

Though a US treaty ally, Thailand has a long history of strategic expediency.

# THAILAND'S *Pivot*

By Richard Halloran



Saab photo

**T**he US Air Force and Thailand have had a long and sometimes troubled history. On the upside, Thailand opened many of its air bases to American combat aircraft during the war in Vietnam, and seven of them remain available to the US today. Moreover, Bangkok is host to

the annual Cobra Gold and Cope Tiger exercises that bring US air, ground, and naval forces together in Thailand with their counterparts from all over Asia. Thailand is also one of two treaty allies of the US in Southeast Asia—the other being the Philippines—and sits at the geographic and political center of a region of increasing strategic importance.

At the same time, the Thais are evidently living up to their reputation for playing off one side against another.

Today, Thailand is a prime target for the People's Republic of China (PRC) as it seeks to gain influence in Southeast Asia—and Bangkok has been visibly receptive. In late June, the commander of the Royal Thai Armed Forces, General Thanasak Patimaprakorn, was welcomed in Beijing where he conferred with General Fan Changlong, a vice chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), which is chaired by President Xi Jinping and governs China's armed forces.

The Thai leader also met with the chief of the general staff of the People's Liberation Army and member of the



*Royal Thai Air Force Gripen fighters fly in a three-ship formation. Part of Thailand's appeal to the US military is geographic. It sits at the nexus of many US and Chinese interests.*



CMC, General Fang Fenghui. Cutting through the diplomatic rhetoric, Xinhua, China's official news agency, reported that the Thais and Chinese discussed "a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership." Xinhua said that included "strategic communication, personnel exchanges and training, joint military exercises and training, maritime security, and multilateral security."

A senior USAF officer notes that while "every nation in Asia has relations with both China and the US," Thailand is perhaps the most active in seeking to expand



Staff map by Zaur Eylanbekov





its military, political, and economic engagement with China, particularly with the People's Liberation Army.

A June 2012 report from the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service in Washington concluded, "Thailand's reliability as a partner, and its ability to be a regional leader, are uncertain."

Moreover, the report said that when the Obama Administration published its plans to "rebalance" US foreign policy priorities in late 2011, "new moves in the US-Thailand alliance were notably lacking."

More recently, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel indicated US displeasure with Thailand during the Shangri-La Dialogue, the annual summit meeting of defense officials and civilian specialists sponsored by the International Institute of Security Studies in Singapore. On the sidelines, Hagel met with senior officials from allies Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia, plus partners and potential partners from Singapore, Indonesia,

Malaysia, and Vietnam. But notably absent from that lineup was anyone from Thailand.

### JUSMAGTHAI

In joint training besides Cobra Gold and Cope Tiger, Thailand is host to 40 other military drills with the United States. Those exercises are arranged and supervised by the Joint US Military Advisory Group Thailand, or JUSMAGTHAI, that is separate from the US Embassy in Bangkok. JUSMAGTHAI is, in effect, the US Embassy to the Royal Thai Armed Forces.

A key tenet of the AirSea Battle concept being developed by USAF and the US Navy is a greater reliance on allies for forces, support, and financial backing as well as for access to air bases, naval ports, and training sites. Thus, Thailand fills the bill on many counts.

Contemporary US-Thai security relations began during the Korean War of 1950 to 1953, when Bangkok

sent combat troops to join the United Nations Command in Korea. In a continuing campaign to stem the spread of communism in Asia, Thailand was among the founding nations of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO).

President Kennedy deployed troops to Thailand in 1962 to prevent communist forces in Laos from spilling over into northeast Thailand. That same year, Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman issued a communiqué in which the US committed itself to "the preservation of the independence and integrity of Thailand as vital to the national interest of the United States." That statement has been the basis of US-Thai military relations ever since.

During the Vietnam War, Thailand sent troops to Vietnam but, more importantly, permitted the US to use its bases to launch B-52s, F-105s, and other aircraft on bombing and attack missions over North and South Vietnam. The B-52s were based at U Tapao Royal Thai Air Base, and their operations included the Linebacker II campaign in December 1972.

Elsewhere in Thailand, USAF fighters were based at Korat, Takhli, and Udon; reconnaissance aircraft were at Udorn; special operations units operated from Nakhon Phanom; and combat support was based at Don Muang, near Bangkok.

Part of the appeal of a US relationship with Thailand is geographic. Thailand is perched alongside the South China Sea, the most heavily traveled waterway in the modern world as it connects the Pacific and Indian Oceans. US Navy vessels use the sea to transit between the two oceans, and the South China Sea carries more commercial traffic than the Suez and Panama Canals combined.



*A1C Victor Reynosa waits for an engine start up on a C-130 before a 2006 Cope Tiger mission at Korat RTAB, Thailand.*



USAF photo



**Left: French Premier Georges Pompidou (r) addresses the 1963 opening session of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, an international alliance for collective defense of Southeast Asia, as US Secretary of State Dean Rusk (l), British Foreign Secretary Alexander Douglas-Home, Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman listen. Center: An F-105 with the 561st Tactical Fighter Squadron at Korat. Right: A B-52 lands at U Tapao RTAB, Thailand, in 1972, after a combat mission over Vietnam.**



**RTAF Sgt. Suttiphan Jankeeree (l) and Sgt. Khvunchi Pinij show USAF Maj. Jean Trakinat (second from left) and MSgt. Joe Sitterly (r) the edible part of a plant during a search and rescue training mission in a 1996 Cobra Gold exercise. The 32nd Cobra Gold was this year.**

As a treaty ally, Thailand offers a critical advantage for the US over other nations on the shores of the South China Sea. Thailand is also not engaged in territorial disputes with China over islands, shoals, or the sea itself.

China has claimed much of the South China Sea as territorial waters. Beijing is keenly aware of its vulnerability in the South China Sea, seeing it as a choke point that could strangle the flow of most of its imported oil. China also has long historical ties to Southeast Asia, having at times occupied large parts of Vietnam and holding other states, including Thailand, as vassals. Large numbers of Chinese have emigrated to Thailand and continue to maintain personal and political ties with China.

After the end of the war in Vietnam, Thailand began to expand its military relations with China. According to the CRS study, "Bangkok pursued a strategic realignment with Beijing in order to contain Vietnamese influence in neighboring Cambodia." The Thais established diplomatic ties with Beijing in 1975, well before other Southeast Asian nations did the same.

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) reports that Bangkok went on an arms buying spree in China in the 1980s and '90s. Thailand acquired ship-to-ship and surface-to-air missiles, frigates, radar for fire control, and 500 tanks and 1,260 armored personnel carriers.

That military spending dropped off after the Asian financial crisis hit in the late 1990s and has not picked up since. Trade and investment, however, have gone up sharply, much of it carried on by ethnic Chinese in Thailand.

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, Thailand allowed the US access to U Tapao and other airfields as stopovers for flights into Iraq and Afghanistan. Thailand also sent 130 soldier-engineers to construct a runway at Bagram Air Base, situated some 25 miles northeast of Kabul. To help with reconstruction in Iraq, Thailand sent 450 medics and engineers after the US invasion. U Tapao was especially useful in the US disaster relief efforts in the region after the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and in subsequent calamities.

Relations have not always been rosy.

In 2006, the Thai Army staged a bloodless coup—the 18th since a constitutional monarchy was proclaimed in 1932—to oust Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and declare martial law. The US expressed its disapproval by suspending several foreign assistance programs worth \$29 million, including those providing for defense procurement, professional military education, and training for peacekeeping operations. Those funds were restored in 2008, as an uneasy political stability returned to Bangkok.





**Above:** MSgt. John Gaona watches from a door as members of the Royal Thai Air Force get ready for a static-line jump from a C-17 during Cope Tiger 2010. **Right:** US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel speaks with ministers of defense from Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Sweden, New Zealand, and Malaysia at the 2013 Shangri-la Dialogue meeting in Singapore.

The banner joint military exercise for Thailand and, indeed, for all of US Pacific Command's operating area, is Cobra Gold, the 32nd version of which was run in February with 13,000 participants. Though originally a bilateral event, Cobra Gold has evolved—over Thai objections—into a multilateral exercise. First Singapore, and then others, joined in; this year's event included units from Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, and Malaysia.

Observers have come from 20 more nations, including (for the first time) Burma this year. China sent its first observers in 2008. The drills included extensive field exercises, a command post exercise, and humanitarian training.

Exercise Cope Tiger 13, in March, reflected Pacific Air Forces' stated desire to nurture military relations with the Thai air force. About 365 airmen from Kadena Air Base in Okinawa, Japan, and from Osan AB, South Korea, joined with 1,500 Thai and Singaporean airmen at the Korat and Udon Thani air bases for a 10-day exercise. They practiced fighter maneuvers, air combat tactics, close air support, and airdrops.

Besides the concern over the worrisome influence of the Chinese on Thai



Photo by Erin A. Kirk Cuomo

leaders, Bangkok's politics are what a senior American officer delicately termed "fragile," and that affects the nation's relations with the US.

King Bhumibol Adulyadej is not well, and there is concern over the line of succession. Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn is said to be unpopular because of his reputation as a playboy.

Former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, whose sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, is the current prime minister, is in self-imposed exile after having been ousted in a coup and then convicted of alleged abuse of power. But he still has a sizeable band of followers, the so-called "red shirts."

His opponents—the "yellow shirts"—are determined to prevent his return or to put him in prison. Violence between them has erupted before and could break out again.

## Long History

In the 1930s, with Japanese militarism on the rise, Siam came under the control of military dictators, threw in with Tokyo, and changed its name from Siam to Thailand. Though it is largely ignored today, Thailand declared war on the US after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941. This was a Thai attempt to regain territories lost earlier to Britain and France. Then, toward the end of the war, Bangkok abandoned its Japanese ally to make a deal with the US and its allies.

Americans seeking clues as to the future relationship of US relations with Thailand might look to the historian Nicholas Tarling, an authority on Southeast Asia. Tarling has pointed to the Thai tendency to seek some sort of compromise, "to go with the tide when they had to, a policy that had a long history behind it."

In the first half of the 21st century, there are signs this tendency to maneuver between competing powers is continuing. Today, the Thais may once again be seeking a beneficial middle ground by playing the United States off against the People's Republic of China. ■

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