

# THAILAND

## THE SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

There has been a significant shift in how the Thai perceive their security environment. During the Cold War, the Thai elites regarded their country as truly a "front line" state, facing subversion from within and potentially aggression from the outside. Today, however, direct military threats to Thailand are regarded as relatively remote. Since the end of conflict in neighboring Cambodia, there is little fear of external aggression, although troubling border issues remain along the country's long land borders. There is also little current threat from communist or minority insurgencies. However, there is increased concern about Thailand's maritime claims and resources, and weak institutionalization of the current democratic political system remain a source of domestic fragility. Thailand also faces challenging social issues associated with rapid but unequal development. If not dealt with effectively, these could affect Thailand's political stability over the longer term.

**The External Environment.** Traditionally, Thailand's security concerns focused on its long land border. Occupying a large, central plain in continental Southeast Asia, Thailand's geographic location made it vulnerable to aggression from its western and eastern frontiers. During the Ayudhaya period (1349–1767), the capital was twice sacked by Burmese armies, but there has been no serious threat of aggression from the western frontier for many decades. However, fears of land-based aggression on the eastern border remained active and resurfaced during the Cold War when conflicts in Vietnam and much of the rest of Indochina were considered to be potentially threatening. Those fears were heightened when Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1978 and subsequently clashed with Thai troops along the border. Because Bangkok is located only 300 km from Cambodia, the Thai elites were very sensitive to events taking place there. The ending of the Cambodian conflict in recent years has reduced concerns over the security of the eastern frontier.

The increased attention to maritime claims and sea lines of communication reflects both the decline of land-based concerns and the Thai economy's increased dependence on international trade. Ninety-five percent of this trade transits South and Southeast Asian sea lanes. Industrialization also has increased Thailand's dependency on energy and raw material resources from abroad, especially the Middle East. The defense modernization program, accordingly, is significantly enhancing naval capabilities.

**Border Security.** Despite the reduced concern about outright aggression, land border issues still are a high profile security concern for Thai authorities. The government's 1994 Defence White Paper specifically states that "it is certain that Thailand will face problems in the future concerning unclear borders." These borders stretch some 5000 kilometers, abutting Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Malaysia. Portions of the borders have never been properly demarcated. Thailand has had border disputes with all of its neighboring countries in recent years. Its dispute with Laos, for example, includes an area containing five villages and a small island in the middle of the Mekong River. Thai security forces have clashed with Laotian troops several times in those areas during the late 1980s. Thailand also contests areas in three eastern provinces with Laos, five northern and central provinces with Myanmar, and four areas in the south with Malaysia. The boundary of its maritime exclusive economic zone (EEZ) is disputed with Cambodia.

Boundary problems between Thailand and its neighbors have been exacerbated by incidents involving illegal entry, smuggling, trade in weapons, drug trafficking and prostitution. Most of these activities are concentrated along the eastern, northeastern and western borders with Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia. The illegal entry problems arise mainly along the western border where in recent years an estimated 60,000 people have fled into Thailand to escape fighting inside Myanmar between the central government and Karen separatists. This created distrust between Myanmar and Thailand, and the mishandling of the refugees by some Thai officers also damaged Thailand's human rights record. Drug trafficking by groups operating in the border areas complicate Thailand's relations with Myanmar and other countries. On the eastern border, the Khmer Rouge still control a number of areas along the Thai-Cambodian border, and fighting between Cambodian troops and the Khmer Rouge occur periodically. The close past ties of Bangkok governments with the Khmer Rouge plagued relations with authorities in Phnom Penh. In the five provinces in the Malaysian border area, misunderstandings between the ethnic Malay Islamic and the ethnic Thai Buddhist populations are more of a governance challenge.

**Internal Security.** From the 1960s to the 1980s, threats posed to Thailand's internal security by communist insurgency, northeast regionalism, southern separatist movements and problems with the northern hill tribes were considered very serious. The Thai military could credibly claim victory over the communist insurgency by the early 1980s, and regional and ethnic unrest withered away to the point that they are of little contemporary concern. Today, issues of

political authority and social stability are regarded as the greater internal threats to the Thai political order.

A contest for political authority continues between military and civilian segments of society. Since 1932, the military has usually dominated Thai politics, but periodically has been challenged by competing groups, including the student-led uprising of 1973 and mass urban demonstrations in 1992. In the early 1980s, the military's position was strengthened by the stable rule of General Prem Tinsulanond who, with the support of the Monarch, was able to lead the country under a parliamentary system for eight consecutive years (1980–88). However, the removal of the internal communist threat and reduced external security concerns weakened the argument that military control was still essential to national security. Economic prosperity also affected Thai politics by increasing the size and influence of the urban middle class who generally supported a more democratic political system. In 1988, Chatichai Choonhavan became the first elected prime minister in twelve years. But in February 1991, seizing on charges of corruption against the Chatichai government, the military reasserted power, abrogating the constitution and dissolving the National Assembly. Public outrage led to pro-democracy demonstrations in May 1992 after army strongman, General Suchinda Kraprayoon, sought to establish himself as prime minister. It took a direct appeal from the King to end the confrontation, after which Suchinda retired from politics.

These events demonstrated the degree to which Thai society has changed. In this new, more relaxed external and internal security environment, most Thai no longer regard the military's political role as needed or relevant. Subsequently, constitutional amendments were passed to strengthen civilian rule, and the Internal Peace Keeping Command Act, which gave excessive power to the military, was repealed. For the first time, the civilian government has even become involved in military appointments. Although present civilian leaders appear to have gained the upper hand, competition continues among civilian political leaders, the military, the government bureaucracy, business and industry. Many institutions of civil society remain weak, especially the political parties. No Thai elected civilian government has yet fulfilled its full term in office. The lack of clear political authority thus remains a threat to the future of the Thai state.

Political competition could be heightened by underlying social tensions associated with the growth process. Here the primary concern is the growing inequality in the distribution of income and resources. Forty percent of the Thai population account for approximately eighty percent of total income. This gap exists in large part because the majority of the population still works in the more

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slowly growing agricultural sector. It seems likely that economic disparities in Thailand will continue to increase. The government's primary response to this emerging problem has been to launch a series of new development programs based on policies articulated in Thailand's National Economic and Social Development Plans.

## DEFENSE POLICIES AND ISSUES

A number of changes are occurring in Thai security policies in response to the improved security environment of the 1990s. The main trends include the increased willingness of government authorities to articulate security goals and policies, the effort to reorganize policy-making to streamline decision-making and institutionalize civilian control, the restructuring of the military into a more compact but better trained and equipped force, and a reduced emphasis on alliances. Professionalization of the military is a central policy objective.

**Defense Objectives.** In the past, changes in security emphasis—from internal subversion in the 1970s to the Vietnamese threat in the 1980s—occurred without formal policy statements. For the first time, Thailand articulated a broad set of security objectives and approaches in its first defense white paper entitled, *The Defence of Thailand 1994*. The document asserts that the country's national interests are: (1) maintenance of the State with independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity; (2) the happiness and well-being of the people; (3) the growth and advancement of the nation as a whole, both in economic and social terms and the existence of an administrative system that benefits the people; and (4) honor and prestige in the international community.

The white paper stresses the importance of internal conditions. Like many other developing countries, many of Thailand's internal security threats stem from what has been called the "weak state" syndrome. The government's solution is to pursue a multidimensional approach that addresses not only military security threats, but also related domains including political security, economic security, socio-psychological security, and scientific and technological security. This broad articulation of national security exists mostly as an abstraction, however.

After the decline of the military in Thai politics in the 1990s, no single institution is capable of developing and overseeing an integrated security policy. Nevertheless, the civilian government is now attempting to institutionalize a new comprehensive approach to security through its National Preparedness Plan (NPP), approved by the Anand government in February 1992. The NPP is one of three major policies the Thai state employs to attain its security goals. The other

two are the National Defense Policy (NDP) and the National Economic and Social Development Plan (NESDP).

The National Defense Policy aims to develop a more professional fighting force with conventional warfare capabilities, while maintaining sufficient capacity for potential domestic threats. The objectives are to: (1) restructure the armed forces so that it is more compact and has professional personnel with modern weapons and equipment; (2) improve the service and conscription systems; (3) revise the curricula of all military educational institutions to take into account the economic, social and political changes occurring in the country; (4) strengthen the role of the armed forces in economic development, including the protection of economic interests on land and sea; and (5) raise morale by improving welfare and providing more vocational training for lower ranking soldiers, improving their post-service job prospects.

**Reorganization.** Reorganization of the numerous security-related government agencies is a central component of the restructuring effort. The thrust is to place the overall security strategy in the hands of the political leadership while reducing the overlapping functions, thus bringing security organization more into line with current perceptions of threats and needs. Over the past sixty years, various security agencies were set up in addition to basic military combat units, specifically to coordinate and/or implement the military-dominated national security policies. These included the National Security Council (NSC), the Central Security Operation Command of the Supreme Commander's Office (CSC), the Accelerated Rural Development Agency (ARDA), the Internal Security Operation Command (ISOC), the Capital Security Command, and the Army's Directorate for Civil Affairs.

Under the new system, the National Security Council, a civilian agency, replaces the military as the central institution for integrating security-related activities and projects. This is a significant change from its past role of largely articulating national concerns in accordance with the military's policy and doctrine. Under the Office of the Prime Minister, the NSC advises the Cabinet on national security policies and oversees security-related programs, including those managed by the military. Its activities cover a wide range of areas including politics, military, economics, society, science and technology, and energy and environment. To ensure security-related development activities comply with overall economic plans, the NSC is required to work closely with the National Economic and Social Development Board under an umbrella organization called the National Coordinating Center for Preparedness. The NSC also has been given oversight over all the budget allocations submitted and coordinated through the NESDB, including the budgets

for military development programs. In addition, the NSC is required to seek support from, and coordinate efforts with, the private sector.

**Defense Spending.** Thailand's defense budget for 1996 is 100.6 million baht, an increase from 91.6 million baht in 1995. Since 1989, the defense budget has consistently accounted for approximately 2.5 percent of the country's GDP. That marks a significant decline from the early to mid-1980s when the ratio was around 4 percent. Then, the defense budget was the largest of the government's budgets. Today it is third largest and it has been so for the last three four years.

**Personnel and Procurement.** Thailand intends to reduce manpower levels from the current 256,000 troops, but increase the size of the reserves (now 200,000). The Thai Royal Army cut its forces by 15 percent between 1992-96 and plans another 10 percent cut during 1997-2001; at that point, the ratio of active forces to reserves will have been shifted from the current 75:25 to 60:40. Thailand has adopted a "total defense strategy" under which all available forces, professional military as well as local defense groups, will be used to make a single combined response against domestic or external threat.

Enhanced training and equipment is a key element of the restructuring effort. The NDP provides the foundation for the three armed forces to gradually shift their doctrine from small-scale warfare to a more conventional defense posture and to acquire the appropriate capabilities. In line with growing interest in maritime protection and strengthened conventional capabilities, weapons modernization and upgrading have a high priority in the 1990s. The increasing availability of economic resources and the commercialization of the arms market have helped speed these efforts. The military's equipment modernization program involves upgrading older weaponry and acquiring large quantities of sophisticated new equipment, including light and battle tanks, heavy artillery guns, advanced fighter jets, modern combat ships and electronic defense systems.

All three armed services consider modernization as vital to fulfilling their new missions. The Royal Thai Navy's (RTN) modernization program is the most ambitious, emphasizing increased capability to protect territorial waters, maritime natural resources, industrial energy sources, and sea lines of communications. The RTN is giving serious consideration to the acquisition of more modern surface warships and a small fleet of diesel-powered submarines. New frigates (Naresuan- and Knox-class vessels) are being commissioned in addition to four Chinese-built frigates (Chao Phraya class) and two British-built anti-submarine warfare corvettes (Kramronsin class). More capable missile and air defense systems (Sea Sparrow ship-to-air missiles and LW-108 and STIR radar systems) also are being acquired. The most significant addition to the RTN's fighting capability

is the Chakkrinareubet light aircraft carrier to be commissioned in early 1997, with a small number of older version sea Harrier jets and anti-sub helicopters. This essentially will change the RTN from a coastal navy into a maritime navy with significant strike capability.

The stated aim of the Royal Thai Army (RTA) is to be "compact in size, light, and have destructive power," so as to respond quickly to contingencies, particularly in the border areas. RTA weapons procurements include main battle and light tanks (M-48A5 and M-60A3) and self-propelled guns (M-109). The RTA also is improving its battlefield surveillance and night operations equipment. The Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) emphasizes increasing the number of modern fighter aircraft in its inventory. It plans to acquire additional advanced jet fighters (F-16) with higher intercept capabilities and has already signed a contract with the United States to procure some F-18/A fighter jets. Acquisition of airborne early warning systems (E-2 Hawkeyes) is planned as well. The RTAF also is in the process of upgrading its air defense systems and electronic surveillance.

**Alliances.** In modern history, alliances or alignments were an important element in Thai security policy. Thailand intends to continue its alliance relationship with the United States. However, in the post-Cold War period and with the Cambodian conflict ended, Thailand no longer feels that its security is as dependent upon links with either the United States or China. The 1995 decision to reject a U.S. request to station supply ships and equipment in the Gulf of Thailand reflects this shift. The bilateral security relationship with the United States is taking a new shape, with Thailand becoming an increasingly assertive partner.

Bilateral security relations with China also are entering a new phase, with Chinese support becoming more open. In 1996, Thailand, for the time, accepted a small amount of military aid from China. Sino-Thai relations are being reinforced by the investments of Thai multinational firms in China and by personal relations among some in the Thai and Chinese elites.

## **CONTRIBUTIONS TO REGIONAL AND GLOBAL SECURITY**

Perhaps the most significant Thai contributions to international security have been the recent visible and serious efforts to strengthen relations with neighboring countries, thus promoting economic development and stability in troubled mainland Southeast Asia. In the case of Cambodia, Thai authorities cut ties with the Khmer Rouge, participated actively in promoting reconciliation among the Cambodian factions, supported the UN-sponsored election, and moved quickly to recognize the newly-elected government of Cambodia. The Thai government also has sought to improve relations with Laos. The Thai-Laos



friendship bridge across the Mekong was opened in 1995, with the Thai monarch presiding in a ceremony in Laos. This was his first visit to a foreign country in over thirty years. In the case of Myanmar, Thailand is a principal supporter of the ASEAN policy of "constructive engagement." Because of the long boundary between the two countries and the complexity of their relations, Thai officials believe that it is essential to work with the Myanmar government to build a peaceful atmosphere. They hope this will provide a foundation for regional stability and security. Finally, in recent years and as noted earlier, Sino-Thai relations have continued to grow deeper, particularly in the economic sphere.

The Thai government has taken independent positions on issues that it regards as important to regional and global order. These have included its criticism of U.S. missile attacks on Baghdad and its rejection of prepositioning U.S. ships in Thai waters.

Thailand also has been actively increasing participation in multilateral diplomacy. In 1993 it became a member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). The government believes that the NAM will be an important forum in the post-Cold War world. Thailand's support for multilateralism is reflected in its hosting of important meetings, including the first ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994, the Fifth ASEAN Summit in 1995, and the first Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) in 1996. Thai officials have a keen interest in the ARF, which was created and is being developed by Thailand and the other ASEAN countries.

In general, the Thai government believes that economic issues are becoming more important in international affairs and that stronger collective dialogue and action is needed in the post-Cold War world. In short, regional and global security can be enhanced by economic means and political action at both the bilateral and multilateral levels.