

Charting Thailand's Course

Leveraging Small Navy Strategies to Secure Thailand amid Great-Power Maritime Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

This article examines recommended strategies for Thailand's small navy amid the Indo-Pacific's great-power maritime rivalry. It argues that while Thailand has pursued these strategies, it has only achieved partial success. Synthesizing existing literature, limitations, and case studies, the article establishes a concrete definition of small navy strategies. Utilizing SWOT analysis and the TOWS matrix (strengths and weaknesses against external opportunities and threats), it identifies recommended strategies for Thailand's small navy and compares them with current policies and practices. These insights, previously absent in Thai maritime security literature, are complemented by exclusive information from related policy practitioners. By shedding light on Thailand's case studies, the article offers valuable insights for policy practitioners involved in executing strategies, military operations, and diplomacy in the region.

This article will examine how Thailand can utilize small navy strategies to secure itself amid the maritime rivalry among the great powers in the Indo-Pacific. It will begin by briefly defining and outlining strategies employed by small navies in the first section. Following this, the article will delve into the historical background of maritime rivalry among the great powers in the Indo-Pacific and the role of the Royal Thai Navy (RTN) within this context in the second section. In the final section, detailed discussion will be provided on Thailand's utilization of small navy strategies to ensure its security amid the maritime rivalry among the great powers in the contemporary world. This will involve establishing Thailand's status as a state with a small navy, strategically analyzing Thailand's position within this maritime rivalry using SWOT analysis, identifying recommended small navy strategies for Thailand within this context through the TOWS matrix, and ultimately comparing these strategies to contemporary strategy, plans, and practices.

Small Navy: Definition and Strategies

In much of the existing literature, the term *small navy* lacks a precise definition and is often interchangeably referred to using synonyms such as *non-blue water*

*navy, inferior navy, weak navy, smaller naval force, and small and coastal naval power.*¹ These terms typically categorize navies into various ranks based on different criteria, designating those below a certain threshold as small navies.² However, current definitions of *small navy* remain insufficiently concise, as they fail to consider three main functions that navies typically perform, as well as political constraints.³

Considering the defined terms of *small navy*, along with their functions and associated limitations, this article proposes a refined definition. A *small navy* is characterized as a naval force whose capabilities and flexibility enable it to primarily undertake constabulary missions as its main naval objective, alongside certain military and diplomatic missions ranging from symbolic presence to nonautonomous operations beyond exclusive economic zones (EEZ) within a specific timeframe. This classification stems from the constraints experienced by these navies during the aforementioned period, which may include limitations on the number and variety of warships within the fleet, the quality of warships and associated equipment, the adequacy of naval support components (such as naval aviation, naval industry, and supplementary naval organizations like separate coast guards and marine corps), the allocation of national resources related to naval power (includ-

¹ Basil Germond, "Small Navies in Perspective: Deconstructing the Hierarchy of Naval Forces," in *Small Navies Strategy and Policy for Small Navies in War and Peace*, ed. Michael Mulqueen, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller (Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), 43–44 & 49; Michael A. Morris, *Expansion of the Third World Navies*, 1st ed. (London: Macmillan, 1987), 22; Michael Lindberg, *Geographical Impact on Coastal Defense Navies: The Entwinning of Force Structure, Technology and Operational Environment*, 1st ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 15; and Peter T. Haydon, "Naval Diplomacy: Is It Relevant in the 21st Century," in *The Politics of Maritime Power*, ed. Andrew T.H. Tan (London: Routledge, 2007), 73.

² Haydon, "Naval Diplomacy," 73; Morris, *Expansion of the Third World Navies*, 18, 22 & 24; Ian Speller, Deborah Sanders, and Michael Mulqueen, "Introduction," in *Small Navies Strategy and Policy for Small Navies in War and Peace*, ed. Michael Mulqueen, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller (Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), 7; Michael Lindberg, *Geographical Impact on Coastal Defense Navies*, 14–37; Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, 1st ed. (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 113–20; Hervé Coutau-Bégarie, *Traite de Strategie* (Paris: Institut de stratégie comparée EPHE IV, 2008), 617–21. Quoted in Germond, "Small Navies in Perspective," 36; Braber and Sipos, *The Future Maritime Environment*, 165–75. Quoted in Germond, "Small Navies in Perspective," 37; and Eric Grove, *The Future of Sea Power*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 1990), 237–40.

³ Germond, "Small Navies in Perspective," 37; and Eric Grove, *The Future of Sea Power*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 1990), 237–40; Ken Booth, *Navies and Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge, 2014), 16; Ian Speller, *Understanding Naval Warfare*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2019), 218; Basil Germond, "Seapower and Small Navies: A Post-Modern Outlook," in *Europe, Small Navies and Maritime Security Balancing Traditional Roles and Emergent Threats in the 21st Century*, ed. Robert McCabe, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller (New York: Routledge, 2020), 26; Alessio Patalano, "Naval Warfare," in *Routledge Handbook of Defence Studies*, ed. David J. Galbreath and John R. Deni (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 201; Geoffrey Till, "Are Small Navies Different?," in *Small Navies Strategy and Policy for Small Navies in War and Peace*, ed. Michael Mulqueen, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller (Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), 26–27.

ing military budgets, naval infrastructure like bases, professional qualifications, and personnel numbers), and political support.

In terms of comparative studies, it is evident that there are five primary small navy strategies aimed at securing themselves against external tensions and non-traditional maritime risks, while simultaneously pursuing national ambitions within the constraints they face.

1. *International maritime and naval cooperation* entails the utilization of naval assets and diplomatic frameworks, either independently or within collective security institutions, to collaborate with other states. This collaboration aims to effectively manage external tensions and non-traditional maritime risks (for operational purposes), foster stronger maritime and naval relationships with other states and their navies (for diplomatic purposes), and adopt best practices from other navies and related entities to enhance force development (for force development purposes). Examples of such cooperation include antipiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden during the 2010s, the deployment of Vietnamese frigates to the 70th anniversary celebration of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) of China in 2019, and the continuous participation of the PLAN in joint antipiracy operations since 2008, serving as a "real-world blue-water operations laboratory" for China.⁴
2. *International maritime and naval institutional building* involves the recognition that states with small navies may lack the resources or manpower to fulfill all naval and maritime commitments independently. Instead, they may opt to establish and engage in collective security institutions. These institutions typically feature "common operational language and procedures, unified command and control, shared rules of engagement, free exchange of intelligence, and concerted naval procurement and planning" among

⁴ Michael McDevitt, *China as a Twenty-First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, 1st ed. (Annapolis: US Naval Institute Press, 2020), 19, 28–32, 34, 39–40; Christopher W. Hughes, Alessio Patalano, and Robert Ward, "Japan's Grand Strategy: The Abe Era and Its Aftermath," *Survival* 63, no. 1 (2021): 139, <https://doi.org/>; Collin Koh, "Best Little Navy in Southeast Asia: The Case of the Republic of Singapore Navy," in *Small Navies Strategy and Policy for Small Navies in War and Peace*, ed. Michael Mulqueen, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller (Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), 127–29; L.S. Sin, "Malaysia Is Asia's 1st to Charge Somali Pirates," *USA Today*, 2011, <https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/>; Alex Richardson, "REFILE-Malaysian Navy Foils Hijack Attempt off Oman," *Reuters*, 22 January 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/>; and Hai Quan, "Two Vietnamese Frigates Visit China," *VietnamNet*, 15 April 2019, <https://vietnamnet.vn/>.

member states.⁵ Within such capable collective institutions, specific small navies can focus on niche specialization, allowing them to allocate limited resources to prioritize commitments to the institution over other duties.⁶ However, this strategy may entail risks, including the delegation of tasks to other members, potential involvement in conflicts of other members, and the possibility of sacrificing decisional sovereignty. Notably, this strategy is primarily observed within institutions like NATO and the European Union.⁷

3. *Naval force multiplier*, as synthesized from existing literature on force multiplication, is a strategy aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of naval forces through the synergistic effects of various defense inputs, whether tangible or intangible.⁸ Tangible enhancements involve the acquisition and utilization of physical resources such as technology and infrastructure, achieved through avenues such as international procurement, state donations, domestic development, and collaborative international development programs.⁹ Examples of this approach include the Royal New Zealand Navy's engagement of a Canadian company to upgrade their frigate surveillance, self-defense, and combat systems to meet ANZAC standards in 2014; Estonia receiving donated warships from Denmark in 1994, 2000, and 2006; the Republic of Korea's capacity to produce landing platform docks (LPD), frigates, and patrol vessels since 2007; the joint development program between the Netherlands and Belgium for multi-

⁵ Geoffrey Till, "Small Navies in the Current Strategic Context," in *Europe, Small Navies and Maritime Security Balancing Traditional Roles and Emergent Threats in the 21st Century*, ed. Robert McCabe, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller (New York: Routledge, 2020), 20; *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, November 2021* (Washington: US Department of Defense, 2021), 40; Jeremy Stöhs, "European Small(Er) Navies: Failure and Success in Doing More with Less," in *Europe, Small Navies and Maritime Security Balancing Traditional Roles and Emergent Threats in the 21st Century*, ed. Robert McCabe, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller (New York: Routledge, 2020), 95.

⁶ Stöhs, "European Small(Er) Navies," 95.

⁷ Till, "Small Navies in the Current Strategic Context," 20.

⁸ Cambridge Dictionary, "Force Multiplier Definition," 2022, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>; W. J. Hurley, "A Clarification of the Concepts of Force Multiplier and Returns to Force Scale," *Defence and Peace Economics* 16, no. 6 (2005), 463, <https://doi.org/>; Andrew Mallia and Chris Xuereb, "Special Effects: Force Multipliers and Small Navies," in *Europe, Small Navies and Maritime Security Balancing Traditional Roles and Emergent Threats in the 21st Century*, ed. Robert McCabe, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2020), 42.

⁹ Mallia and Xuereb, "Special Effects," 42–44.

purpose frigates; and the establishment of Singapore's Changi Naval Base in the early 2000s.¹⁰

4. States with small navies can also enhance their naval force effectiveness through intangible means, focusing on human resources development and procurement from both domestic and international sources, as well as administrative and organizational reforms.¹¹ Examples of this approach include the Maritime Squadron of the Armed Forces of Malta (AFM) sending naval cadets and staff for training in naval colleges abroad, leading to a transformation into an effective constabulary navy; the Royal New Zealand Navy's recruitment of secondment naval staff from the Royal Australian Navy to address manpower shortages; the Republic of Singapore Navy's merger of its LPD squadrons to address human resource shortages; the establishment of the Naval Aviation branch by the Vietnamese navy in 2013; and Ukraine's restructuring of its mosquito fleet in response to threats from the Russian Navy.¹²

¹⁰ "Anzac Frigate Systems Upgrade," New Zealand Ministry of Defense, July 2022, <https://www.defence.govt.nz/>; Johnny E. Balsved, "Two Former Minelayers Sold to Estonia," *Danish Naval History*, 1 August 2006, <http://www.navalhistory.dk/>; Ian Bowers, "The Republic of Korea Navy—A 'Big' Small Navy," in *Small Navies Strategy and Policy for Small Navies in War and Peace*, ed. Michael Mulqueen, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller (Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), 101–03; Anselm Van Der Peet, "The Royal Netherlands Navy after the Cold War: Working with a New Doctrine in a New Security Environment," in *Europe, Small Navies and Maritime Security Balancing Traditional Roles and Emergent Threats in the 21st Century*, ed. Robert McCabe, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller (New York: Routledge, 2020), 113; and Ronnie Tay, "Speech by Chief of Navy, Rear-Admiral Ronnie Tay, at the Opening Ceremony of Changi Naval Base" (speech, Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 21 May 2004), <https://www.nas.gov.sg/>.

¹¹ Mallia and Xuereb, "Special Effects," 45.

¹² Ciarán Lowe, "A Comparative Analysis of Policy and Practice within Three Small Navies: Croatia, Ireland and Malta," in *Europe, Small Navies and Maritime Security Balancing Traditional Roles and Emergent Threats in the 21st Century*, ed. Robert McCabe, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller (New York: Routledge, 2020), 188; Steven Paget, "The 'Best Small Nation Navy in the World'? The Twenty-First Century Royal New Zealand Navy," *Australian Journal of Maritime & Ocean Affairs* 8, no. 3 (2016), 246, <https://doi.org/>; Ng Eng Hen, "Speech by Dr Ng Eng Hen, Minister for Manpower and 2nd Minister for Defence at Launch of RSS *Supreme*" (speech, Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 9 May 2006), <https://www.nas.gov.sg/>; Koh, "Best Little Navy in Southeast Asia," 122–23; Truong-Minh Vu and Nguyen The Phuong, "Naval Development in Vietnam," in *Naval Modernisation in Southeast Asia Problems and Prospects for Small and Medium Navies*, ed. Geoffrey Till and Ristian Atriandi Supriyanto (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 98; Deborah Sanders, "Rebuilding the Ukrainian Navy: Maritime Security in a Highly Contested Environment," in *Europe, Small Navies and Maritime Security Balancing Traditional Roles and Emergent Threats in the 21st Century*, ed. Robert McCabe, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller (New York: Routledge, 2020), 174; "Strategy of the Naval Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine 2035," Naval Forces of the Armed Forces Ukraine, 11 January 2019, <https://navy.mil.gov.ua/>; and Speller, *Understanding Naval Warfare*, 66.

5. *Maritime and naval hedging strategy*, as synthesized from existing literature on hedging strategy within the field of international relations, involves states with small navies proactively diversifying their naval and maritime relationships to mitigate vulnerabilities in their naval capabilities.¹³ This strategy aims to deter overreliance on or vulnerability to specific great powers by expanding engagements across various aspects of maritime cooperation, technological procurement, infrastructure development, technological advancements, joint operations, exercises, and training. Concurrently, these states seek to strengthen relationships with other small navies to serve as cooperative strategic balancers in the maritime domain. This strategy finds application among Southeast Asian nations with small navies.¹⁴
6. *Naval strategic communication* involves the utilization of communication by naval organizations to uphold their policies, operations, and activities, as well as those of their alliances. While various methods exist for employing strategic communication within naval organizations, including public diplomacy and informational operations, the use of military public affairs to garner political support from the domestic audience for specific naval policies, operations, and activities stands out as the most prominent means available to small navies for bolstering other small navy strategies within certain limitations.¹⁵ A notable example is Japan's successful militarization efforts between 2012 and 2020, achieved through the publication of serialized manga editions by the Ministry of Defense (MOD) to overcome political constraints.¹⁶

¹³ Anders Wivel, "The Grand Strategies of Small States," in *The Oxford Handbook of Grand Strategy*, ed. Thierry Balzacq and Ronald R. Krebs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 499; Mohammad Salman, "Strategic Hedging and Unipolarity's Demise: The Case of China's Strategic Hedging," *Asian Politics & Policy* 9, no. 3 (2017), 356, <https://doi.org/>; Evan S. Medeiros, "Strategic Hedging and the Future of Asia Pacific Stability," *Washington Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (2005), 146, <https://doi.org/>; Kuik Cheng-Chwee, "The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's Response to a Rising China," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 30, no. 2 (2008), 165, <https://doi.org/>; Øystein Tunsjø, "U.S.–China Relations From Unipolar Hedging toward Bipolar Balancing," in *Strategic Adjustment and The Rise of China: Power and Politics in East Asia*, ed. Robert S. Ross and Øystein Tunsjø (London: Cornell University Press, 2017), 41; and Jürgen Haacke, "The Concept of Hedging and Its Application to Southeast Asia: A Critique and a Proposal for a Modified Conceptual and Methodological Framework," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 19, no. 3 (2019), 377–79, <https://doi.org/>.

¹⁴ *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific* (Hanoi: ASEAN, 2020), <https://asean.org/>; Quan, "Two Vietnamese Frigates Visit China"; and Vu and Phuong, "Naval Development in Vietnam," 96.

¹⁵ "Military Concept for NATO Strategic Communication" (press release, NATO 12 August 2010), <https://info.publicintelligence.net/>.

¹⁶ Matthew Brummer and Eitan Oren, "We Must Protect This Peace with Our Hands': Strategic Culture and Japan's Use of Force in International Disputes as Depicted in Ministry of Defense Manga Promotional Materials," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies*, no. special (2022): 94–106, <https://doi.org/>.

Historical Background: Great-Power Maritime Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific

Maritime rivalry among the great powers in the Indo-Pacific region, defined as the area encompassing the western coast of the Indian Ocean to the western shore of the United States, has indeed been a significant aspect of geopolitics since the twentieth century.¹⁷

During the early twentieth century, a complex maritime rivalry emerged among several great powers, including the British Empire, the United States, the Russian Empire (later the Soviet Union after 1917), and Imperial Japan. This rivalry was manifested in various ways, such as the projection of naval supremacy in the Indian Ocean Basin and the Western Pacific. The Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 is a notable example of this competition.

During World War I, the Indo-Pacific region did witness significant great-power rivalry, although it was not as pronounced as in other theaters of the conflict. The main focus of the war was in Europe, with the major naval powers, including Britain, Germany, and to a lesser extent Japan, primarily engaging in naval activities in the Mediterranean regions.¹⁸

However, there were notable instances of maritime rivalry in the Indo-Pacific during World War I. For example, Germany's East Asia Squadron, under the command of Admiral Maximilian von Spee, operated in the Pacific Ocean, engaging in battles such as the Battle of Coronel off the coast of Chile in November 1914.¹⁹ This squadron aimed to disrupt Allied shipping and extend German influence in the region, posing a challenge to British naval dominance.

Additionally, Japan, as an ally of the Allied Powers, played a significant role in naval operations in the Indo-Pacific during World War I.²⁰ The Imperial Japanese Navy operated in support of Allied efforts, particularly in safeguarding shipping routes and countering German naval activities in East Asia and the Pacific.²¹

Thus, while the Indo-Pacific was not the primary theater of naval conflict during World War I, there were notable instances of great-power rivalry and naval

¹⁷ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington: The White House, 1 December 2017), 45–46, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/>.

¹⁸ Timothy D. Saxon, "Anglo-Japanese Naval Cooperation, 1914-1918," *Naval War College Review* 53, no. 1 (2000), 62–63, <http://www.jstor.org/>.

¹⁹ Saxon, "Anglo-Japanese Naval Cooperation, 1914-1918," 64.

²⁰ Amon Kiilleen, "Japan's Victory in World War I: A Review of Japan's Role as a Principal Great War Victor Highlights Critical Lessons From Naval History," *Naval History Magazine*, June 2021, <https://www.usni.org/>.

²¹ Saxon, "Anglo-Japanese Naval Cooperation 1914-1918," 63–64 & 67.

engagement in the region, particularly involving Germany's East Asia Squadron and Japan's role as an ally of the Allied Powers.²²

During the interwar period (1918–1939), maritime rivalry between the British Empire and the Soviet Union manifested notably in their competition for influence in the strategically significant regions of Iran and the Caucasus. This rivalry stemmed from both powers' interests in securing access to vital resources, particularly oil, and establishing geopolitical footholds in the heart of the Eurasian landmass.

From the 1920s to 1934, the British Empire and the Soviet Union engaged in diplomatic maneuvers, covert operations, and proxy conflicts to assert their influence in Iran and the Caucasus. The British sought to maintain their historical dominance in the region and safeguard their imperial interests, including securing oil concessions and maintaining access to key trade routes. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union aimed to expand its sphere of influence, consolidate control over neighboring territories, and promote communist ideologies.²³

However, as the interwar period progressed, the dynamics of the British-USSR maritime rivalry began to shift. The emergence of Nazi Germany as a potent and expansionist threat to both powers in Europe forced them to reassess their strategic priorities. Recognizing the need to confront the common Nazi threat, the British Empire and the Soviet Union gradually transitioned from adversaries to strategic partners in certain aspects of their maritime affairs.²⁴

This transformation from rivalry to interdependence was particularly evident in the Indian Ocean Basin and the Western Pacific, where the British Empire and the USSR found themselves facing common challenges posed by Nazi Germany's ambitions and aggression.²⁵ As the Nazi threat loomed larger, both powers recognized the imperative of coordinating their naval strategies, sharing intelligence, and cooperating on maritime defense initiatives to counter the growing menace.

Ultimately, the exigencies of confronting the Nazi threat fostered a pragmatic convergence of interests between the British Empire and the USSR in the maritime domain. This newfound interdependence facilitated greater cooperation and coordination between the two powers in the Indian Ocean Basin and the Western Pacific, laying the groundwork for broader collaboration during World War II.²⁶

²² Saxon, "Anglo-Japanese Naval Cooperation 1914-1918," 63–64; and Howard M. Hensel, "The Great Powers Struggle for the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific: 1904-1949," in *Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific Heritage and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Howard M. Hensel and Amit Gupta (New York: Routledge, 2021), 42 & 67.

²³ Hensel, "The Great Powers Struggle for the Indian Ocean," 52.

²⁴ Hensel, "The Great Powers Struggle for the Indian Ocean," 62–63.

²⁵ Hensel, "The Great Powers Struggle for the Indian Ocean," 69.

²⁶ Hensel, "The Great Powers Struggle for the Indian Ocean," 52 & 69.

In World War II (1939–1945), the maritime rivalry in the Indian Ocean Basin and the Western Pacific intensified significantly, culminating in naval warfare between Imperial Japan and the Allied Powers, particularly the British Empire and the United States. The attack on Pearl Harbor by Japan on 7 December 1941, stands as a pivotal moment that propelled the conflict to new heights of intensity and global involvement.

Following the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, Imperial Japan swiftly expanded its military operations across the Pacific, seizing control of numerous strategic territories and launching aggressive naval campaigns. The Japanese Imperial Navy, bolstered by its formidable carrier-based airpower, posed a formidable threat to Allied naval forces and shipping routes throughout the region.²⁷

In response to Japan's aggressive expansion, the Allied Powers, led by the United States and the British Empire, launched extensive naval operations to counter Japanese advances and regain lost territories. Naval battles such as the Battle of Midway in June 1942 and the Battle of the Coral Sea in May 1942 marked critical turning points in the Pacific Theater, halting Japan's momentum and shifting the balance of naval power in favor of the Allies.²⁸

The maritime rivalry in the Indian Ocean Basin also saw heightened tensions and strategic maneuvering as both Axis and Allied powers sought to control vital sea lanes and maritime resources. Naval engagements such as the Battle of the Indian Ocean and the Battle of Ceylon underscored the strategic importance of the region and the fierce competition for naval dominance.²⁹

Overall, World War II witnessed a dramatic escalation of maritime rivalry in the Indian Ocean Basin and the Western Pacific, with naval warfare playing a crucial role in shaping the outcome of the conflict and determining the course of global history.³⁰

Following World War II, the global geopolitical landscape underwent a profound transformation, transitioning into a bipolar world order characterized by decolonization and the rise of two superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union. The annihilation of Imperial Japan, the decline of the British Empire, and the ascendancy of the US and the USSR reshaped international dynamics and set the stage for the Cold War era (1949–1991).

During the Cold War period, the Indian Ocean basin and the Western Pacific became arenas of maritime rivalry between the US and the USSR. With the emer-

²⁷ Hensel, "The Great Powers Struggle for the Indian Ocean," 57, 58 & 68.

²⁸ Hensel, "The Great Powers Struggle for the Indian Ocean," 60, 61 & 68.

²⁹ Hensel, "The Great Powers Struggle for the Indian Ocean," 58.

³⁰ Hensel, "The Great Powers Struggle for the Indian Ocean," 69.

gence of numerous newly independent littoral states in these regions, both superpowers sought to exert influence and establish strategic control through naval competition and an arms race.

The US and the USSR engaged in a comprehensive contest for naval supremacy, vying for dominance in key maritime areas and seeking to secure alliances with littoral states. This rivalry played out through various means, including the deployment of naval assets, military aid to allied states, and strategic maneuvers to project power and influence.³¹

While China emerged as a significant player on the global stage since the 1970s, it remained largely sidelined in the maritime rivalry between the US and the USSR. China's prioritization of economic development led to the allocation of limited national resources away from building robust naval capabilities, thus precluding its active participation in the naval arms race between the superpowers.³²

Overall, the Cold War era witnessed intense maritime competition between the US and the USSR in the Indian Ocean basin and the Western Pacific, underscoring the strategic significance of these regions in the broader geopolitical context of the time.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the global geopolitical landscape underwent a significant shift towards a monopolar world order within the context of globalization. With the dissolution of the USSR, the United States emerged as the sole dominant power in the Indo-Pacific region. During this period, there was a notable absence of maritime rivalry among the great powers in the region.

The demise of the Soviet Union left the United States as the predominant naval force in the Indo-Pacific, with no other great power capable of challenging its maritime supremacy. While Russia, as the successor state to the USSR, was undergoing a period of transition and had yet to fully recover its naval capabilities, China's naval modernization efforts were still in progress and had not reached a level where it could rival the United States in the region.³³

³¹ Howard M. Hensel, "Decolonization and the Cold War in Indian Ocean and the West Pacific: 1945-1991," in *Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific Heritage and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Howard M. Hensel and Amit Gupta (New York: Routledge, 2021), 100.

³² Sing Yue Chan, *China's Maritime Security Strategy: The Evolution of a Growing Sea Power*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2022), 60-61.

³³ Robert Haddick, "Maritime Strategic Developments in the Indian Ocean and the West Pacific since the End of the Cold War," in *Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific Heritage and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Howard M. Hensel and Amit Gupta (New York: Routledge, 2021), 116-17; Chan, *China's Maritime Security Strategy*, 87, 152-53; and McDevitt, *China as a Twenty-First Century Naval Power*, 19, 34, 39 & 40.

As a result, the post-Cold War era witnessed a relative absence of maritime rivalry among the great powers in the Indo-Pacific. The United States stood as the undisputed naval hegemon in the region, exerting significant influence and projecting power across the vast expanse of the Indo-Pacific theater.

In the 2010s, as the world transitioned towards a multipolar order within the context of globalization, a complex maritime rivalry emerged among the great powers — the United States, China, and Russia — in the Indo-Pacific region. This rivalry represents a significant departure from the dynamics of the first half of the 20th century and has reintroduced intricate geopolitical challenges to the region.

For China, navalism and maritime expansion in the Indo-Pacific have become indispensable tools for safeguarding national integrity and sustaining international maritime trade.³⁴ Similarly, for Russia, maritime endeavors in the region offer avenues to capitalize on new economic opportunities and mitigate the effects of Western sanctions, particularly in response to events such as the annexation of Crimea, which has been intensified by the armed conflict in Ukraine.³⁵ The expansion of China and Russia's naval presence in the Indo-Pacific poses a considerable threat to the interests of the United States and its allies.

Consequently, since the 2010s, the three great powers and their respective allies have engaged in a competitive struggle for dominance in the maritime domain of the Indo-Pacific. This competition has intensified over time, driven by a complex interplay of reciprocal and adversarial relationships. Key factors contributing to this rivalry include the implementation of maritime and naval doctrines, strategic fleet mobilizations, the pursuit of naval force multipliers, and efforts to forge or disrupt international maritime and naval cooperation agreements.³⁶

³⁴ Xinhua, "Xi Jinping stresses the need to show greater care about the ocean," quoted in McDevitt, *China as a Twenty-First Century Naval Power*, 6.

³⁵ Geoffrey Gresh, *To Rule Eurasia's Waves: The New Great Power Competition at Sea* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 205, 207 & 241.

³⁶ Gresh, *To Rule Eurasia's Waves*, 205, 207 & 241; Yu Jie and Jon Wallace, "What Is China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)?," Chatham House, 13 September 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/>; Chan, *China's Maritime Security Strategy*, 151–53; "Chinese, Russian Navies Sail into Contested Japanese East China Sea Waters," *ABC News* (Australia), 9 June 2016, <https://www.abc.net.au/>; "Russia Deploys More Surface-to-Air Missiles in Crimean Build-Up," *Reuters*, 13 January 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/>; "Trilateral Naval Drills between China, Russia and Iran Start on Friday," *Reuters*, 20 January 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/>; and William Choong, "The Return of the Indo-Pacific Strategy: An Assessment," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 73, no. 5 (2019), 416 & 418, <https://doi.org/>.

Historical Background: The Royal Thai Navy's Roles in Great-Power Maritime Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific

Amid the rise of imperialism, the inception of the modern Thai Navy under the absolutist regime occurred through the centralization of fragmented naval entities, culminating in the establishment of the Department of Navy in 1890. During this period, Thailand's naval modernization efforts were primarily influenced by European powers. While Thailand did acquire some warships from imperial European states, such as a corvette and four gunboats from France in 1865, and two small coast defense vessels from the British Empire in 1924 and 1928, it notably opted to engage smaller non-imperial European states, such as Denmark and Sweden, as advisors for modernizing its navy.³⁷

Following a series of administrative reforms, the Department of Navy underwent a transformation, officially becoming the Royal Thai Navy (RTN) in 1933, a year after the Siamese Revolution. Against the backdrop of rising nationalism and the turmoil of World War II (1930s–1945), Thailand and the RTN shifted their allegiances from European powers to cultivate a cordial relationship with the Axis Powers, particularly Imperial Japan. This strategic pivot saw the RTN's deployment to annex provinces lost to French Indochina in 1940, with political support from Imperial Japan resulting in both a strategic victory and successful territorial claims.³⁸

Furthermore, the RTN formulated plans to bolster its naval capabilities by acquiring a cruiser from Fascist Italy and four submarines from Imperial Japan in 1941. However, these plans were thwarted by the conclusion of World War II in 1945, which saw the defeat of the Axis Powers and the subsequent halt of procurement efforts by the RTN.³⁹

Since the early Cold War era in 1950, Thailand forged a close alliance with the United States, resulting in the monopolization of RTN force development by US assistance. The RTN became intricately involved in supporting US naval missions in East Asia, with the United States providing extensive aid and support to Thailand's naval capabilities.

Specifically, the United States donated surplus weaponry to Thailand, including used frigates such as HMS *Tha Chin*, HMS *Pra Sae*, and HMS *Pinklao*. Additionally, the US extended credits to Thailand for the purchase and maintenance of

³⁷ James Goldrick and Jack McCaffrie, *Navies of South-East Asia: A Comparative Study*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2012), 154.

³⁸ Goldrick and McCaffrie, *Navies of South-East Asia*, 155.

³⁹ Goldrick and McCaffrie, *Navies of South-East Asia*, 155.

weapons, facilitating the acquisition of unused frigates like HMS *Tapi* and HMS *Kirirath*.⁴⁰ This assistance package encompassed various aspects, ranging from training programs and joint naval drills to infrastructure development initiatives. Furthermore, the United States generously supplied forty-five naval aviators to Thailand at no cost.⁴¹

As part of the alliance agreement, Thailand was prohibited from purchasing weapons from other countries.⁴² In exchange for US assistance, the RTN committed to supporting any US naval missions directed against the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China (PRC). This included deploying two corvettes and a logistic vessel to assist in UN missions during the Korean War between 1950 and 1955, as well as deploying two warships to aid the US in the Vietnam War between 1966 and 1972.⁴³

Since 1972, the RTN has actively sought to diversify its relationships and reduce its dependence on the United States for force development. This strategic shift is evidenced by the RTN's procurement of naval assets from a variety of sources and its engagement with multiple foreign navies.⁴⁴

One notable example of this diversification is the acquisition of naval vessels from different countries. For instance, the RTN purchased the frigate HMS *Makut Rajakuman* from the United Kingdom, which was commissioned in 1973.⁴⁵ Additionally, the RTN procured four frigates from China—HMS *Chao Phraya* (commissioned in 1991), HMS *Bang Pakong* (commissioned in 1991), HMS *Sai Buri* (commissioned in 1992), and HMS *Kabi* (commissioned in 1992), resulting in the establishment of Frigate Squadron 2 in 1992.⁴⁶ Furthermore, in a significant

⁴⁰ Taweewuth Pongsapipatt (Retired Admiral and Former Deputy Supreme Commander), interview by the author, Nakhon Pathom, 11 December 2023; and Strategic Analyst no. 679, "Wiwattanakan-Khong-Kong-Thab-Ruea: Mum-Mong-Dan-Yutthasat (วิวัฒนาการของกองทัพเรือ: มุมมองด้านยุทธศาสตร์—Historical Development of the Royal Thai Navy: A Strategic Perspective)," *Naval Strategic Studies Journal*, n.d., 103, <http://www.navedu.navy.mi.th/>.

⁴¹ Strategic Analyst no. 679, "Wiwattanakan-Khong-Kong-Thab-Ruea," 102–03.

⁴² Pongsapipatt interview.

⁴³ Pongsapipatt interview; "Songkarm-Kao-Lee (สงครามเกาหลี - Korean War)," in *Anusorn-Nai-Ngan-Prarachatan-Preng-Sop-Pol-Ruea-Tri-Sawaeng-Dueng-Chan (อนุสรณ์พระราชทานเพลิงศพพลเรือตรี แสงดวงจันทร์ - Cremation Volume of Rear Admiral Sawaeng Duengchan)* (Ratthara Publisher, 2005), 55–58; and Strategic Analyst no. 679, "Wiwattanakan-Khong-Kong-Thab-Ruea," 104.

⁴⁴ Pongsapipatt interview.

⁴⁵ "R.L. Makut-Rajakumarn (ร.ล.มกุฏราชกุมาร - HTMS Makut Rajakumarn)" (fact sheet, Frigate Squadron 1, RTN, 24 May 2022), <http://www.fleet.navy.mi.th/>.

⁴⁶ "Pravat-Kong-Ruea-Frigate-Ti-Song (ประวัติกองเรือฟริเกตที่ 2 - History of Frigate Squadron 2)" (fact sheet, Frigate Squadron 2, RTN, 29 December 2016), 2023, <http://www.fleet.navy.mi.th/>.

development, the RTN acquired an air carrier, HMS *Chakri Narubeth*, from Spain in 1992, which was commissioned in 1997.⁴⁷

Moreover, the RTN has pursued a policy of international training and collaboration, sending its naval cadets and staff for training and educational programs abroad. In addition to the United States, RTN personnel have undergone training and study programs in countries such as the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Sweden, and Italy.⁴⁸ This approach reflects the RTN's commitment to enhancing its capabilities through exposure to diverse training environments and best practices from various naval traditions.

Following the conclusion of the Cold War, the RTN underwent a strategic recalibration, shifting its focus towards a broader spectrum of military functions beyond traditional warfare. One significant aspect of this transformation was the RTN's increased involvement in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) efforts within the ASEAN region.⁴⁹

A pivotal moment in the RTN's HA/DR endeavors occurred in 2000 when it mobilized its amphibious vessels to provide assistance during a flood crisis in Sri Lanka.⁵⁰ This deployment showcased the RTN's commitment to regional stability and its capacity to respond effectively to natural disasters, thereby solidifying its reputation as a reliable partner in times of crisis.

Furthermore, the RTN extended its reach by contributing to international peacekeeping efforts. In 2000, the RTN deployed naval forces to support the UN peacekeeping mission in Timor-Leste, demonstrating Thailand's dedication to promoting peace and stability.⁵¹

Additionally, the RTN played a proactive role in combating piracy off the coast of Somalia. Recognizing the threat posed by piracy to maritime trade and security, the RTN dispatched naval assets to participate in Combined Task Force 151 (CTF-151) on approximately four occasions in 2011.⁵² These deployments were prompted by the alarming increase in piracy incidents, including the ransom of Thai civilian merchant ships.⁵³ By engaging in antipiracy operations, the RTN

⁴⁷ "Pravat-R.L.- Chakri Narubet (ประวัติ รล.จักรีนฤเบศร – A Background of the HTMS Chakri Narubet)," Royal Thai Navy (RTN), 19 July 2022, <http://www.fleet.navy.mi.th/>.

⁴⁸ Paron Sangkaew (Commander and Lecturer, Naval Education Department), interview by the author, Bangkok, 14 October 2023.

⁴⁹ Thanadet Jitprawat (Commander and Lecturer, Naval Education Department), interview by the author, 7 November 2023.

⁵⁰ Jitprawat interview.

⁵¹ Pongsapipatt interview.

⁵² Pongsapipatt interview.

⁵³ Pongsapipatt interview.

actively contributed to safeguarding maritime commerce and ensuring the safety of seafarers navigating high-risk waters.

Overall, the RTN's shift toward multifaceted military functions beyond traditional warfare reflects its evolving role as a proactive and responsible maritime actor, regionally. Through its engagement in HA/DR missions, peacekeeping operations, and anti-piracy efforts, the RTN has underscored its commitment to promoting peace, stability, and security in the Indo-Pacific region.

Thailand as a State Possessing Small Navy

Based on a synthesized definition of small navies, Thailand is classified as a state possessing a small navy due to several limitations that impede the RTN from autonomously projecting force beyond Thailand's EEZ.

Primarily, the RTN faces constraints in terms of both the quantity and diversity of its warships. With a fleet comprising 70 patrol and coastal combatant vessels, including seven corvettes, 17 mine countermeasures vessels, 17 amphibious vessels, 13 logistic support vessels, one aircraft carrier, and 7 frigates, Thailand lacks cruisers, destroyers, and submarines.⁵⁴ While this fleet is adequate for coastal defense missions within the EEZ, it is insufficient for independent naval operations beyond these maritime domains.

Furthermore, many of the RTN's warships and associated equipment suffer from inadequate quality, primarily due to their outdated nature. For instance, several vessels, such as the corvette *Pin Klao*, corvette *Tapi*, corvette *Makut Rajakumarn*, corvette *Rattanakosin*, and frigate *Chao Phraya*, were commissioned between 1959 and 1991, exceeding 30 years in service.⁵⁵ Additionally, the software utilized in RTN military equipment, notably the Link16 program, has not been updated to meet current international standards, further compromising the navy's operational capabilities.⁵⁶

These limitations underscore the challenges faced by the RTN in effectively projecting force beyond Thailand's EEZ and highlight the need for moderniza-

⁵⁴ International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2023* (London: Routledge, 2023), 295–96.

⁵⁵ “R.L. Makut-Rajakumarn”; “R.L. Pin-Klao (ร.ล.ปินเกล้า – HTMS Pin Klao)” (fact sheet, Frigate Squadron 1, RTN, 24 May 2022), <http://www.fleet.navy.mi.th/>; “R.L. Rattanakosin (ร.ล.รัตนโกสินทร์ – HTMS Rattanakosin)” (fact sheet, Frigate Squadron 1, RTN, 5 October 2021), <http://www.fleet.navy.mi.th/>; “R.L. Tapi (ร.ล.ต-api – HTMS Tapi)” (fact sheet, Frigate Squadron 1, RTN, 21 June 2022), <http://www.fleet.navy.mi.th/>; and “R.L. Chao-Phraya (ร.ล.เจ้าพระยา – HTMS Chao Phraya)” (fact sheet, Frigate Squadron 2, RTN, 14 October 2020), <http://www2.fleet.navy.mi.th/>.

⁵⁶ Sarun Pecharanond (Lieutenant General and Deputy Director General Secretariat, Ministry of Defence), interview by author, 25 January 2024.

tion and enhancement of naval capabilities to meet contemporary maritime security demands.

Insufficient naval support components pose a significant obstacle to the RTN in autonomously conducting naval missions beyond Thailand's EEZ. Primarily, the RTN's naval aviation force relies on outdated patrol aircraft, and Thailand lacks a dedicated coast guard organization.⁵⁷ Consequently, the RTN must allocate its limited budget and manpower primarily to coastal defense missions, diverting resources from naval operations beyond the EEZ.

Moreover, while the RTN and domestic naval industries can manufacture small and medium patrol vessels for domestic and export purposes, the absence of blue-water warship production capabilities hampers the RTN's ability to expand its naval capabilities.⁵⁸ This limitation restricts the RTN's capacity to undertake autonomous naval missions beyond Thailand's EEZ.

Additionally, the RTN faces challenges related to national capabilities in naval power, including budget allocation and staffing. Despite Thailand's defense budget ranking fourth highest globally in 2024, with approximately 5.69 percent of the total budget allocated to defense, the RTN receives an inadequate share.⁵⁹ The majority of military funding is directed towards the Royal Thai Army and staff welfare, limiting the RTN's ability to enhance its naval capabilities across various domains.⁶⁰ Furthermore, the RTN suffers from a shortage of naval staff at the

⁵⁷ Panitan Wattanayagorn (Security and International Relations Expert), interview by the author, 19 July 2022; Ekapol Nakpum, "Kongthap-Ruea-Thai-Yoklerk-Krongkan-Sue-Kruang-Bin-Ladtrawen-Tang-Talay-Mai-3- Kruang (กองทัพเรือไทยยกเลิกโครงการซื้อเครื่องบินลาดตระเวนทางทะเลใหม่ ๓ เครื่อง—The Royal Thai Navy Cancels the Project on Purchasing 3 New Patrol Aircrafts)," *Aagth Daily Journal* (blog), 7 March 2019, <https://aagth1.blogspot.com/>; "Kong-Ruea-Yarm-Fung (กองเรือยามฝั่ง—Coast Guard Squadron)," Coast Guard Squadron, 16 October 2014, <http://www.coastguard.navy.mi.th/>; and "Nyua-Nyan-Kongthap-Ruea (หน่วยงานกองทัพเรือ—the Royal Thai Navy's Organizational Structure)," Royal Thai Navy (RTN), 19 September 2018, <https://www.navy.mi.th/>.

⁵⁸ JSL Global Media, "Marsun-Phu-Parit-Lea-Okbab-Ruea-Rob-Sunchat-Thai-100% I Patarawin Jongwiras: PERSPECTIVE [6 Dec B.E. 2563] (มาร์ซัน ผู้ผลิตและออกแบบ 'เรือรบ' สัญชาติไทย 100% | กัทรวิณ จงวิศาล : PERSPECTIVE [6 ธ.ค. 63]—Marsun 100% Thai Warship Building and Design Company I Patarawin Jongwiras: PERSPECTIVE [6 Dec 2020])," *YouTube*, 6 December 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/>; and *Royal Thai Navy White Paper 2023* (Bangkok: RTN, 2023), 21, <https://drive.google.com/>.

⁵⁹ "Ngob-Praman-Pi-2567: Perd-Ngob-Pi-Rrak-Kong-Ratthaban-Settha-Hed-Dai-Tung-Tuk-Priab--Wa-Mai-Tang-Jak-Ratthaban-Prayutt (งบประมาณปี 2567 : เปิดฉบับแรกของรัฐบาล 'เศรษฐา' เหตุใดถึงถูกเปรียบว่าไม่ต่างจากรัฐบาล 'ประยุทธ์'—The Government Budget of 2024: Why the First Year Government Budget of Settha Administration Does Not Different from That of Prayutt Administration)," *BBC Thai*, 2 January 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/>; and "Pha-Ngob-Kalahom-2567-Chai-Arai-Thung-Dai-Ngob-Praman-1.98-San--Larn (ผ่านงบกลาโหม 2567 ไขอะไรถึงได้งบประมาณ 1.98 แสนล้าน—Scrutinizing the Defence Budget 2024: Why It Is 198 Billion [Baht])," *Thansettakij*, 23 March 2023, <https://www.thansettakij.com/>.

⁶⁰ Sangkaew interview; Pongsapipatt interview; and Wattanayagorn interview.

operational level, below the rank of captain, further inhibiting its operational effectiveness and autonomy.⁶¹

Lastly, the RTN encounters challenges in garnering political support for allocating budget toward acquiring new naval technologies aimed at bolstering the fleet's blue water capabilities. This is evident in the public opposition faced by the RTN when it sought to purchase submarines from China.⁶² Despite the strategic importance of enhancing Thailand's naval capabilities, political reluctance to allocate funds for such acquisitions hampers the RTN's efforts to modernize and strengthen its fleet. This lack of political support undermines the RTN's ability to effectively project power and safeguard Thailand's maritime interests in the region.

SWOT Analysis Application

Utilizing SWOT analysis to assess Thailand's position amidst the maritime rivalry among the great powers in the Indo-Pacific revealed a comprehensive overview. Thailand exhibits eight strengths (S), along with eight weaknesses (W), while also presenting three opportunities (O) and one threat (T) in relation to the maritime rivalry among the great powers in the Indo-Pacific, as delineated in table 1.

⁶¹ Wattanayagorn interview; and Sangkaew interview.

⁶² Tita Sanglee, "Thai Navy's Submarine Acquisition Stuck in Limbo," *The Diplomat*, 23 July 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/>; "Ruea-Damnam-Jeen-Ja-Dai-Pai-Tor-Rue-Mai ? ('เรือดำน้ำจีน' จะได้ไปต่อหรือไม่?—Any Chance for Continuity of 'the Chinese Submarines' Procurement ?)," *Matichon Weekly*, 26 April 2022, <https://www.matichonweekly.com/>; "Rum-Tan-Sue-Ruea-Damnam-Term-Fai-Kan-Mueang (รุมต้าน ซื้อ 'เรือดำน้ำ' เดิม ไฟการเมือง—Opposing Submarine Purchase, Politics in Fire)," *Bangkokbiznews*, 23 August 2020, <https://www.bangkokbiznews.com/>; "Timeline-Mahakap-Ruea-Damnam-Saner-Plean-Pen-Ruea-Frigate-Jak-Jeen (ไทม์ไลน์มหากาพย์ 'เรือดำน้ำ' เสนอเปลี่ยนเป็น 'เรือฟริเกต' จากจีน—Timeline of Prolonged 'Submarine' Procurement: Purposing to Shift to Purchase Frigate from China)," *Thairath*, 23 October 2023, <https://www.thairath.co.th/>; and "Ngob-Praman-Pi-2567."

Table 1. SWOT analysis of Thailand’s maritime and naval conditions for securing itself amid maritime rivalry among the great powers in the Indo-Pacific with detail

SWOT		Related Details	Sources
Strengths (S)	S1: Geopolitical advantage	Thailand occupies a strategically significant position within a vital sea lane connecting the Pacific and the Indian Oceans.	ONSC 2023, 13; ONSC n.d., 9
	S2: Balance of power strategic culture driven by colonialism legacies	Thailand has consistently pursued a delicate balancing act, engaging with major powers such as the United States, China, and Russia. This strategic approach, rooted in the concept of maintaining a balance of power, has been instrumental in safeguarding Thailand’s autonomy since the colonial era.	Ibid, 9; Raymond 2018, 34 & 60-1; Blaxland and Raymond 2017, 15
	S3: No conflict of interest with any great powers	Thailand maintains a position without any conflicts of interest with major powers, unlike its neighboring nation Malaysia, which, possessing a similar geopolitical advantage, has become embroiled in conflicts with China in the South China Sea.	Till and Tsjeng 2018, 79; ONSC n.d., 9
	S4: Concurrently focusing on non-traditional maritime risks	This issue can serve as a basis for cooperation with both the United States and China, as they also prioritize its resolution.	Ibid, 9; ONSC 2023, 124
	S5: Sufficient know-how for producing high-quality Small and Medium Patrol and Coastal Defence Vessels	These are evidently strengths in their own right.	RTN n.d., 21; Sanglee 2021; Matchon Weekly 2022; VoiceOnline 2024; Peacharanond 2024
	S6: Governmental support in naval activities and procurements		
	S7: International potential compared to RTA and RTAF	The Royal Thai Navy (RTN) possesses greater opportunities for involvement in joint international operations compared to the Royal Thai Army (RTA) and Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF)	Wattanayagorn 2022
	S8: ASEAN membership	The ASEAN-led mechanism and its diplomatic framework can serve as a cooperative strategic balancing tool against the influence of major powers in the maritime domain.	ASEAN n.d.

SWOT		Related Details	Sources
Weaknesses (W)	W1: Geopolitical disadvantage	Given Thailand's extensive coastline, it is susceptible to the effects of maritime rivalry among major powers.	ONSC n.d., 9
	W2: Collective security rejection strategic culture driven by colonialism legacies	Thailand's strategic culture appears to strongly oppose collective security institutions, influenced by its history of colonization. Asian nations often interpret the concepts of sovereignty and non-intervention restrictively, viewing them as normatively delegitimizing. This perspective limits the range of options available for recommended small navy strategies.	Acharya 2005, 46-9
	W3: Administrative problems	Inadequate naval administration in the Andaman Sea and the absence of integrated entities not only render Thailand's coastline along the Indian Ocean vulnerable but also impede the RTN from fully leveraging its capabilities to safeguard Thailand's national interests at sea amid ongoing maritime rivalries.	Wattanayagorn 2022; MECC 2022; Pongsapipatt 2023
	W4: Insufficient capabilities and flexibilities in autonomous force projection beyond the EEZ	This situation could result in heightened interdependence with other nations, particularly the great powers.	Previously discussed and cited in the section "Thailand as a State Possessing Small Navy"
	W5: Insufficient know-how to produce any blue water vessels	This could result in heightened interdependence with other nations, particularly the great powers.	Previously discussed and cited in the section "Thailand as a State Possessing Small Navy"
	W6: Small shipbuilding market	This limits Thailand's choices of warship procurement.	Wattanayagorn 2022
	W7: Limited budget due to bureaucratic politics	These are evidently weaknesses in their own right.	Ibid; Bangkokbiznews 2020; Pecharanond 2024
	W8: Lack of public support as negatively perceived		
Opportunities (O)	O1: Joint naval drills, operations, and development and training programmes provided by particular great powers and amity nations	These actions not only empower Thailand to enhance its maritime and naval ties with the great powers but also simultaneously facilitate the absorption of naval best practices and technological expertise from these influential nations.	Previously discussed and cited in small navy strategies subsection

Table 1. (continued)

SWOT		Related Details	Sources
Opportunities (O)	O2: Multinational naval parades held by particular great powers and amity nations	This presents an opportunity for Thailand to bolster its relationships with major powers while simultaneously enhancing its international standing.	Previously discussed and cited in small navy strategies subsection
	O3: Other maritime and naval cooperation and related MoU with particular great powers and amity nations	This not only enables Thailand to enhance its maritime and naval relationships with major powers but also improves its naval force effectiveness.	
Threats (T)	T1: Consequences of tension escalation from the maritime rivalry among the great powers (T1A: the probability of involving in the great power's conflicts and T1B: unsecured valuable interests on the sea)	The escalated tension increases the likelihood of Thailand becoming involved in conflicts with major powers (T1A). Furthermore, given that Thailand's maritime economic value is approximately assessed at 24 trillion Thai baht per year and the majority of its fossil fuel supply comes through the sea lanes in the Indo-Pacific, escalating tension obstructs the use of these vital sea lanes, thereby jeopardizing Thailand's economic and energy security (T1B).	Ibid; ONSC n.d., 1-2; ONSC 2023, 13; RTN n.d., 2

Recommended Small Navy Strategies for Thailand

Having analyzed Thailand's maritime and naval conditions within the context of maritime rivalry among the great powers in the Indo-Pacific using SWOT analysis, the TOWS Matrix framework will be applied to identify recommended small navy strategies. Through this analysis, it is evident that leveraging strengths (S) to exploit opportunities (O) presents four viable strategies (SO) for Thailand. Additionally, by addressing weaknesses (W) to capitalize on opportunities (O), four strategies (WO) can mitigate deficiencies. Furthermore, utilizing strengths (S) to counter threats (T) yields two strategies (ST), while minimizing weaknesses (W) to avoid threats (T) suggests one strategy (WT), as outlined in table 2.

Table 2. TOWS matrix of Thailand's maritime and naval conditions for choosing recommended small navies strategies

TOWS Matrix		Details of the Matrix	Recommended Small Navies Strategies
Strengths-Opportunities Strategies (SO Strategies)	SO1	As a nation with a strategic culture of balancing power (S2), possessing the potential for an international navy (S7), and lacking conflicts of interest with major powers (S4), Thailand and the RTN can actively engage in joint naval drills, operations, development, and training programs offered by the United States, China, Russia, and friendly nations (O1).	<i>international maritime and naval cooperation for operational, diplomatic and development purposes</i>
	SO2	As a nation with a strategic culture of balancing power (S2), possessing the potential for an international navy (S7), and lacking conflicts of interest with major powers (S4), the RTN can deploy its fleet to participate in international naval parades organized by major powers and their allies (O2). This participation serves to strengthen maritime and naval relationships while enhancing Thailand's international standing.	<i>international maritime and naval cooperation for diplomatic purposes</i>
	SO3	Given the Thai government's support for naval procurements and activities (S6), the RTN has the opportunity to ratify maritime and naval memoranda of understanding (MoU) with major powers or friendly nations (O3). This facilitates the acquisition of advanced naval technologies from these partners.	<i>naval force multiplier in form of internationally technological procurement</i>
	SO4	Given that the RTN and Thailand's shipbuilding industries possess sufficient know-how for producing high-quality patrol and coastal defense vessels (S5), this capability can be leveraged to exploit opportunities for maritime and naval cooperation with major powers and friendly nations (O3). This may involve enhancing defense industrial relationships with allies that lack expertise in this area through vessel trading MoUs.	<i>international maritime and naval cooperation for diplomatic purposes</i>
Weaknesses--Opportunities Strategies (WO Strategies)	WO1	To effectively participate in joint naval drills and operations with major powers and their allies (O1), it is imperative to address the weaknesses of insufficient capabilities and flexibility in autonomous force projection beyond the EEZ (W4) and a lack of expertise in producing blue water vessels (W5). This can be achieved by procuring blue water vessels and related technologies from foreign nations in the short term, while simultaneously engaging in joint naval technology development with other states, enhancing naval staff knowledge and skills, and developing blue water infrastructure for long-term outcomes.	<i>naval force multiplier in form of international technological procurement, human resources, and infrastructure development</i>

Table 2. (continued)

TOWS Matrix		Details of the Matrix	Recommended Small Navies Strategies
Weaknesses-- Opportunities Strategies (WO Strategies)	WO2	Effectively enhancing defense industrial cooperation with major power allies through selling high-quality patrol and coastal defense vessels (O3) requires a robust naval industry. However, this is hindered by the limited size of the shipbuilding market (W6). Therefore, it is necessary to address this by supporting the domestic development of naval technologies and related infrastructure.	<i>naval force multiplier through domestic technologies and infrastructure development</i>
	WO3	Since participating in joint naval operations, drills, development, and training programs (O1), including involvement in naval parades held by major powers (O2) and signing MoUs on purchasing advanced naval technologies from other states (O3), requires a significant budget, the Thai government's allocation of a minor defense budget to the RTN while allocating the majority to the RTA (W3) presents a challenge. This results in the RTN facing the issue of insufficient budget, thereby hindering its ability to fully capitalize on these opportunities. Therefore, the RTN should address this by strategically persuading the government to allocate more budget to naval operations and modernization efforts.	<i>naval strategic communication</i>
	WO4	Given the negative public perception of the RTN and strong opposition to naval procurement (W8), the RTN's efforts to sign MoUs for purchasing naval technologies from foreign nations, such as submarines (O3), face significant obstacles. Consequently, it becomes imperative to address this weakness in order to fully leverage the associated opportunities. This can be achieved by strategically engaging with the public to garner their support and alleviate concerns regarding naval procurement initiatives.	<i>naval strategic communication</i>
Strengths-Threat Strategies (ST Strategies)	ST1	To mitigate the potential repercussions of tension escalation stemming from maritime rivalry among the great powers (T1), including the risk of involvement in conflicts (T1A) and the threat to unsecured maritime interests (T1B), Thailand can leverage its unique geopolitical position and strategic attributes. Benefiting from its lack of conflicts of interest with any great powers (S3), Thailand can capitalize on its balance of power strategic culture (S2) and its membership in ASEAN (S8). By diversifying its maritime and naval relationships with all great powers, while simultaneously strengthening ties with neighboring and amity nations possessing small navies, Thailand can effectively navigate the complexities of maritime rivalry and safeguard its national interests.	<i>maritime and naval hedging strategy</i>

TOWS Matrix		Details of the Matrix	Recommended Small Navies Strategies
Strengths-Threat Strategies (ST Strategies)	ST2	To address the challenge of unsecured maritime interests (T1B), the RTN can leverage government support for naval activities and procurements (S5). By utilizing this support, the RTN can strategically invest in acquiring blue-water warships or advanced naval technologies essential for safeguarding Thai commercial vessels across the air, surface, and underwater domains within the ambiguous maritime zones. This proactive approach ensures that Thailand's maritime interests are adequately protected amid evolving geopolitical dynamics.	<i>naval force multiplier in form of internationally technological procurement</i>
Weaknesses-Threat Strategies (WT Strategies)	WT1	To mitigate the risk of unsecured maritime interests (T1B), the RTN should address geopolitical disadvantages (W1), administrative challenges (W3), and budget constraints (W7) by implementing strategic reforms. This includes adapting the naval force structure to align with emerging maritime threats, enhancing administrative efficiency through digitalization, and prioritizing naval expenditure. These measures aim to optimize maritime and naval administration, ensuring Thailand's maritime interests are safeguarded effectively amid evolving geopolitical complexities.	<i>naval force multiplier in form of administrative reform</i>

Upon analysis using the TOWS matrix, it becomes evident that Thailand can enhance its maritime security amid great-power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific by pursuing a range of strategic initiatives. These include:

1. International Maritime and Naval Cooperation: Engaging in collaborative efforts with other naval forces and maritime nations to facilitate operations, strengthen regional security, foster diplomatic relations, and commonly develop naval capabilities.
2. Naval Force Multiplier Initiatives through Technology Acquisition: Implementing strategies to enhance the effectiveness of the RTN through international procurement, joint development programs, and domestic capacity-building efforts.
3. Naval Force Multiplier through Infrastructure Development: Investing in maritime infrastructure to improve naval capabilities and facilitate efficient operations in strategic maritime areas.

4. Naval Force Multiplier through Human Resources Development: Prioritizing training and skill development for naval personnel to ensure a proficient and capable maritime force.
5. Naval Force Multiplier through Administrative Reform: Streamlining administrative processes within the RTN to improve efficiency, coordination, and decision-making capabilities amid limited resources.
6. Maritime and Naval Hedging Strategies: Adopting flexible and adaptive strategies to navigate geopolitical uncertainties and mitigate risks associated with great-power competition.
7. Naval Strategic Communication: Enhancing communication efforts to convey Thailand's maritime interests, policies, and intentions effectively to the government, related domestic stakeholders, and the general public for legitimizing naval activities and procurement.

While these strategies offer significant benefits for Thailand's maritime security, it's essential to note that the TOWS matrix does not recommend certain approaches. These include:

1. International Maritime and Naval Institutional Building: Avoiding extensive commitments to formal institutional frameworks, which may limit flexibility and autonomy in decision making and be obstructed by strategic culture as previously mentioned.
2. Naval Force Multiplier Strategies Involving Seeking Naval Technologies through International Donations: Relying solely on external sources for naval technology may compromise self-reliance and long-term sustainability.
3. Naval Force Multiplier Strategies Involving Recruiting Naval Staff Aboard: Due to the trust issues.
4. Naval Force Multiplier Strategies Involving Fleet Structure Reform to Achieve National Maritime Goals: Pursuing large-scale restructuring of the naval fleet may pose logistical and operational challenges without clear strategic objectives and sufficient resources.

By focusing on the recommended strategies while being mindful of the limitations outlined by the TOWS matrix, Thailand can effectively navigate the complex maritime environment and safeguard its national interests in the Indo-Pacific region.

Comparing to Contemporary Strategies and Plans

This article has already examined seven contemporary strategies and plans regarding Thailand's maritime security and naval affairs: the National Maritime Security Plan 2015–2021, Royal Thai Navy Strategy 2015–2024, Royal Thai Navy Strategy 2017–2036, “Security Strategy” in National Strategy 2018–2037 (Brief Version), Royal Thai Navy White Paper 2023, National Maritime Security Plan 2023–2027, and Operational Plan for Developing National Security Capability 2023–2027. It is evident that these strategies and plans collectively aim to achieve the recommended small navy strategies for Thailand to secure itself amid maritime rivalry among the great powers in the Indo-Pacific.⁶³

In terms of maritime and naval international cooperation, the strategies and plans indicate that the RTN is responsive to missions related to relations and activities with other navies. Maritime security frameworks, both bilateral and multilateral, are designated to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). To enhance operational capabilities, Thailand plans to conduct joint naval operations with navies of neighboring countries, amity countries, and the great powers, engage in joint patrols and intelligence exchange with other navies, continuously participate in naval and maritime activities in the region, and establish agreements on supporting military supply in both peacetime and wartime.

Moreover, Thailand aims to maintain, build, and strengthen alliances and maritime security cooperation with navies of neighboring countries, amity countries, and the great powers. This will be pursued through bilateral and multilateral engagements, with Thailand playing a leading role in peacetime to effectively improve diplomatic relations in naval and maritime affairs. However, the RTN must establish a clear framework for its foreign affairs to ensure it receives sufficient interest.

Finally, joint naval drills, exchange of best practices, and sharing of experiences with other navies are planned to be achieved for force development purposes.

In terms of naval force multiplier, the RTN intends to acquire modern and advanced technologies to enable naval operations far from shore and enhance

⁶³ ONSC, “Phaen-Kuam-Munkong-HangChat-Tang-Talay B.E. 2558-2564”; “Yuttasat-Kongthap-Ruea B.E. 2558-2567”; “Yuttasat-Kongthap-Ruea B.E. 2560-2579 (ยุทธศาสตร์กองทัพเรือ ๒๕๖๐-๒๕๗๙—Royal Thai Naval Strategy 2017-2036),” Royal Thai Navy (RTN), n.d., <https://www.navy.mi.th/>; “Yutthasat-Chat B.E. 2561-2580 (Chabab-Yor)(ยุทธศาสตร์ชาติ พ.ศ.2561 – 2580 (ฉบับย่อ)—National Strategy 2018-2037 (Brief Version))” (Bangkok: National Strategy Council Secretariat and Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, n.d.), <https://www.nesdc.go.th/>; *Royal Thai Navy White Paper 2023*; “Phaen-Kuam-Munkong-HangChat-Tang-Talay B.E. 2566-2570”; *Paen-Patbatkan-Dan-Kan-Pattana-Sakayapab-Kong-Prates-Dan-Kuam-Mankong B.E. 2566-2570* (แผนปฏิบัติการด้านการพัฒนาศักยภาพของประเทศด้านความมั่นคง (พ.ศ. ๒๕๖๖ - ๒๕๗๐)—*Operational Plan for Developing National Security Capability 2023-2027* (Bangkok: MOD, n.d.), <https://opsd.mod.go.th/>.

coastal defense and air defense systems. This includes procuring four advanced frigates, two of which will be equipped with cruise missiles for commission in the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea, as well as technologies for naval aviation capabilities, especially maritime patrol aircrafts (MPA), submarine warfare capabilities, and netcentric warfare capabilities. These procurements are prioritized as the first, third, fourth, and fifth priorities of the RTN spending, although the source of procurement is not explicitly indicated. Given the current capabilities of Thailand's shipbuilding industry, it is implied that the RTN plans to procure these technologies from other countries. Concurrently, the RTN aims to support domestic development in certain naval technologies through research and development (R&D) programs, particularly focusing on unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), unmanned surface vehicles (USV), and the prototype of midget submarines, which is the sixth priority of RTN spending.

Furthermore, the RTN plans to support the domestic shipbuilding industry, particularly in producing Small and Medium Patrol Vessels and conducting R&D on mines. In addition to technological advancements, the RTN also aims to improve naval infrastructure by developing naval bases and facilities in the Andaman Sea and its coast, with a focus on forward bases and submarine bases, which constitute the second priority of RTN spending. Development plans also extend to forward bases and submarine bases in the Gulf of Thailand and its coast.

In addition to tangible measures, the strategies and plans emphasize human resource development in entities related to maritime and naval affairs. This includes conducting naval drills such as naval exercises for revision, integrative naval drills with other military branches, and joint naval drills with other navies. Moreover, there is a focus on enhancing maritime and naval specializations of naval officers and related staff, particularly in leveraging digital, cyber, and space technology for national security, maritime law and obligations, military strategy and crisis planning, intelligence analysis, military functions other than war, and English proficiency. Best practice exchange across governmental entities and knowledge absorption from overseas are also highlighted, along with the need to adapt to dynamically changing technology requirements.

Administrative reform within maritime and naval entities is also planned, with an emphasis on integrative and flexible administration to address maritime security issues. This includes digitalizing administrative systems and establishing databases on security issues such as one marine chart and maritime spatial planning. Adjusting the naval force in accordance with threats and domestic contexts is also prioritized.

The strategies and plans implicitly address a maritime and naval hedging strategy, as the RTN and other maritime security entities of Thailand position themselves

on the international stage. This is evidenced by the planned bilateral and multilateral joint naval operations and drills with navies of neighboring countries, amity countries, and the great powers.

Furthermore, emphasis is placed on the pursuit of naval strategic communication, which involves leveraging informational technologies and public relations to garner support from the public and stakeholders for RTN activities and budget distribution. Additionally, there is a focus on developing a system for information operations.

Contemporary Practices

Overall, Thailand has endeavored to pursue all recommended small navy strategies outlined in the strategies and plans, although the success of these attempts has been partial. Thailand's pursuit of maritime and naval international cooperation with willing nations has been hampered by budget constraints, leading to a reactive rather than proactive approach.⁶⁴

Operationally, the RTN has engaged in joint patrols with other navies, such as Thai-Vietnam joint naval patrols and patrols in the Malacca Strait with Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore. Additionally, intelligence exchanges, exemplified by the MoU on White Ship Information Exchange with the Indian Navy, have been conducted.⁶⁵ However, participation in antipiracy campaigns, such as CTF-151, has been limited due to a lack of requests.⁶⁶

Diplomatically, the RTN has facilitated foreign naval officers' education in Thai institutions to strengthen ties between Thai and foreign naval staff. Notably, naval staff from various countries have been allowed to study in nonconfidential classes at the Naval Command and Staff College. Furthermore, logistic cooperation agreements with at least 13 navies have been established to support agreed-upon military supply during port visits.⁶⁷

Furthermore, the RTN sends liaison officers to various entities such as The Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), the Information Fusion Centre (IFC) operated by the Singaporean Navy, the Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region

⁶⁴ Jitprawat interview; and Thai diplomat, interview by the author, 13 December 2023.

⁶⁵ Sangkaew interview; and Jitprawat interview.

⁶⁶ Jitprawat interview.

⁶⁷ Sangkaew interview.

(IFCIOR) operated by the Indian Navy, and the Combined Maritime Force (CMF), particularly CTF-151.⁶⁸

In addition, the RTN and the MFA have participated in international conferences and diplomatic frameworks related to maritime and naval security. Notable events include the West-Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS), Indian Ocean Naval Symposium which Thailand was a host on December 2023, International Seapower Symposium, Intersessional Session in Maritime Security of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Expert Working Group on Maritime Security of ASEAN Defence Minister's Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) with the US which Thailand, under the US funding, was a host for the PSI workshop in 2023, and Thai-Vietnam Joint Committee on Security.⁶⁹ Additionally, the RTN participates port visits and naval parades in countries such as Cambodia, Russia, China, Australia, the Philippines, and India.⁷⁰ Notably, Thailand hosted the naval parade and ASEAN Navy Commanders Conference in Pattaya in 2018.⁷¹

Regarding force development, the RTN sends its naval staff for training and education abroad, with naval cadets studying in prestigious institutions such as the naval academics in Germany, the United States, Spain, Japan, Australia, Italy, China, and Russia. Naval staff also attend courses at institutions like the Naval Command and Staff College in various countries, including the US, Singapore, the Philippines, Australia, China, Japan, India, South Korea, Russia, and Germany, as well as the Naval War College in the US and China. Specialized training courses, such as Maritime Policy in Australia and Anti-submarine and UAVs in the US, are also provided.⁷² Additionally, the RTN actively participates in joint naval drills with various partners, including exercises such as RIMPAC (sent only officers), CARAT, COBRA Gold, and Guardian Sea with the United States, Blue Strike with China, PASSEX with Japan, Thalay Laut with Malaysia, and Sea Garuda with Indonesia as well as regional exercises like the ASEAN Multinational Naval Exercise (AM-

⁶⁸ Pongsapipatt interview; Thai diplomat interview; Royal Thai Navy (RTN), “Khao-San-Navee (ข่าวสารนาวิก - Navy News)” (Printing House Division, Naval Administration Department, November 2019), 3, <https://www.navy.mi.th/>; and Sangkaew interview.

⁶⁹ Sangkaew interview; Thai diplomat interview; and “Khao-San-Navee.”

⁷⁰ Jitprawat interview; and Pongsapipatt interview.

⁷¹ Pongsapipatt interview.

⁷² Sangkaew interview.

NEX), the ASEAN Maritime Exercise (AUMEX) and ASEAN - Russia Naval Exercise (ARNEX).⁷³

However, the RTN has faced challenges in pursuing maritime and naval institutional building. Despite attempts to establish ASEAN's navy, this initiative has not succeeded due to differences in naval protocols among ASEAN members and a lack of trust, exacerbated by maritime disputes, particularly concerning fisheries, between Thailand and other ASEAN members. These disputes have led ASEAN members to perceive each other as potential threats.⁷⁴

Moreover, the RTN has encountered obstacles in implementing its naval force multiplier strategy. One major setback has been the procurement of advanced naval technologies through international channels. A notable example is the prolonged procurement process for submarines. Although Thailand agreed to purchase the first S26T *Yuan*-class submarine from China in 2017, with payment scheduled over seven years, this decision faced criticism regarding its necessity and the quality of the vessel. The subsequent purchases of the second and third submarines were met with significant disapproval from the public and parliament due to fiscal constraints exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to their postponement in 2020.⁷⁵

The procurement of S26T *Yuan*-class submarines faced renewed criticism in 2022 when it was revealed that the first purchased submarine lacked an engine, as Germany's Motor and Turbine Union company refused to supply the cutting-edge MTU396 diesel engines to the Chinese firm building the submarines for the RTN.⁷⁶ This led to considerations regarding engine replacement by the Chinese company.⁷⁷ However, in October 2023, the new Defense Minister, Sutin Klangsang,

⁷³ Collin Koh, "ASEX-01N Strengthens the Intra-ASEAN Military Landscape," *East Asia Forum*, 27 October 2023, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/>; Royal Thai Navy (RTN), "Thab-Ruea-Pak-Ti-Sam-Ruam--Fuk-Pasom-ASEAN-Russia Naval Exercise 2021 (ARNEX - 21) (ทัพเรือภาคที่ ๓ ร่วมการฝึกผสม ASEAN-Russia Naval Exercise 2021 (ARNEX - 21)-The Third Naval Division Participated in the Joint Naval Drill ASEAN-Russia Naval Exercise 2021 (ARNEX - 21))," 3 December 2021, <https://www.navy.mi.th/>; Sangkaew interview; Pongsapipatt interview; Jitprawat interview; "Khao-San-Navee."

⁷⁴ Sangkaew interview; Pongsapipatt interview; and Jitprawat interview.

⁷⁵ Sanglee, "Thai Navy's Submarine Acquisition Stuck in Limbo"; and Sebastian Strangio, "Thai-Chinese Submarine Deal Faces Axe: PM Prayut," *The Diplomat*, 7 April 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

⁷⁶ Strangio, "Thai-Chinese Submarine Deal Faces Axe"; and "Yuthapong-Share-Ruea-Damnam-Lum-Ti-Nueng-Rai-Kruangyon-Wissawakorn-Korsang-Pen-Kru-Sorn-Pasa (‘ยุทธพงษ์’ แจกเรือดำน้ำลำที่ 1 ไร้เครื่องยนต์-วิศวกรก่อสร้างทำจอดเป็นครูสอนภาษา—‘Yuthapong’ Unfolds the First Purchased Submarine Does Not Have Any Engine, and the Engineer of the Port Construction Is Just a Language Teacher)," *Daily News* (Thailand), 27 February 2022, <https://www.dailynews.co.th/>.

⁷⁷ "Timeline-Mahakap-Ruea-Damnam-Saner-Plean-Pen-Ruea-Frigate-Jak-Jeen."

proposed shifting from purchasing submarines to acquiring Chinese frigates instead. This proposal sparked a prolonged debate in the Thai Parliament and society.⁷⁸

Furthermore, the prolonged submarine procurement process has impeded the acquisition of four advanced frigates and maritime patrol aircraft (MPA). The procurement of a *Bhumibol*-class frigate was slated to be proposed in early 2024, pending resolution of the submarine procurement debate.⁷⁹ However, approval for the frigate procurement in the 2024 budget appears uncertain, with potential postponement to the 2025 budget due to fiscal constraints, prioritization of submarine procurement, and unclear terms of reference (TOR) for procurement.⁸⁰ Additionally, the budget allocation for MPA procurement remains pending despite being in the process.⁸¹

Acquiring planned naval technologies through domestic development has been partially successful. The RTN has managed to domestically develop underwater mines, and with support from the domestic ship industry, it can produce a variety of vessels, including hydrographic survey vessels, offshore patrol vessels (OPV), landing ship tanks, patrol crafts, harbor tugs, landing craft vehicle personnel, replenishment ships, and high-speed operation crafts.⁸² However, the RTN has encountered challenges in domestically developing UAVs and midget submarines for practical use as originally planned. These challenges stem from constraints in technology, budget limitations, and the need to establish comprehensive regulations governing military drone usage.⁸³

⁷⁸ “Timeline-Mahakap-Ruea-Damnam-Saner-Plean-Pen-Ruea-Frigate-Jak-Jeen”; “Sutin-Jang-Tad-Ngob-Kalahom-Pruad-Prad-Mai-Dai-Jud-Yuen-Kong-Derm-Mai-Kid-Su-Iea-Tahan (‘สทิน’ แจงตัดงบกลาโหมพรวดพรัดไม่ได้ จุดยืนคงเดิม ไม่คิดชงเหี้ยมทหาร—Sutin Expressed Defence’s Budget Cannot Be Suddenly Reduced And Insisted His Previous Position on Does Not Appear to the Arm Force),” *VoiceOnline*, 4 January 2024, <https://www.voicetv.co.th/>.

⁷⁹ Peacharanond interview; Taweewuth Pongsapipatt (Retired Admiral and Former Deputy Supreme Commander), messages to the author, 25 January 2024; and Paron Sangkaew (Commander and Lecturer, Naval Education Department), messages to the author, 11 January 11, 2024.

⁸⁰ “‘Sutin’-Prob-’TorRor’-Took-Titok-’Ruea-Frigate’-17,000-Larn-Tae-Dai-’Ruea-Damnam’-Nae (‘สทิน’ปล่อยบทร. ถูกตัดกเรือฟรีเกต 17,000 ล้าน แต่ได้เรือดำน้ำเน—‘Sutin’ Mollifies ‘the RTN’ as Seventeen Billion Baht Frigate Is Not Approved But Grants The Submarine),” *Naewna*, 8 March 2024, <https://www.naewna.com/>; “KorMorTor-Jang-Tad-Ngob-Ruea-Frigate-Chee-TorRor-Maimee-TOR-Chad-Sue-Jak-Prated-Nai-Wan-Sumroi-Rueadamnam (กมธ.แจงตัดงบเรือฟรีเกต ชีทร. ไม่มีที่ใออาร์ชัดซื้อจากปท. โหน หวันชำรอยเรือดำน้ำ—Comm. Informs Disapprove Frigate Procurement Budget as the RTN Does Not Have a Clear TOR with a Concern on the Repeats of the Submarine Procurement),” *KhaosodOnline*, 20 March 2024, <https://www.khaosod.co.th/>.

⁸¹ Sangkaew messages.

⁸² “Khao-San-Navee”; and *Royal Thai Navy White Paper 2023*.

⁸³ Wattanayagorn interview; Jitprawat interview; Pongsapipatt interview; and Sangkaew interview.

The RTN currently does not possess naval technologies acquired through donations from other states, nor has it engaged in joint development programs for such technologies.⁸⁴ Instead, the RTN's approach favors purchasing vessel plans from other countries and constructing vessels based on those plans. For example, the OPV Krabi was built at Mahidol Dockyard Thailand using a plan purchased from the United Kingdom.⁸⁵

As for infrastructure development, progress is underway but has faced challenges. Efforts to enhance naval bases and facilities, including improving capabilities at existing bases and developing submarine infrastructure such as the submarine base at Sattahip, a submarine dockyard near Mahidol Dockyard, and a submarine stop at Ang Thong Archipelago, are ongoing. However, these initiatives have encountered difficulties due to constraints in both budgetary allocations and available land resources.⁸⁶

Human resource development is a key focus for the RTN, with efforts showing effectiveness through various initiatives. Naval staff have been sent abroad for studies and training, as well as participating in joint naval drills with other navies, as previously mentioned. The RTN also conducts regular revisional naval drills and integrative exercises with other branches of the Royal Thai Armed Forces.⁸⁷ Additionally, the Maritime Enforcement Command Center (MECC) facilitates joint drills between naval and maritime entities in Thailand, including foreign participants.⁸⁸

In terms of administrative reform, progress has been made but remains partial. The establishment of the MECC as an integrative administration entity for maritime law enforcement in March 2019 was a significant step, although it currently relies on the RTN's force and lacks its own dedicated force.⁸⁹ Efforts to transition to a digital navy have encountered challenges, with the existing administrative system favoring analog document management. Technological constraints have hindered the practical use of an electronic document management system.⁹⁰

Adjusting the force in response to threats and domestic context is a gradual process.⁹¹ Minister of Defense Sutin Klangsang outlined plans for force adjustment

⁸⁴ Sangkaew interview; and Wattanayagorn interview.

⁸⁵ Pongsapipatt interview.

⁸⁶ Pongsapipatt interview; and Sangkaew interview.

⁸⁷ Sangkaew messages; and "Khao-San-Navee."

⁸⁸ Jitprawatt interview.

⁸⁹ MECC, "Parakij-Lea-Kongsang"; Wattanayagorn interview; Pongsapipatt interview; and Jitprawatt interview.

⁹⁰ Sangkaew interview.

⁹¹ Jitprawatt interview.

by 2027 during a National Assembly address on 4 January 2024. These plans include implementing an early retirement program, considering squadron dissolution and merger for a more compact force structure, and adjusting enlistment rates while enhancing incentives for military service.⁹²

On a positive note, the RTN successfully established the Cyber Security Operation Center in 2018 and launched its first White Paper in 2023.⁹³ The White Paper release marked a significant milestone, as it provided the public insight into the RTN's spending priorities, as mentioned earlier when discussing naval technologies and infrastructure.⁹⁴

Thailand effectively implements a maritime and naval hedging strategy, demonstrated by the RTN and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) engaging in joint naval patrols, drills, and diplomatic frameworks. This includes sending naval staff for training abroad and engaging in the purchase of naval technologies from neighboring countries, amity countries, and great powers, as previously outlined. Notably, the procurement of specific warships serves to diversify arms sources inherently, as it involves sourcing components from multiple countries. For instance, the debated S26T Submarine involves production by a Chinese company and engines initially sourced from Germany.⁹⁵ This strategy enables the RTN to mitigate excessive reliance on any single country for naval acquisitions.

Despite attempts by the RTN and Ministry of Defense (MOD) to engage in naval strategic communication, success has been limited due to implementation challenges.⁹⁶ The RTN's unfamiliarity with utilizing social media platforms, resulting in content on its YouTube channels diverging from societal trends, diminishes its impact.⁹⁷ Moreover, the RTN website predominantly promotes high-ranking naval staff over squadron missions, hindering public engagement.⁹⁸ Similarly, MOD communication methods are characterized by passivity, formality, and academic tone, further complicating effective communication.⁹⁹

⁹² "Sutin-Jang-Tad-Ngob-Kalahom-Pruad-Prad-Mai-Dai-Jud-Yuen-Kong-Derm-Mai-Kid-Su-Iea--Tahan."

⁹³ Sangkaew interview; Jitprawat interview; Naval Secretariat, "Phubanchakan-Tahan-Ruea-Yeam-Soon-Cyber-Krom-Kan-Sue-San-Lae-Technology-Sarasontes-Tahan-Ruea (ผู้บัญชาการทหารเรือเยี่ยมชมศูนย์ไซเบอร์ กรมการสื่อสารและเทคโนโลยีสารสนเทศทหารเรือ - A Commander in Chief of The Royal Thai Navy Visited Cyber Operation Centre, Naval Communications and Information Technology Department)," 14 September 2018, <https://www.sctr.navy.mi.th/>.

⁹⁴ Peacharanond interview.

⁹⁵ Pongsapipatt interview.

⁹⁶ Pongsapipatt interview.

⁹⁷ Sangkaew interview.

⁹⁸ Sangkaew interview.

⁹⁹ Peacharanond interview.

The absence of unified administrative bodies, coupled with a lack of dedicated presentation teams and political instability, further undermines naval strategic communication efforts.¹⁰⁰ These challenges not only contribute to public misunderstanding of maritime security and naval affairs but also impede trust-building initiatives.

Conclusion

This article has delved into how Thailand can employ small navy strategies to navigate the maritime rivalry among the great powers in the Indo-Pacific. It reveals that a *small navy* is one whose capabilities and flexibility allow for constabulary missions as the primary naval function, along with limited military and diplomatic operations beyond the EEZ due to various constraints such as fleet size, equipment quality, resource availability, and political constraints.

There are five key small navy strategies identified: international maritime and naval cooperation, international maritime and naval institutional building, naval force multiplier initiatives, maritime and naval hedging, and naval strategic communication. The historical context of maritime rivalry among great powers in the Indo-Pacific has posed enduring challenges to Thailand, shaping its policies and practices over time.

Presently, Thailand is recognized as possessing a small navy, with recommended strategies including international cooperation, technological acquisition, infrastructure development, human resource enhancement, administrative reform, hedging strategy, and strategic communication. Contemporary strategies and plans in maritime security and naval affairs aim to align with these recommendations, yet success remains partial.

Moving forward, the dynamic nature of maritime rivalry in the Indo-Pacific necessitates ongoing scrutiny of Thailand's ability to employ these small navy strategies effectively. Factors such as naval capabilities, shipbuilding industry capacity, government support, public opinion, and regional relationships will influence the adaptability and relevance of these strategies in the face of evolving geopolitical dynamics. ✪

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¹⁰⁰ Peacharanond interview; interview; Wattanayagorn interview; and "Nyua-Nyan-Kongthap-Ruea."