dehumanization, and Contemporary Thai Politics,” *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review* 19, no. 2 (June 2019): 115–30.

³⁹ Katherine A. Bowie, *Rituals of National Loyalty: An Anthropology of the State and the Village Scout Movement in Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); and Prajak Kongkirati, “Counter-Movements in Democratic Transition: Thai Right-Wing Movements after the 1973 Popular Uprising,” *Asian Review* 19, no. 1 (2006): 101–34.

However, despite the substantial support provided to the Thai military by the United States, encompassing firearms, weapons training, administration, psychological operations, and intelligence, the kingdom's victory over the CPT in the early 1980s did not result from superior military capacity. Rather, it stemmed from the fact that the young students who had joined the CPT ranks exhibited little inclination for guerrilla warfare and were receptive to the amnesty proposals presented by the Thai government.⁴⁰ Additionally, the CPT's diminishing ability to secure support from foreign entities like China and Vietnam sealed its demise.⁴¹

Nonetheless, despite the reported success of the counterinsurgency campaign, the CIA's 1974 assessment identified two pivotal developments concerning the achievements in building the Thai military. Firstly, while acknowledging the Thai military's capability to withstand an independent attack from countries such as Malaysia, Laos, Cambodia, or Burma (Myanmar), it highlighted that confronting a joint "invasion" by North Vietnam and/or China would necessitate foreign assistance and materiel.⁴²

Secondly, the CIA expressed apprehension over persisting weaknesses among senior military officers. These weaknesses encompassed negligence in supervising command and training units beyond the battalion level. Furthermore, there was a prevalent "preoccupation of senior officers with politics and their personal economic interests."⁴³ This early recognition sets the stage for the second section of this article, delving into Thailand's failure to implement necessary security reforms and modernization after a shift in foreign policy resulted in enhanced relations with neighboring states. It also explores the extent to which high-ranking elites vied for increased control and personal gain.

Toward an Exploitative Military: 1980–2006

Following its development and buildup, the Thai military did not adopt a modernization strategy for several decades. Instead, the Thai armed services, laden with high-ranking military officials and politically-connected elites wielding influence, pursued a strategy of self-enrichment. Rather than seeking a distinct or broader regional role, the military immersed itself in domestic political affairs. This persis-

⁴⁰ Puangthong Pawakapan, *Infiltrating Society: The Thai Military's Internal Security Affairs* (Singapore: IS-EAS Publishing, 2021), 22; and Duncan McCargo, "Security, Development and Political Participation in Thailand: Alternative Currencies of Legitimacy," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 24, no. 1 (2002), 52.

⁴¹ Kevin Hewison, "Thailand: An Old Relationship Renewed," *Pacific Review* 31, no. 1 (2 January 2018), 118, <https://doi.org/>.

⁴² "CIA, "National Intelligence Survey," 12.

⁴³ "CIA, "National Intelligence Survey," 11.

tent interference in civilian politics perpetuated a pattern of striving for greater control over Thai society. A substantial body of literature addresses this issue, with Thailand ensnared in a recurring “coup trap,” as the military has intervened in numerous coups and coup attempts since the 1932 Revolution. These interventions are consistently rationalized and justified by the perceived need to defend the monarchy as an institution.⁴⁴

In 1972, David Morell identified some of the factors in Thai society that legitimized military interference. These included bureaucrats seeking to expedite the passage of their legislative proposals, cliques advocating for new or established foreign policies, officers aiming to accelerate communist suppression, and competition for political power among military leaders and Cabinet members.⁴⁵ In the post-CPT era, the military entered a phase of rapid monarchization under Prem, with pro-monarchy military factions becoming dominant.

However, it is overly simplistic to suggest that this symbiotic relationship between the military and monarchy was the sole significant development post-1980. As Paul Chambers later argued, the Thai military evolved into a “praetorian state” and a “khakistocracy,” characterized by extensive collusion among “tycoons, royals, and religious leaders.”⁴⁶ The shift toward a self-serving, predatory military was not a strategic choice but rather the outcome of internal struggles among various military factions vying for increased control, not only over political affairs in Thailand but also over the military itself. An illustration of this stagnation in Thailand’s military modernization and professionalism was the change in Thailand’s foreign policy initiated during General Chatichai Choonhavan’s premiership. He pledged to “turn battlefields into marketplaces” and pursued a policy of greater regional cooperation, as well as a degree of appeasement and accommodation with the Burmese regime of the time.⁴⁷

David Morell’s argument regarding various “cliques” pursuing distinct foreign policies finds relevance here, particularly in the context of Myanmar. The Thai security apparatus, including the military, veered away from Western pressures and,

⁴⁴ John B. Londregan and Keith T. Poole, “Poverty, The Coup Trap, and the Seizure of Executive Power,” *World Politics* 42, no. 2 (1990): 151–83, <https://doi.org/>; and Nicholas Farrelly, “Why Democracy Struggles: Thailand’s Elite Coup Culture,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 67, no. 3 (1 June 2013), 281, <https://doi.org/>.

⁴⁵ David Morell, “Thailand: Military Checkmate,” *Asian Survey* 12, no. 2 (1972), 162–63.

⁴⁶ Paul Chambers, “Assessing the Monarchized Military and Khakistocracy,” in *Coup, King, Crisis: A Critical Interregnum in Thailand*, ed. Pavin Chachavalpongpun, Yale Southeast Asia Studies (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 170.

⁴⁷ Mark S. Cogan and Vivek Mishra, “India–Thailand Security Cooperation: Strengthening the Indo-Pacific Resolve,” *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 7, no. 1 (April 2020), 38, <https://doi.org/>.

through a new policy of “constructive engagement,” brokered a series of security and economic agreements with Myanmar’s State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).⁴⁸ Concurrently, a series of clandestine, black-market exchanges emerged in tandem with Thailand’s military arrangements with Myanmar. This was exemplified, in part, by SLORC’s attempts in the early 1990s to order 20 million rounds of small arms ammunition through Thai intermediaries.⁴⁹

Certain branches of the military have been caught undermining Thailand’s gun control legislation. In 2001, a senior Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) officer was apprehended after armed military personnel pilfered 30 Glock semi-automatic pistols from a warehouse at Don Mueang Airport in Bangkok. Thailand’s Interior Ministry uncovered that the military was being utilized as a conduit to circumvent restrictions on the number of weapons that could be sold to private gun shops. Although the law provided a tax-free import of weapons as a “welfare benefit” for officers, the Thai judiciary compelled the RTAF to reimburse fraudulently avoided import duties during this period.⁵⁰

As Duncan McCargo highlighted in a similar context, the Thai military seemed to avoid “potentially hazardous situations,” as military officers “devote their energies to referred to devote their energies to the more interesting and satisfying professions of business and politics,” some of which involved smuggling and exploitative natural resource extraction.⁵¹ For example, in the interest of its own national security, the military knowingly allowed a black-market opium trade to flourish in Myanmar, deliberately neglecting narcotics control, even as opium production surged significantly.⁵² Between 1987 and 1995, opium levels in Myanmar escalated from 836 tons to 2,340 tons, with cultivation areas expanding from 93,200 hectares to 154,000 over the same period, coinciding with a substantial increase in the number of heroin refineries.⁵³ Military-controlled governments, given that Thai prime ministers often emerge from high-ranking military ranks, demonstrated a

⁴⁸ Leszek Buszynski, “Thailand and Myanmar: The Perils of ‘Constructive Engagement,’” *Pacific Review* 11, no. 2 (1 January 1998), 290–91, <https://doi.org/>.

⁴⁹ Martin Smith, “The Burmese Way to Rack and Ruin,” *Index on Censorship* 20, no. 10 (1 November 1991), 45, <https://doi.org/>.

⁵⁰ David Capie, *Small Arms Production and Transfers in Southeast Asia*, Canberra Papers on Strategy & Defence 146 (Canberra: Australia National University, 2002).

⁵¹ McCargo, “Security, Development and Political Participation in Thailand,” 51.

⁵² Ronald Cima, *Narcotics and the Police and Military Forces of South and Southeast Asia* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, August 1986), 6, <https://apps.dtic.mil/>.

⁵³ Patrick Meehan, “Drugs, Insurgency and State-Building in Burma: Why the Drugs Trade Is Central to Burma’s Changing Political Order,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 42, no. 3 (2011), 382, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

willingness to be pragmatic in pursuit of their political and economic objectives through a policy of constructive engagement.

These trends persisted, despite domestic upheavals, as seen in 1991 when other high-ranking members of the Thai military, including Royal Thai Army General Sunthorn Kongsompong and members of Class Five of the prestigious Chulachomklao Military Academy, General Deputy Army Chief Gen. Issarapong Noonpakdi, and Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army General Suchinda Kraprayoon, ousted Prime Minister Chatichai from power in a February coup. The official justification for the coup was unexplained wealth. However, the so-called “Kra-pakdee clique,” led by Suchinda, had held senior roles in state enterprises, including the Port Authority of Thailand, the State Railway of Thailand, and Thai Airways International.⁵⁴

The 1991 coup and the subsequent 1992 “Black May” street violence temporarily loosened the military’s influence and control over Thai society. The Thai monarchy remained undiminished due to a royal intervention by King Bhumibol and the workings of a “network monarchy.”⁵⁵ Prem, under the control of the Privy Council, increased monarchical influence over the armed services. After the Black May violence, General Suchinda was publicly admonished and replaced by more senior statesmen, including senior diplomat Anand Panyarachun and later Chuan Leekpai.

Chuan won a closely-monitored election, with his Democrat Party earning 79 parliamentary seats and forming a coalition government with four other political parties. It was during Prime Minister Chuan’s tenure that Thailand began to curb the military’s influence and initiate the process of embracing military modernization. While this policy direction would resurface after the 2006 coup d’état, two important documents, a “Master Plan for Regional Cooperation or the Creation of a New Equilibrium” in 1993 and a 1994 White Paper issued by the Defense Ministry, suggested that the military should no longer merely safeguard its interests but promote political cooperation between neighboring Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries and China.⁵⁶ This shift required a departure from an exploitative foreign policy.

Unfortunately, the successive premierships of Banharn Silpa-archa and General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, marked by systemic corruption and inattention to Thailand’s economic vulnerabilities, contributed to the 1997 Asian economic crisis. This

⁵⁴ John McKinnon, “Can the Military Be Sidelined?” *Pacific Viewpoint* 33, no. 2 (1992), 130, <https://doi.org/>.

⁵⁵ McCargo, “Network Monarchy,” 508.

⁵⁶ McCargo, “Security, Development and Political Participation in Thailand,” 53.

crisis opened the door to the populist Thaksin Shinawatra era, which brought significant changes to Thailand's foreign policy and the composition of its military.

Instead of pursuing demilitarization or SSR, Thaksin prioritized personalized control. A clear example of this strategy was his formation of a clique of Thaksin loyalists within the military. This was evident early on through his appointments, such as his cousins General Uthai Shinawatra as deputy director of the Defense Ministry's Planning and Policy Office and Lieutenant General Chaisit Shinawatra as deputy commander of the Armed Forces Development Headquarters.⁵⁷ Many senior positions in the Royal Thai Navy, Army, and Air Force were filled by members of Thaksin's Class 10 of the Armed Forces Academies Preparatory School. These appointments included Admiral Werayut Uttamot as Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Third Fleet, Major General Chatchai Thawonbudtra as Army Advisor, and Captain Siripong Wanuntrakul as Chief of the Air Staff, among others.⁵⁸

Thaksin also acquiesced to substantial budgetary requests for the military, a departure from the previous administration under Chuan.⁵⁹ As McCargo noted, "[ties] between Thaksin and the Army [undermined] principles of military professionalism and neutrality, a potentially dangerous state of affairs," suggesting that the separation between the executive and the military had never been complete and that Thaksin was repeating the mistakes of the past.⁶⁰

During the Thaksin era, there was a shift in military priorities. Initially, Thaksin hesitated to become involved, in part due to the large Muslim population in Thailand's southernmost provinces. However, the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks and the subsequent pressure on US allies to contribute to the global war on terror (GWOT), along with concerns about international terrorist groups using Southeast Asia as a staging area for attacks, prompted some action by the Thaksin government.⁶¹ Thaksin's approach to the southern insurgency, while seen as heavy-handed and damaging to human rights and internal security, was driven by a perspective of maintaining law and order rather than countering terrorism.⁶²

⁵⁷ Duncan McCargo and Ukrist Pathmanand, *The Thaksinization of Thailand*, NIAS Studies in Contemporary Asian History 4 (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2005), 135–36.

⁵⁸ McCargo and Ukrist, *The Thaksinization of Thailand*, 138–39.

⁵⁹ McCargo and Ukrist, *The Thaksinization of Thailand*, 151.

⁶⁰ McCargo and Ukrist, *The Thaksinization of Thailand*, 155–57.

⁶¹ Kavi Chongkittavorn, "Thailand: International Terrorism and the Muslim South," in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2004*, ed. Daljit Singh and Kin Wah Chin (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2004) 267–76, <https://doi.org/>.

⁶² Mark S. Cogan and Vivek Mishra, "Regionalism and Bilateral Counter-Terrorism Cooperation: The Case of India and Thailand," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 16, no. 3 (2 September 2021), 249, <https://doi.org/10.1080/>.

Under internal and external pressure, Thaksin eventually pledged Thailand's support for the GWOT, deploying troops to Iraq and aiding in the capture of Nujrman Riduan bin Isomuddin, a top leader of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) with close ties to al-Qaeda. It was reported that JI planned the Bali bombings in Indonesia from safehouses in Bangkok.⁶³ American SSR efforts during that period, mainly through the Cobra Gold joint military exercises, began to incorporate more counterterrorism components.⁶⁴ These joint exercises, along with similar exercises with Australia and Japan, helped professionalize the military by imparting transferable skills to personnel of different ranks.

The Post-Coup Thai Military: 2006–2023

The 2006 and 2014 coups, which removed both Thaksin and his sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, were driven by elite distrust and suspicion of the power structures that Thaksin had established both during his time in office and while in exile. As noted by Kevin Hewison, the prevailing opinion about the 2006 coup was that it was a “justified coup” necessary to remove the corrupt elements of the Thaksin era and “restore democracy” through military intervention.⁶⁵ Similar justifications were put forth after the May 2014 coup, with the Prayut-led military junta claiming it was “returning happiness to the Thai people.” Many Thais welcomed the military's presence in the streets and at junta-sponsored public events.⁶⁶

The justification for Thailand's multiple military coups often revolves around the issue of systemic corruption. Arguments put forth by both the military and civilian factions, particularly the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), were centered on allegations of corruption involving Thaksin and his tendency to derive personal gains from public office.⁶⁷ In a broader sense, as pointed out by Pavin Chachavalpongpun, the Thai military saw itself as the “moral compass” of the nation, which legitimized the coup against Thaksin as the only means to save democracy, cleanse politics of corruption, remove corrupt politicians, and restore stability.⁶⁸

⁶³ Cogan and Mishra, “Regionalism and Bilateral Counter-Terrorism Cooperation,” 249.

⁶⁴ Seth Robson, “Troops Leave Cobra Gold Exercise with Understanding of Role in Regional Security — and Maybe a Few Tattoos,” *Stars and Stripes*, 1 June 2004, <https://www.stripes.com/>.

⁶⁵ Kevin Hewison, “Thailand after the ‘Good’ Coup,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 14, no. 1 (2008), 237, <https://bjwa.brown.edu/>.

⁶⁶ Kate Hodal, “Thai junta ‘brings happiness to the people’ with parties and selfies,” *The Guardian*, 4 June 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

⁶⁷ Aim Sinpeng, “Corruption, Morality, and the Politics of Reform in Thailand,” *Asian Politics & Policy* 6, no. 4 (2014), 525, <https://doi.org/>.

⁶⁸ Pavin Chachavalpongpun, “Thaksin, the Military, and Thailand's Protracted Political Crisis,” in *The Political Resurgence of the Military in Southeast Asia*, ed. Marcus Mietzner, Contemporary Southeast Asia Series

However, corruption isn't the sole motivator, as evidenced by both the coups against Chatchai and Thaksin. While Thaksin had garnered attention for his conflicts with Prem's monarchist establishment and his attempts to shape the military for personal gain, Chatchai was ostensibly ousted for similar reasons—his clash with the financial interests of the military and the personal interests of its elite members.⁶⁹ Following the pattern of the justifications for the Thaksin coup, the 2014 coup against Yingluck aimed to excise the political influence of Thaksin.⁷⁰

The coups against Thaksin and Yingluck represented significant challenges to the efforts to professionalize and bring the Thai military under civilian control. The 2007 Constitution, which replaced the People's Constitution of 1998, characterized by democratic processes and public input, established a culture of impunity.⁷¹ It offered amnesty for those involved in the 2006 coup and empowered the military to allocate funds for the "protection and upholding of its independence, sovereignty, security of State, institution of kingship, national interests and the democratic regime of government with the King as Head of State, and for national development."⁷² As noted by Aurel Croissant and others, the military sought to prevent the rise of a Thaksin-like figure by disbanding the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) Party. The Constitutional Court, originally established to foster judicial independence, was granted the authority to investigate and prosecute political parties, Members of Parliament, and other independent institutions.⁷³

Both coups had some consequences for SSR efforts and modernization, but primarily in the context of US concerns about the state of Thai democratization. In both cases, there were impacts on US weapons sales, particularly in 2014 when US Foreign Military Financing (FMF), which supports defense equipment, training, and services, was reduced. Additionally, USD 1.3 million in funding under the

(New York: Routledge, 2011), 47.

⁶⁹ Miron Mushkat, "Policy Implications of Thailand's Unexpected Coup," *International Studies* 29, no. 2 (1992), 163, <https://doi.org/>.

⁷⁰ Chris Baker, "The 2014 Thai Coup and Some Roots of Authoritarianism," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 46, no. 3 (2016), 389, <https://doi.org/>.

⁷¹ Somchai Preechasinlapakun, "Dynamics and Institutionalization of Coups in the Thai Constitution," VRF 483 (Chiba: Institute for Developing Economies - Japan External Trade Organization, 2013), 30, <https://www.ide.go.jp/>.

⁷² Aurel Croissant et al., "Thailand: Civilian Control Deterred," in *Democratization and Civilian Control in Asia*, ed. Aurel Croissant et al., Critical Studies of the Asia Pacific Series (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013), <https://doi.org/>.

⁷³ Croissant, et. al., "Thailand: Civilian Control Deterred," 170.

International Military Education and Training (IMET) program, which allows Thai officers to attend US military institutions, was terminated.⁷⁴

The pressure for democratization exerted by the Obama Administration proved ineffective due to Thailand's deepening relationship with China. As nurtured over the years, Michael Chambers suggested that the growing closeness between China and Thailand represents a mutually beneficial relationship that drove them towards stronger ties, which was particularly advantageous for Thailand as it gained a major trading partner.⁷⁵ According to World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS) data, China has become one of Thailand's largest trading partners, with USD 66 billion worth of Chinese goods imported into Thailand and USD 36.5 billion exported to China in 2021.⁷⁶

However, this was not the sole reason for the expanded ties. Thai foreign policy adjusted after the US withdrawal from the region in the mid-1970s, leading to a significant improvement in Sino-Thai relations. Beijing offered Bangkok protection from Vietnamese aggression through the provision of weaponry and deals at "friendship" prices.⁷⁷ It became evident that China viewed Thailand not only as a potential partner but also as a reliable buyer of Chinese arms. Thailand had been procuring weapons from foreign manufacturers since a significant foreign policy shift following the Vietnam conflict. During this period, arms acquisitions from China's state-owned industries notably increased, especially when US restrictions limited Bangkok's options.

Starting in 2015, Thailand entered into multiple defense agreements with China, including the purchase of NORINCO-made VT4 battle tanks, the procurement of three S26T diesel submarines, and a proposal by Defense Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan to establish a joint military facility for manufacturing Chinese small arms and drones.⁷⁸

Furthermore, in the post-coup era, Thailand expanded joint military drills, including the Falcon Strike exercise held at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base, which originated in 2015.⁷⁹ Joint Strike, an Army exercise, and the Blue Strike naval

⁷⁴ Emma Chanlett-Avery, Ben Dolven, and Kirt Smith, *Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 11 September 2019), 2, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/>.

⁷⁵ Michael R. Chambers, "The Chinese and the Thais Are Brothers: The Evolution of the Sino-Thai Friendship," *Journal of Contemporary China* 14, no. 45 (2005): 599–629, <https://doi.org/>.

⁷⁶ "Thailand Monthly Trade Data," World Integrated Trade Solution, 2023, <https://wits.worldbank.org/>.

⁷⁷ Chambers, "The Chinese and the Thais Are Brothers," 616.

⁷⁸ Mark S. Cogan, "Is Thailand Accommodating China?," *Southeast Asian Social Science Review* 4, no. 2 (1 December 2019), 39, <https://papers.ssrn.com/>.

⁷⁹ "China-Thailand Joint Air Force Training Exercise 'Falcon Strike 2022' to Kick off," Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, 12 August 2022, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/>.

exercise, which began in 2010 but expanded under Prayut in 2016 to include more than 1,000 Thai and Chinese participants, now encompass a wide range of armaments, including helicopters, tanks, guns, and speedboats.⁸⁰

Subsequent US administrations saw a return to greater cooperation, including access to IMET and FMF programs. Cobra Gold activities also resumed at normal capacity, although the focus of each training exercise varied, encompassing counterterrorism, humanitarian relief, interoperability, maritime security, and disaster response.

The most significant and problematic development during this era was the ongoing interference in domestic political affairs, highlighted by the enactment of the 2017 Thai Constitution. This constitution imposed significant restrictions on normal democratic processes by introducing junta-selected senators.⁸¹ The process was predominantly internal within the Prayut government, with final approval and some additions authorized by King Vajiralongkorn. This, however, led to some tensions between the two institutions.⁸² In 2019, King Vajiralongkorn took control over two Army units through a royal decree, the 1st and 11th Infantry Regiments, which were directly assigned to the Royal Security Command.⁸³ Both the military and the monarchy made substantial efforts to shape Thai society, including the approval of a controversial national development plan that granted the military significant control over Thailand's national development for the next two decades.⁸⁴

The 2017 Constitution, which Thai voters approved in a 2016 referendum, accelerated military control at the expense of established political parties. Similar to what would happen in the aftermath of the May 2023 election, the new charter reduced the likelihood of any one political party securing an outright majority government. This was because the 250 senators, handpicked by the junta, were granted the authority to select the next prime minister. Furthermore, the requirements for the office of prime minister were modified, eliminating the need for a potential candidate to be an elected member of the Thai Parliament. This change favored then-Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha, who had assumed power through

⁸⁰ Prashanth Parameswaran, "China, Thailand Kick Off Military Exercise Blue Strike 2016," *The Diplomat*, 23 May 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

⁸¹ Hiroshi Kotani and Yukako Ono, "Thailand's New Constitution Favors the Monarchy and Military," *Nikkei Asia*, 13 April 2017, <https://asia.nikkei.com/>.

⁸² Eugénie Mériéau, "Seeking More Power, Thailand's New King Is Moving the Country Away from Being a Constitutional Monarchy," *The Conversation*, 3 February 2017, <http://theconversation.com/>.

⁸³ "Thailand's King Takes Personal Control of Two Key Army Units," *Reuters*, 1 October 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

⁸⁴ Marwaan Macan-Markar, "Thai Military Draws up 20-Year National Political Blueprint," *Nikkei Asia*, 19 July 2018, <https://asia.nikkei.com/>.

nonconstitutional means and had never been elected as a Member of Parliament (MP). The appointed senators included *ex officio* military commanders and former members of the now-defunct National Legislative Assembly (NLA).⁸⁵

Evidenced by recurrent political crises stemming from dysfunctional political institutions, the revised electoral system, a mixed-member proportional representation (MMP) regime, also heightened the likelihood of instability within Thailand's legislative branch. This, in turn, created an environment conducive to fragile coalitions and obstacles in passing reform-oriented legislation.⁸⁶ The combination of fragility and a perceived sense of crisis has historically been used to justify military intervention in domestic affairs.

During this same period, Thailand actively pursued military modernization, particularly through a 2017 act aligning defense strategy with its National Strategic Development Plan (2017–2036) and its National Strategic Defence Plan (2017–2036). However, this approach appeared haphazard and somewhat irrational. While the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted crucial training and interoperability efforts, Thailand's plans for local defense manufacturing were also interrupted. There was an increased focus on security relations with both Russia and India, partly due to strained relations with the United States. This was evident in Moscow's interest in the Thai arms market and New Delhi's broader security interests in the region following the 2008 Mumbai attacks and the evolving security crisis along its shared border with Myanmar.⁸⁷ Furthermore, the local manufacturing base in Kanchanaburi faced challenges such as a lack of innovation, weak local governance, and a shortage of skills at the local level required to make a local defense industry competitive.⁸⁸

Moreover, there are questions regarding the alignment of purchases from both China and the United States, as well as other foreign suppliers, with the proposed modernization plan. The lack of attention to SSR has compromised Thailand's ability to develop weapons that effectively meet the military's needs in response to external threats. For instance, the acquisition of Chinese-made S26T diesel submarines, totaling over USD 1 billion, drew criticism due to the scale of the pro-

⁸⁵ Khemthong Tonsakulrungruang, "Thailand's National Legislative Assembly," *New Mandala* (blog), 24 August 2014, <https://www.newmandala.org/>.

⁸⁶ Enze Han and Sirada Khemanitthathai, "Thailand: The Baffling Mathematics That Helps to Keep the Junta in Power," *The Conversation*, 17 April 2019, <http://theconversation.com/>.

⁸⁷ Dmitry Gorenburg and Paul Schwartz, "Russia's Relations with Southeast Asia," *Russie.NEI.Reports* (Paris: IFRI, March 2019), 39 <https://www.ifri.org/>; and Cogan and Mishra, "India–Thailand Security Cooperation," 39–40.

⁸⁸ Hadrien Saperstein, "A Reckoning for Thailand's Indigenous Defence Industry," *The Interpreter*, 9 December 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/>.

curement. Additionally, a German engine supplier declined to provide engines for these submarines, citing a long-standing embargo with China related to the Tiananmen Square massacre.⁸⁹ The Prayut government faced significant criticism for the procurement of GT200 fake bomb detectors, which raised alarm as various military units and other agencies spent over 1.4 billion baht on nearly 1,400 counterfeit detection devices. This prompted concerns that the Thai military had not taken sufficient measures to ensure transparency, accountability, and quality control in its acquisitions.⁹⁰

Furthermore, the attempted purchase of US-made F-35 fighter jets, at an estimated cost of approximately USD 408 million, was denied due to issues related to training and technical requirements. This occurred despite Thailand being designated as a Major Non-NATO Ally in 2003.⁹¹ The deepening relations between Thailand and China have also raised significant concerns among analysts.⁹²

During Prayut's more than nine years of military rule, elite exploitation and corruption within the Thai military escalated. Personal relationships with foreign militaries not only affected the professionalism of higher-ranking military personnel but also amplified military influence and private profit motives in shaping foreign policy decisions.

For instance, when Myanmar experienced a coup in February 2021, General Min Aung Hlaing sought counsel from Thailand's military. Many of these personal relationships date back to 2012 when General Hlaing was named the "adopted son" of Prem Tinsulanonda.⁹³ These interpersonal ties raise concerns about ongoing corruption and a significant departure from Thailand's prior constructive engagement policy, which, while exploitative, was lucrative and extended support to an isolated Tatmadaw regime in Myanmar.

An example of this concerning trend is a 2019 deal with the junta-run Myanmar Economic Corporation, which allocated over USD 1 million to construct a fuel terminal on land seized from rural farmers.⁹⁴ The implications of these personal

⁸⁹ Mike Yeo, "Thai Submarine Purchase Hits Rough Seas," *Defense News*, 28 August 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/>.

⁹⁰ Nopporn Wong-Anan, "GT200 Scam Tests Regime's Mettle," *Bangkok Post*, 23 June 2016, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

⁹¹ "Thailand Air Force Says U.S. Has Denied Request to Buy F-35 Jets," *Reuters*, 25 May 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

⁹² "Thai Plan to Acquire F-35 Fighter Jets Poses Dilemma for Washington," *Radio Free Asia*, 16 February 2022, <https://www.rfa.org/>.

⁹³ "Former Thai Army Chief Is 'Godfather' to Burma's Top General," *The Irrawaddy*, 16 July 2014, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/>.

⁹⁴ "Myanmar: Thai State-Owned Company Funds Junta," *Human Rights Watch*, 25 May 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/>.

ties have prompted criticism regarding the depth of Thailand's relationships with the Myanmar junta and their impact on the broader ASEAN effort to address the regional crisis. While some ASEAN states like Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore have pursued a policy of isolation, Thailand remains among a select few, including Cambodia and Laos, that have chosen to engage with the junta. This has caused a division within ASEAN, with some states prioritizing security interests and pragmatic national security considerations.

Conclusion: The Srettha Government and Military Relations

The progressive Move Forward Party (MFP), in coalition with the Pheu Thai Party, managed to defeat the military and monarchy-aligned conservative parties in the 2019 election. However, the 2017 Constitution played a crucial role in the post-May 2023 election crisis, where junta-appointed senators wielded significant influence and power over the final outcome. Pragmatism on the part of Pheu Thai led to a deal to “make friends with the devil,” where a Thaksin-aligned party formed a coalition with several conservative parties, including those that had previously played a role in removing both Thaksin and Yingluck from political office.⁹⁵ The resulting semi-democratic government, led by real estate businessman turned Pheu Thai candidate Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin, complicates efforts to reform the Thai military and achieve modernization and professionalization objectives, which had been a key campaign focus for MFP, its former coalition partner.⁹⁶ One of the concessions made by Pheu Thai to the military-aligned parties was allowing Prayut to handpick the next generation of military leaders as part of the annual military reshuffle.⁹⁷

Srettha's relationship with the military remains somewhat unpredictable, as he has recently offered measured public praise for the armed services, acknowledging that the military “has done many good things”, while also noting some unresolved issues from the past.⁹⁸ Srettha has engaged in a series of meetings with the military to “bridge the divide” between the public and armed forces. Changes are likely to

⁹⁵ Koh Ewe, “How Thailand Finally Got Its New Prime Minister,” *TIME*, 22 August 2023, <https://time.com/>.

⁹⁶ Bryan Pietsch, “Meet the Ivy-Educated Opposition Leader Who Could End Thai Military Rule,” *Washington Post*, 15 May 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

⁹⁷ Patpicha Tanakasempipat, “Prayuth Makes Key Military Appointments Before Leaving Office,” *Bloomberg News*, 31 August 2023, <https://www.bnnbloomberg.ca/>; and Francesca Regalado, “Thailand's Pheu Thai Coalition Adds Largest pro-Military Party,” *Nikkei Asia*, 21 August 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/>.

⁹⁸ Bloomberg, “Thailand to Hold US Security Talks, PM Says as He Skips Asean,” *Bangkok Post*, 4 September 2023, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

be gradual, as indicated by a September announcement that military procurement would involve economic benefits and deals to import products from Thailand.⁹⁹

Pheu Thai has also consulted with former defense ministers, including General Thammarak Isarangkura na Ayudhaya, a former Thaksin defense minister turned Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) campaigner.¹⁰⁰ Complicating matters was Pheu Thai's selection of Sutin Klungsang as Defense Minister. While Sutin would be only the second civilian to hold this position, his expertise has been in education rather than defense matters.¹⁰¹

Recent developments between the end of the Prayut era and the start of the Srettha government indicate that politics, rather than modernization efforts, are shaping policy decisions. In October 2023, when Defense Minister Sutin visited the Royal Thai Navy Headquarters, he announced the government's intention to acquire a Chinese frigate instead of the previously planned submarine. This change was attributed to external disagreements regarding the submarine's propulsion system.¹⁰²

An internal document leaked from the China Shipbuilding and Offshore International Co., Ltd (CSOC) revealed that the Chinese-manufactured engines had a maximum output of 18 knots, but were sustainable for only 10 minutes, which fell significantly short of the specifications offered by other bidders, such as South Korea. This raised suggestions that both Prayut and Srettha prioritized Thailand's ongoing relationship with Beijing over the submarine's actual capabilities when evaluating potential bids.¹⁰³

As noted by Termsak Chalermpananupap, Srettha's appointment of Sutin could have presented an opportunity for the new government to hold the military accountable by introducing transparency in the procurement process. However, given that the critical information regarding the submarine bidding process is now over eight years old, it appears unlikely that more accountable or transparent processes are being considered, even though negotiations with China for the frigate are still ongoing.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ Wassana Nanuam, "Srettha Lays out Defence Buy Plans," *Bangkok Post*, 3 September 2023, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

¹⁰⁰ Aekarach Sattaburuth, "PPRP Recruits Thammarak to Lead Northeastern Assault," *Bangkok Post*, 23 March 2023, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

¹⁰¹ "The Military Policy of Srettha and the Civilian Defence Minister Is Closely Watched," *Khaosod English*, 4 September 2023, <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/>.

¹⁰² Sebastian Strangio, "Thailand Will Replace Chinese Sub With Frigate, Defense Minister Says," *The Diplomat*, 24 October 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

¹⁰³ Termsak Chalermpananupap, "Thailand's Marooned Submarine Deal: Some Questions Need Answers," *Fulcrum*, 30 October 2023, <https://fulcrum.sg/>.

¹⁰⁴ Termsak, "Thailand's Marooned Submarine Deal."

However, by forming a pragmatic coalition with military partners, Srettha's control over key line ministries and his ability to influence ad-hoc policies and decisions created under the previous regime are limited. This represents a significant departure from the MFP's promises not only to demilitarize and decentralize power in Thailand but also to reverse Thailand's exploitative Myanmar policy. With appointments now secured and military parties in the coalition gaining more influence over future annual appointments, it is likely that the political status quo will persist, and reform efforts will be put on hold in the near term or until a coalition without the support of military-backed political parties becomes viable.

This article has aimed to trace the development, professionalization, and modernization of the Thai military, which has played a prominent role in Thai society since the 1932 Revolution. This historical review of three distinct eras of contemporary military history has brought to light long-standing concerns that continue to affect the new Srettha government. Each era has demonstrated that the lack of attention to professionalism and SSR has allowed successive generations of military leaders to perpetuate a culture that prioritizes personal gain and ensures the survival of both military and monarchical institutions, often at the expense of foreign policy, corruption harming Thai citizens, and the erosion of trust and confidence in the Thai body politic.

While the May 2023 election initially served as a referendum on Prayut's nine-plus years of authoritarian rule and prompted a long-overdue public discourse on the role of the Thai monarchy in society, continued nondemocratic interventions, such as the coordinated abstentions of appointed senators during the prime ministerial confirmation, reaffirmed a multigenerational belief that ruling elites find justifications for intervening in the political process, not just during national crises, but at all-too-suspicious times. 🌟

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