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Thailand's Changing Patrons

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Dear Peter,

The decline of U.S. global influence and the concomitant rise of new power centers is a topic that is now in vogue. Perhaps more than anywhere else, Thailand's turn toward a new patron--China--is a striking example of this trend.

Twenty years ago, America was Thailand's dependable ally and "Red China" the menace to the north. Today, Thai generals proudly drive their newly-delivered Chinese tanks as U.S. military assistance, and influence, continues to decline. One U.S. military officer told me ruefully, "Thai generals used to come up to you and throw their arms around you saying, 'We're pals.' Now, they only do that with the Chinese." A Western military analyst warned that the sharp decline in U.S. aid has "driven these folks into the arms of the Chinese....Forty years of [U.S.] influence is coming to an end."

When Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda steered one of the 30 new, Chinese-built T-69-2 tanks last Christmas Day, it marked a major step in Thailand's increasing reliance on China as a patron for security and military equipment. Thailand's decision to purchase 30 Chinese tanks and over 400 armored personnel carriers at cut-rate prices is only the beginning of Chinese entry into what has been almost exclusively an U.S. domain. This trend will continue with the next shipment of 25 Chinese-built T-69-2s equal to or better than their American competitor thanks to American technology that China acquired and installed on its tanks in an apparent violation of U.S. laws.

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This shift toward Chinese support is not a sudden development and is not entirely the result of the decline in U.S. military assistance since 1985. The tank purchase is only the most public facet of the growing Thai-Chinese military cooperation. It is a relationship that has impinged upon Thai-U.S. affairs, strengthened China's new role as an international arms exporter, provided a toe-hold for increased Chinese ties with the rest of Southeast Asia, and influenced domestic Thai politics. [1]

I. Contours of Thai Diplomacy

A glance at Thai history reveals two factors that have shaped foreign relations for the past three centuries. The first is the extraordinarily skillful maneuvering by Thai foreign policy makers to balance off and switch allegiance among global superpowers whenever necessary. Just as patron-client networks characterize Thai society, with clients seeking out strong, rising patrons and dropping weak ones, so too patron-client relations are often the medium for dealing with foreign powers. The second factor is that because of geography, Thailand has often been vulnerable to military threats from the west and east, particularly the east since the early nineteenth century. [2]

Three hundred years ago this month, the reign of King Narai the Great began to come to an end. His reign (1656-1688) marked a period of intense diplomatic activity with Thailand playing the colonial powers off against each other in the attempt to remain independent. In those 32 short years, King Narai aligned with France to counter Dutch domination, renewed relations with England, employed Japanese mercenaries in an internal power struggle, and received simultaneous delegations from France and Persia that attempted to convert him to, respectively, Catholicism and Islam. This balancing and maneuvering among superpowers during King Narai's time is still very much part of the consciousness of today's foreign policy making elite. [3]

Until the mid-nineteenth century, Thailand rested comfortably at the periphery of the Chinese World Order, fighting wars with Burma to the west and competing with Vietnam for control over Laos and Cambodia. The Opium War (1839-1842) jolted the Thai elite into realizing that the Chinese World Order was coming to an end and that accommodation with England was necessary to stave off the more rapacious French who were seizing large chunks of territory to the east. In the 1910's and 1920's, growing relations with America enabled Thailand to gain Western recognition of its full sovereignty. By negotiating an equitable treaty with the U.S., Thailand used this as a precedent to convince the other Western powers to renegotiate their unequal treaties. Japan's rise in the 1930's, however, encouraged the growth of militant Thai nationalism

and led Thailand to declare war on the U.S. in January 1942. Fortunately, the Thai Ambassador to the U.S. refused to deliver the declaration. Thailand may have been the only country to declare war on the U.S. with impunity, for after the war the U.S. prevented France and England from imposing reparations on Thailand.

The post-war era up to 1969, could be considered one of the most stable in Thai foreign relations. During this period, Thailand's major security threat was internal and U.S. assistance in counter-insurgency operations made for particularly close ties between the two countries. Thailand was a most willing partner in Pax Americana. The first Asian country to send troops to South Korea, Thailand later provided air bases for U.S. air operations in Vietnam. At the height of its involvement, Thailand stationed some 11,000 soldiers in South Vietnam, with additional forces in Laos and Cambodia. In contrast, the Philippines prohibited U.S. B-52s from making bombing runs out of Clark Air Base and had to be bribed into sending a small civic action contingent to Vietnam. But, as with the previous Chinese and British world orders, soon major shocks to the American order would surprise Thailand, demanding a deft response.

II. Shocks from Vietnam

Two shocks from Vietnam awakened Thai foreign policy makers into re-evaluating their heavy reliance on the U.S. and their enmity with China. The first was the Nixon Doctrine, announcing in 1969 that "Asian nations themselves" would be responsible for their own defense; the U.S. would only play a supportive role. Reacting to this, and the surprise withdrawal of 25,000 U.S. troops from Vietnam, Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman began the process of making peace with China. It was his efforts in late 1960's and early 1970's that culminated with Prime Minister Prem reviewing the new, T-69-2 Chinese tanks.

It was a long and difficult process. For years, Thanat's attempts were blocked by the conservative, anti-Chinese Thai military. China continued to support and arm the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), which the Thai military perceived as the main threat. Although the subsequent U.S. loss in Indo-China in 1975 further undercut Thai confidence in America as its primary patron, accommodation with China was not yet in the cards. [4]

Vietnam's sudden invasion of Cambodia in December 1978 was, of course, the second shock. Within a matter of weeks, the Thai armed forces, which had last officially fought a foreign war in 1845, now faced the world's third largest military machine. From the Thai perspective, its ancient enemy defeated the French in eight years, the Americans in eight years too, and had just fought China for 17 days, arguably emerging the victor.

Although China had been humiliated by the defeat of its client, the Khmer Rouge, China alone had directly committed troops against 'Soviet-backed expansionism' by invading Vietnam to teach it a mutually costly "lesson." At this point, U.S. treaty commitments to directly aid Thailand in case of external aggression probably counted for little in the minds of the Thai military. With the Nixon Doctrine, the U.S. had announced its unwillingness to shed American blood on foreign soil. Moreover, the effectiveness of America's preferred method for projecting force at a minimum cost of U.S. lives--aerial-naval power combined with small special operations forces--may have lost some credibility after the Mayaguez debacle.

Confronted with the double threat from Vietnam on the border and a still-flourishing insurgency, Thailand found a remarkable solution by entering into an informal military alliance with China. The deal was that China would stop supporting the CPT and, in exchange, Thailand would channel Chinese arms to the Khmer Rouge. Only one Thai official has commented publicly on the genesis of one of Thailand's most important security arrangements. General Saiyud Kerdphol, former Supreme Commander of the Royal Thai Armed Forces, writes:

...the Cambodian situation made Peking suddenly more dependant on Thai goodwill in order to pursue its goals in the region. Most specifically, this saw the need to channel munitions and logistics support to Pro-Chinese Khmer Rouge guerrillas along the Thai border in order to provide continued resistance to Vietnamese occupation forces. Bangkok found itself in a position to appeal to Peking to end its support for the CPT, which Thai authorities at that time still regarded as the foremost threat to national security. [5]

On July 10, 1979, Voice of the People of Thailand, the CPT radio station based in China, "temporarily" suspended its broadcasts. China had done its part. Later, we shall discuss the Thai half of the bargain.

Today, China may indeed be a more reliable guarantor than the U.S. against Thailand's present number-one security threat --Vietnamese incursions. Chinese troops massed along Vietnam's northern border tie up over 19 Vietnamese divisions. During the annual Vietnamese dry-season offensive in Western Cambodia, which often results in border incursions, China has issued verbal threats, backing them up with artillery barrages, and last year launched a division-sized attack. According to one report, Bangkok can now telephone Kunming Military Region headquarters to request a Chinese retaliatory artillery barrage against Vietnam within six hours. Apparently, the most Washington has done during Vietnamese incursions is to voice its strong displeasure and rush shipments of munitions to Thailand. [6]

Moreover, China's position on Vietnam's northern border gives it an edge over the U.S. in responding to precisely the

type of Vietnamese incursion that Thai policy makers most expect. Gen. Saiyud explained to me that the Vietnamese threat is not a full-scale invasion, but a smaller thrust to seize "a chunk of Thailand" and then call for negotiations. As my previous newsletter indicated, border disputes on the Thai-Lao and Thai-Cambodian borders often are not "nation-threatening" events, but ambiguous incidents along an unclear border. This ambiguity inhibits U.S. intervention, were it requested. The U.S. can rush shipments of materiel to Bangkok, but lacks realistic options for further, graduated response. China, however, has the machinery to ratchet up the pressure on Vietnam: first verbal warnings; then border shelling followed by limited troop incursions; and finally, a second "lesson."

A more important issue than the mechanics of possible military response is, of course, Thai perceptions of the American commitment to exercising such military force if requested by Thailand. When I asked a variety of people whether they believed the U.S. would honor its treaty obligations--the 1954 Manila Pact and the 1962 Rusk-Thanat agreement--to directly assist Thailand in case of a Vietnamese invasion, I received a wide range of answers.

M.R. Sukhumbhand Paribatra, a leading scholar on Thai security issues, said "we still believe that the U.S. would come to our assistance." The Thai military, he said, expects that the U.S. would retaliate with air strikes against Vietnam. Dr. Thanat Khoman, who has grown increasingly critical of U.S. policy, bluntly replied, "We don't know." One Western military analyst pointed out that with every delegation from Washington, whether executive or congressional, Thai policy makers repeatedly seek assurances on the U.S. commitment. He claimed that Thai military officers, "don't believe that the [U.S.] could be trusted if Vietnam invades."

Perhaps Lt. Gen. Thamniab Thapmanee, President of the National Defense College, best expressed the Thai military's sentiment. Lt. Gen. Thamniab is not involved in the formulation of foreign policy, but his classmates from Chulachomklao military academy are involved, and as President of the Defense College he follows the policy discussions. He asked me rhetorically, "Why does the U.S. change [its] policy so often? Your allies do not have any confidence....so now the Thai people look for other allies."

Because Thai policy makers, civilian and military, cannot peer into the minds of those in Washington, one of the few objective measurements they have of U.S. intentions is the level of U.S. military assistance. And that indicator has plummeted.

III. Declining U.S. Dollars

Typically, patrons provide their clients with one, or both, of two goods: protection or material benefits. With U.S. protection perceived as diminishing, material benefits--both arms aid and arms sales--become more important. From a high point of \$110 million in fiscal year 1985, U.S. military aid has dropped to \$88 million in FY1986, \$50 million in FY1987, and \$43 million for FY1988. Western diplomats expect the trend to continue.

U.S. military assistance to Thailand has fluctuated wildly in the past: decreasing rapidly in the early 1960's from \$300 million annually to less than \$50 million, and again in the early 1970's from \$100 million to less than \$25 million. But, unlike the present situation, both of these declines did not occur in conjunction with the perceived weakening of U.S. commitment and the availability of alternative allies.

For the Thai military, the reduction in military aid in fiscal year 1987 from \$88 million to \$50 million was a rude jolt. Expecting only a minor decrease in aid, Thai officers were, according to one observer, "very frustrated" when they had to scrap certain programs. To soften the blow, the Defense Security Assistance Agency dispatched what was derisively called a "creative financing team." The team tried to convince the Thai military that although the total aid package had been reduced, they were actually better off because the aid was now in grants, not long-term credits as before. The Thai military, interested in the total flow of cash and weapons, not finances, didn't buy it. Lt. Gen. Thamniab said, "After you suddenly cut half [sic] of the military aid, the consequence was to have a weakened military....It was a hardship."

Two factors magnified the impact of the aid cut. First, because of Thai budgetary constraints, U.S. equipment that was no longer subsidized by U.S. aid began to be priced out of reach. During the late 1970's and early 1980's, a surge in Thai government borrowing to finance massive arms purchases had helped push the government's debt up to unacceptable levels. From 1978 to 1983, Thai foreign debt to finance military expenditures shot up from \$17.8 million to \$189.2 million. To control the debt burden, the Thai government has now severely reduced foreign borrowing and even trimmed slightly the defense budget after fiscal year 1985. The Thai military, faced with a slightly smaller budget and curtailed government loans to finance expensive purchases, has been forced to forgo some of the traditionally preferred American weapons and search for cheaper substitutes. [7]

Second, and more importantly, under Gen. Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, who became Commander in Chief of the Royal Thai Army in May 1986, the Army embarked on an extensive modernization program just as U.S. aid levels nosedived. Gen. Chavalit's ambitious plans call for mechanizing four of the Army's seven infantry divisions, requiring large numbers of tanks and armored personnel carriers. With U.S. aid declining, Chinese equipment is filling the gap. Said one Western military

analyst, the Thai Army's modernization program is "101% dependent on Chinese hardware."

While that may be a slight overstatement, for the short-term at least, the Thai Army is relying heavily on Chinese weaponry. Thailand is still purchasing 40 M-48A5 tanks from the U.S. to add to its existing fleet of 65 M-48A5s, but delivery is slow. The first U.S. tanks will not arrive until October and the entire shipment will be stretched out over a long period. In contrast, Chinese tanks come quickly and cheaply. In short order, Thailand has received 30 T-69-2 tanks and 419 M-85 armored personnel carriers (APCs) and may soon receive 25 more tanks and 360 more APCs. As will be shown below, for Gen. Chavalit and the Army, time is important.

Some Thai academicians believe that what led to the decision to purchase Chinese equipment was a matter of simple pragmatism. At the "friendship prices" China was offering--one third of the market value--the tanks would have been difficult to resist even if U.S. aid had continued at a high level.

Yet, the reduction in U.S. aid provided some of the necessary conditions for the deal. Before the decline in aid, China had unsuccessfully offered tanks to Gen. Chavalit's predecessor. Prior to that, China had been selling modest amounts of ammunition and side arms to the Thai Army. But, according to a knowledgeable Thai arms dealer, just to sell those items "took a while." Thus, for politically insignificant items such as ammunition, the Royal Thai Army was willing to eventually make a purely pragmatic decision. But for the Army to turn from the U.S. to China for prestigious big-ticket items would require the right political climate.

IV. Bureaucratic Interests

Aside from the external changes described above, important internal changes within the Thai Army and the rise of key individuals facilitated the shift toward Chinese equipment.

According to one Western military analyst, the Royal Thai Army--the key branch of the military--has undergone a profound generational change. Gen. Chavalit, and his classmates who hold the top Army positions, grew up in the shadow of the Vietnam War. They were majors and lieutenant colonels when, in their eyes, the U.S. was defeated. Later, they formed the core group that crushed Thailand's communist insurgency, without excessive U.S. support. Their class (Class 1 of Chullaklomchao military academy), was the first to use field manuals that were not exact copies of U.S. manuals. Thus, they are "more self-confident" than their predecessors and psychologically "less dependent on U.S. aid and assistance."

As mentioned earlier, Chinese aid to the Khmer Rouge--channeled through the Thai armed forces--has had a seldom-discussed impact on domestic Thai affairs. It is difficult to obtain a reliable estimate of how much materiel China has

provided to the Khmer Rouge over the years, but the amount is significant. Consider the number of trucks, mortars, small arms, and munitions it takes to equip and sustain a guerrilla army of up to 40,000 fighters for over nine years. It is reliably reported that the Thai military receives approximately 10% of that aid. [8]

Some observers have wondered how a relatively obscure signal corps officer named Chavalit rose so suddenly in just seven years to become Commander in Chief of the Royal Thai Army. In part, it was because the close aide to Gen. Prem won widespread recognition for formulating the last phase of Thailand's counter-insurgency strategy. And in part, it was because he oversaw Thai-Cambodian border policy. Said M.R. Sukhumbhand, Gen. Chavalit moved to the top "through traditional patronage." He added, "once a leader deals with a country," he generally maintains the relationship. "Each military leader has his own favorite supplier."

Gen. Chavalit is widely viewed as eventually succeeding to the Prime Ministry. Ironically, what may hinder the Army chief's progress is his relatively narrow base of support within the Army. Previous Army chiefs have come from the fighting corps: the cavalry, artillery, infantry, sometimes even the engineers, but rarely from the signal corps. Many traditionally-minded officers view Gen. Chavalit as lacking in direct, combat experience. [9]

One has the impression that Gen. Chavalit's drive to modernize the Thai Army, aside from its purely strategic goals, may be one means of garnering more support from these officers.

But in this effort, Gen. Chavalit has little time to produce results. He has pledged to retire early after two years at his post, and despite the possibility of a last minute change, many believe that he will have to stick to his word, retiring in April, or at the latest in October during the annual military reshuffle. Thus the Chinese tanks and APCs, which arrive quickly and in large quantities, are the right equipment at the right time.

Finally, playing the China card also increases Gen. Chavalit's stature as a soldier-statesman. Few aspiring political leaders of any country can finesse military assistance from two superpowers, while flying to a warm reception at the wintry capital of the third.

V. Chinese Tanks

This purchase of tanks and APCs is not the first arms transfer from China. In 1985, China gave Thailand ammunition and 30 artillery pieces, including 18 130mm guns. But this sale is unprecedented in its size and political ramifications.

The first shipment of tanks and APCs is part of a larger deal that is reportedly for 100 tanks and 300 APCs at a cost

of \$42.4 million, or one-third of the market value. The exact details and price are unclear since this shipment of 30 tanks and 416 APCs means that the number of APCs delivered already exceeds the total number of APCs reported purchased. In addition, I learned that there is another, as yet unannounced, delivery of 25 T-69-2 tanks and 360 M-85 APCs. Whatever the exact price and quantity of the total deal, it is a bargain.

The Chinese tanks and APCs are not clunkers. Thai military officials claim, and some Western military analysts concur, that the Chinese M-85 is better than the U.S. M-113. More importantly, according to one analyst, Thai cavalry officers prefer the Chinese tanks over the American M-48A5, the backbone of the Thai tank fleet. While the Chinese T-69-2s are all brand-new "production line models," the 40 M-48A5s that the U.S. will begin delivering late this year are all rebuilt. The T-69-2 comes equipped with a laser range finder and, unlike the M-48A5, can fire while moving. The only apparent drawback is that the first batch of T-69-2s are armed with an old, East European smooth-bore 100mm cannon. Thus, they are not interoperable with Thailand's existing fleet of 65 M-48A5s, which have a 105mm cannon.

That problem will soon be solved with the next batch of T-69-2s. According to a Thai arms dealer, the Royal Thai Army requested that China equip its next shipment of tanks with 105mm guns and China agreed. The 105mm cannons, however, are not of Chinese design. The 105mm cannon was designed in the U.S. A reliable source claims that Israel sold the technology to China in direct violation of U.S. arms control laws.

Under Section 3(a)(2) of the Arms Control Export Act and Section 505(a) of the Foreign Assistance Act, no purchaser or grant recipient of U.S. defense articles, training, or related services may transfer these items or services without prior U.S. consent. The President must notify Congress before such consent is granted.

It would appear, then, that Chinese tanks now look even more favorable than their U.S. competitor thanks to the illegal transfer of U.S. technology. Based here in Bangkok, one does not know whether Congress has been notified of U.S. approval. One suspects not.

What will the Royal Thai Army look like when all these tanks are delivered? In the near future, the Thai Army is likely to have as its main operational armor and armored transport units the following:

Tanks:

65 M-48A5 (U.S.)
180-200 M-41(many in reserve) (U.S.)
55 T-69-2 (approx.) (China)

Lt. Tanks:

150 Scorpion (U.K.)

Armored Personnel Carriers:

500 M-113 and M-3A1 half-track (U.S.)
150 V-150 Commando (U.S.)
779 M-85 (approx.) (China) [10]

For the short-term, the Royal Thai Army's arsenal of prestigious ground equipment has a significantly increasing Chinese component. The T-69-2s and APCs will probably form a mechanized infantry division with a tank battalion attached to it. This would require approximately 500 APCs and some 50 tanks. Thus, one-quarter of Gen. Chavalit's modernization program will soon be fulfilled. Provided there really is an agreement for a total of 100 tanks, he may soon be half-way toward his goal. Eventually, the more traditional, anti-Chinese cavalry and infantry officers may view China as their purveyor in time of need.

Some, however, question whether defense against Vietnam requires so much expensive armor. After describing the array of Thai and tank and anti-tank forces, one Western military observer stated, "The Thais, for some reason, are enamored with tanks." Gen. Saiyud is also one of the few who questions the current build-up.

In 1980, Gen. Saiyud headed the first integrated civilian-military committee to establish guidelines for a comprehensive defense and economic policy. The committee found that the military spending necessary to achieve parity with Vietnam in weaponry would cripple the Thai economy. Thus, it established a set of defense priorities and goals. The committee recommended, among other things: ceilings on defense expenditures and loans; establishing specific criteria for defense purchases; and further developing a cost-effective border defense program involving Border Police and paramilitary units. Although some of these proposals were incorporated into Thailand's Fifth Economic and Social Development Plan (1982-1986), higher-ups overturned some specific recommendations in order to purchase certain costly weapons systems for primarily political reasons. [11]

For the present, Gen. Saiyud claims that there is "no defense concept" behind the program to modernize the Thai Army. He said that if Thailand needs "real" aircraft, submarines, or tanks "just for prestige," the government should "buy one for training and prestige." Instead of falling "into that trap" of excessive purchasing, he emphasized the need for a comprehensive defense plan in which Thai forces are provided

with adequate ammunition, support, and training. In light of the difficulties during the recent border clash with Laos, it appears that Gen. Saiyud may have been right. [12]

VI. The Future

For the future, one can expect China's arms aid and transfers to flourish while U.S. aid levels dwindle. Let us first turn to the U.S. decline.

Aside from reductions imposed by budgetary constraints and Congressional earmarks, which this year guarantee Egypt and Israel 66% of a shrinking pie, another, often-overlooked, factor will further reduce aid to Thailand. Thailand and the Philippines directly compete for U.S. security assistance to the Asia Pacific region. This may not be an explicit policy, but in the early 1970's Thailand's share was cut to rush aid to the Philippines. Given the continuing importance of Manila over Bangkok, as the Philippines calls for more aid in connection with the military bases negotiations, the U.S. may be compelled to further reduce Thai assistance.

At the same time, a succession of relatively new bilateral problems has put some recent strains in Thai-U.S. relations. These are the three r's: rice, regulations, and refugees.

Over the past few years, in part as a result of Thailand's economic boomlet, Thailand and the U.S. have wrangled over a series of economic issues. The world's two largest rice exporters have begun to clash over markets, with Thailand charging unfair U.S. subsidies for American rice growers. Last year, U.S. pressure on Thailand to stiffen its copyright laws against the 'piracy' of 'intellectual property rights' touched off a major parliamentary dispute. Most recently, refugees have again cropped up as a problem. Thailand, the country of "first asylum" for Indo-China's refugees, resents that it is now the country of 'last asylum' with refugees becoming de facto permanent residents. Thailand's tough policy to discourage 'illegal' refugees has brought the Thai Foreign Ministry and some U.S. Congressmen into a sharp clash. [13]

A Western diplomat with years of experience in Thailand said that because of the increase in bilateral trade problems and the decline in U.S. assistance, "you have to be concerned about the China relationship." Similar concern is apparently not shared by Washington. For Washington, Thailand is an old ally whose support has become less crucial for U.S. security interests and is now taken for granted. For Beijing, Thailand is a new, important partner to be courted assiduously.

Almost everyone who is anyone in Thai society has been invited to China: members of the royal family, top generals, and almost each of Thailand's 73 governors. China's growing links with Thailand are its entree to the other ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) members. For China's

other means of diplomacy--international arms sales--Thailand is a show case for sales to new, up-scale markets. Previous recipients of Chinese arms have generally been international pariahs, e.g. Iran. One Western military observer claimed that the U.S. has "now given them [the Chinese] the entry into the international market." How well China does in Thailand, he continued, will be an indication of how well China can do elsewhere.

Finally, there may be an element of diplomatic style that favors China. According to Dr. Thanat, "Americans don't cultivate friendships" with smaller countries. The U.S. has been "bullying" Thailand on trade and other issues, he said. "They [Americans] don't like to have friends; they prefer lackeys." In contrast, the "Chinese make an effort to seek out friendships."

Although U.S.-Thai relations are fundamentally in good shape, what appear to be petty issues or matters of style, do flavor the overall relationship. Several Thai scholars, such as M.R. Sukhumbhand, argued that the security relationship between the U.S. and Thailand is too important to let minor "rough patches" impinge on this central concern. Yet, in the next breath, he suggested that Americans tend to view events in black and white, forgetting that Southeast Asians prefer more outward flexibility and nuance.

Even after 150 years of relations, Thais and Americans do not perceive diplomacy in quite the same way. Speaking from experience, a Western diplomat noted that Westerners, and Americans in particular, often separate and compartmentalize issues. Trade, refugees, and mutual security, are discrete issues that are each handled according to their own set of rules and regulations. Thais, however, tend to view relationships "holistically"--trade, security, and refugees are all interdependent parts of a larger reality. [14]

From this holistic perspective, "friendship" or proper inter-personal behavior is significant. Friends do not shout at each other and outwardly vent their disagreements. Related to this holistic view, is the expectation that in the U.S., as in Thailand, the central government has strong control over all the voices enunciating foreign policy. Beijing speaks in one soothing voice; Washington in many different voices, some of which grate.

Of course, some of the Thai complaints about diplomatic etiquette are mere posturing for leverage. And deep tensions between Bangkok and Washington appear few and far between. But when a visiting lobbyist for U.S. rice growers says that Washington finds Thai lobbying "strident and whining" or when members of Congress angrily blame Thailand for the death of scores of refugees, it does have a subtle influence on where the Royal Thai Army buys its next tank.

Having outlined the forces of attraction for greater Thai-Chinese military cooperation, one should note that there is

a set of strong constraints.

The most significant of these constraints is that Thai-Chinese military alignment rests not upon long-shared, positive values, but on a common enemy. A settlement to the Cambodian situation, with a genuine Vietnamese withdrawal by 1990, however unlikely, would erode this foundation. Parallel to this, many Thais harbor strong doubts about the long-term intentions of the central kingdom. "We shouldn't rely on China," said Gen. Saiyud. "We still remember [Chinese aid to] the CPT very well." When I asked Dr. Thanat which country Thailand could rely on more as an ally against Vietnam, the U.S. or China, he ducked the question and said, "In my view, we should rely on ourselves."

Moreover, four institutional developments buttress Thai-U.S. security relations while constraining further Thai-Chinese relations. These are: the Joint War Reserve Stockpile, Thai-U.S. joint military exercises, the training of Thai officers in the U.S., and increasing defense cooperation among the ASEAN nations. The first three programs could be considered bilateral benefits that the U.S. can continue to offer Thailand despite Congressional foreign aid cuts. The last is a multilateral trend that the U.S. has encouraged, probably unintentionally at first, and perhaps now as a matter of deliberate policy.

A few years ago, Gen. Saiyud originally proposed establishing a joint Thai-U.S. stockpile of munitions to assure an adequate supply of weapons, ammunition, and spare parts in case of a major border conflict with Vietnam. Washington rejected the idea, only to resurrect it in 1985. The present Joint War Reserve Stockpile, located at a former U.S. military facility in Northeastern Thailand, will contain \$100 million worth of materiel--half Thai and half U.S. Thailand has access to its portion of the stockpile at anytime and the U.S. portion during a "nation-threatening contingency." This year each country contributed \$10 million in materiel to the stockpile, which will be at full-strength in four years. Because the U.S. contribution is drawn directly from U.S. military supplies, it is not considered foreign assistance, requiring only Congressional authorization not appropriation. [15]

When completed, the War Reserve Stockpile will ostensibly contain enough supplies to last Thailand for 45 days of battle with Vietnam. If so, it will help alleviate Thailand's chronic ammunition shortages during artillery duels with Vietnam. However, some Western military observers see the stockpile as more of a "symbolic" gesture of U.S. support. Whatever the primary effect, symbolic or logistic, the stockpile is a rather modest compensation for the decrease in U.S. military aid and equipment flows.

The second development is the ever-increasing joint military exercises between Thai and U.S. forces. This year there are some 40 joint exercises of varying size. The centerpiece is the annual Cobra Gold exercise, which in 1986 involved almost

25,000 Thai and U.S. personnel from the Air Force, Navy, Army, and special forces. Although these exercises are not officially direct "training" for Thai troops, they do provide valuable experience for Thai personnel and serve to strengthen contacts between the Thai and U.S. militaries. The funds for the U.S. part of these exercises comes from the Pentagon's budget, not the State Department's foreign assistance program.

Cobra Gold began as a joint naval exercise in 1982, later expanding to include Thai and U.S. ground forces in 1985. The former U.S. Ambassador reluctantly agreed to permit larger exercises, but only if U.S. forces were confined to Southern Thailand, as far away from Cambodia as possible. At the request of the Thai military, Cobra Gold is currently held in Rayong province on the Eastern Seaboard, still relatively far from the volatile Cambodian border. Aside from offering the excitement and camaraderie of cross-training, these exercises probably give the Thai military a psychological boost. Cobra Gold is also extremely beneficial for the U.S.: Thailand is one of the few remaining areas in Asia available for military exercises by U.S. ground forces. [16]

The third institutional development is the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program, described in a previous newsletter.

Although the IMET program is subject to Congressional budget cuts, Congress has wielded the budgetary ax sparingly, viewing IMET as one of the most cost-effective programs for supporting U.S. interests. Thailand's IMET program is the sixth largest in the world, sending 284 students to the U.S. this year at a cost of \$2.2 million.

The Royal Thai Armed Forces highly values this schooling in the U.S. For Thai Army officers, attending the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Ft. Leavenworth is an important step up the career ladder. Whenever an extra space opens up for a foreign student at a U.S. military institution, Thailand is often one of the few countries already prepared to send an additional student on short notice. Airfare to shuttle students to the U.S. chews up a large portion of the IMET program for most countries. The Thai military pays the airfare for all of its students--\$1.6 million last year--thus getting as much schooling as possible out of the limited U.S. dollars. For comparison, the financially-strapped Philippine military provides its students with only \$12 per diem and a small clothing allowance. China also appreciates the value of schooling and has been trying, without much success, to convince Thai officers to attend its military schools. But here, at least, American prestige remains paramount.

U.S. officials knowledgeable about the IMET program claimed that, "with influence programs, we've hit the jackpot." They pointed to the sons of various top generals who are being sent off to the Infantry Officers Advanced Course, or Ranger Training, for example. When these young officers come back

from their exposure to the size and might of the arsenal of democracy, one U.S. officer said, "they believe" in the U.S. commitment to defend Thailand.

Young Thai officers undoubtedly do return believing (at least for a while), and Thai soldiers are very much pro-U.S. in their outlook. But, more so than in other countries, Thai officers are foremost nationalists. Indeed, Gen. Chavalit, the architect of the Chinese tank purchases, is a graduate of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (class of '64) and is a proud member of that institution's "hall of fame."

The fourth development--growing military cooperation among the ASEAN countries--is not due to direct U.S. promotion. But it is a trend that the U.S. has indirectly encouraged, most likely unintentionally at first.

Since 1979, ASEAN nations have increased the scope and number of their joint exercises and operations. These exercises are not under ASEAN auspices since ASEAN is a political and economic arrangement, not a military alliance. To date, joint exercises have primarily involved the peripheral services--Air Forces and Navies--not the politically more significant ground forces.

The U.S. provided the impetus, inadvertently at first, for greater military cooperation among the ASEAN nations by selling a single advanced aircraft--the F-16A-- to Thailand, Indonesia, and Singapore. Initially, the Pentagon, and especially the Air Force, opposed selling America's most advanced fighter to any nation in the region. But, after a visit by Prime Minister Prem in 1985, in which he lobbied strongly for the fighter, Washington agreed to sell the F-16 to Thailand, and later to Singapore and Indonesia. The introduction of the F-16 to the region has spurred talk about establishing a common repair and logistics center and even the possibility of an integrated air-defense system. The first of Thailand's

18 F-16s will arrive in June. Last month, Singapore received the 2000th F-16 produced, and Indonesia's are expected later.[17]

This steadily growing military cooperation among the ASEAN nations, however limited, is another counterweight to Thai-Chinese military cooperation. These exercises and exchanges with ASEAN counterparts are viewed by some Thai officers as "making us feel comfortable that we have friends." Because of the geographical and political diversity of the ASEAN region, this ASEAN 'comfort' has never been translated into military reality. Yet, it does make a slight difference. [18]

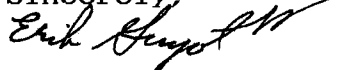
More significantly, ASEAN exerts a political counter-pull against Thailand's burgeoning relationship with China. Thailand may provide China with a connection for better diplomatic relations with the other ASEAN nations, but these nations in turn, especially Indonesia and Malaysia, are leery of China's intentions. It is not clear how strongly the ASEAN bonds counter the increasing Thai-Chinese links. But, over the

years, ASEAN has achieved considerable international recognition, if nothing else. Thailand values the added moral and diplomatic weight gained through ASEAN's consistent statements of support for Thailand as the "frontline state" against Vietnam. Thailand has now fashioned three, very unequal chains with which to anchor its security: China, the U.S., and ASEAN.

These three linkages secure Thailand against the possible waves of khaki-clad Vietnamese troops. But these chains can also restrain and bind. How Thailand manages the three, unequal connections of its security arrangement will influence the balance of power throughout the region.

The most powerful factor influencing the tightening Thai-Chinese military links is internal--Thai political succession. One important career will be that of Gen. Chavalit Yongchaiyudh. Until recently, most observers believed that the brilliant Army commander would eventually ascend to the Prime Minister's office. Now, in the prolonged denouement of the Thai-Lao border clash, this month's conventional wisdom is that Gen. Chavalit mishandled the incident and may not continue on his spectacular rise. Thai soldiers under his command were unable to dislodge the Lao troops occupying Thai territory, and Gen. Chavalit's rush to make peace and literally embrace the Lao leaders was perhaps too effusive. Today, as during the reign of King Narai the Great 300 years ago, in the land of smiles, personal fortunes and foreign influences can rise and fall with astonishing rapidity.

Sincerely,



Erik Guyot

1. Use of the term patron-client does not imply deprecation. John L. Girling's Thailand: Society and Politics (Ithaca: Cornell, 1981) provides a brief analysis on the role of patron-client ties in foreign relations.
2. M.R. Sukhumbhand Paribatra traces Thailand's changing perceptions of geographical vulnerability in "Thailand: Defense Spending and Threat Perception" in Defense Spending in Southeast Asia Ed. Chin Kin Wah (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1987).
3. For one example of King Narai's continuing relevance see the opening of the speech "Security vs. Protectionism" delivered by General Saiyud Kerdphol before the National Defense University, Honolulu, February, 1987.
4. For a discussion of Thanat Khoman's struggles with the Thai military to realign Thai foreign policy see W. Scott Thompson's Unequal Partners: Philippine and Thai relations with the U.S. 1965-1975.
5. From The Struggle for Thailand: Counter-Insurgency 1965-1985 (Bangkok: S. Research Center, 1986) Gen. Saiyud, pp.166-167. In his monograph, Sukhumbhand notes that this is the only public comment by a Thai official on the deal, "From Enmity to Alignment: China's evolving Relations With China" (Bangkok: Institute of Security and International Studies, 1987) p. 17.
6. A good example of the public U.S. response to Thai-Vietnamese border clashes is a State Department statement of March 6, 1985. The statement "strongly condemns these further Vietnamese violations of Thai territory," noting that "an expedited shipment of U.S. military equipment and supplies is now underway and is expected to arrive in Thailand early in April." Compare with the report on the radio-telephone link between Bangkok and Kunming to coordinate Chinese artillery barrages against Vietnam. Far Eastern Economic Review, January 2, 1986, p. 9.
7. See Wanraks Mingmaneeakin "Kanborihan Nisatharana Khong Thai" in Wikritkan Nitangprathet Khong Rattaban Thai? ["Managing the Thai Public Debt" in The Thai Government's Foreign Debt Crisis?] (Bangkok: Thammasat University, 1985) (in Thai) p. 4-35. (in Thai) See also in the same volume Suthas Sethbunsang and Siriboon Naothinsuk "Naikhasetsat Khong Ngeraku Pongkan Prathet" ["The Economic Implications of Defense Loans"].

In this discussion economic assistance provided by the U.S. and China has been ignored since both amounts are rather marginal. U.S. economic assistance is \$5 million; as of 1985, China was Thailand's number 7 trading partner, accounting for 3% of Thailand's total trade.

8. Probably the only published estimate on the amount of Chinese aid to the Khmer Rouge is a report mentioning 300-500 tons of Chinese aid every month. Far Eastern Economic Review, June 14, 1984, p. 30. However, the report does not describe this aid and the information was provided by a partisan source--a Vietnamese official.

9. I am grateful to Dr. Suchit Bunbongkarn for his informative views on the Thai military. His book, The Military in Thai Politics: 1981-1986 (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1987) provides a comprehensive analysis of the military's new role in nation-building as well as extensive background information on many key military officers.

10. Compiled from The Military Balance: 1987-1988 and other sources.

In the chart, longer-term U.S. arms deliveries have been omitted. The 40 U.S.M48-A5 tanks that will begin to slowly arrive late this year are apparently part of a convoluted order first made in 1984, then canceled by former Army chief Gen. Arthit Kamlang-ek in one of his many attempts to undermine Prime Minister Prem, and finally reordered again. Thailand has recently decided to purchase 106 Stingray light tanks manufactured by Cadillac Gage, but delivery may be greatly delayed due to unusually persistent rumors of kickbacks. Although the Stingray's chasis is from the standard U.S. M-109 howitzer, the tank does not qualify for FMS sales credits because the turret and the rest of tank is not standard to the U.S. system.

11. Sukhumbhand's "Defense Spending and Threat Perceptions" summarizes the guidelines issued by General Saiyud's committee. According to a Thai officer, one of the weapons originally rejected by the Thai Air Force, but ordered by higher-ups for political reasons, is the F-16.

12. While the Thai Air Force will soon be acquiring F-16s, it apparently lacks the proper aircraft and training for close air support. According to a Thai general, Air Force planes bombed their own troops, killing 70. Leaflets circulated anonymously by officers seeking to embarrass Gen. Chavalit claimed 200 deaths. During the conflict, a Thai F-5 and a slow-moving OV-10 were downed by Lao forces.

13. While one may wish that Thailand would exercise a more tolerant refugee policy, the Western press has generally ignored the key factor that explains Thai policy. All Vietnamese refugees are considered a threat to Thai national security. In 1980, refugees were specified as one of the four major national security threats. The Thai government views the mass of refugees as a breeding-ground for potential subversives and a haven for Hanoi's agents. Unfortunately, Vietnam's recent practice of releasing refugees in large surges only reinforces this harsh Thai perception.

14. This holistic, interdependent view of reality and causation derives from the Buddhist scriptures. The twelve-fold chain of causation, Paticca-samuppada, or Conditioned Genesis, often illustrated as a twelve-sectioned wheel of life, describes how sensation, birth, and death arise. According to Paticca-samuppada everything is conditioned, relative, and interdependent.

15. Apparently, there is a minor disagreement over what constitutes a "nation-threatening contingency." Thai officials believe that this includes the frequent artillery duels and border clashes between Thai and Vietnamese forces; the Americans do not. The different interpretations may be academic: Thailand has operational control over the stockpile. U.S. supplies used by Thailand are considered an FMS transfer requiring eventual Thai payment. A valuable Thai reference is Nana Thatsana Waduay Khlang Awut Samrong [Various Views on the War Reserve Stockpile], Ed. Surachat Bamrungsuk (Bangkok: Institute of Security and International Studies, 1987)

16. Thailand is an increasingly attractive host for U.S. ground forces exercises. Expanding land exercises in Northeast Asian has become difficult; the Philippines is now too realistic. U.S. forces on joint exercises are required to stay well away from potentially sensitive areas: the State Department has established a 50 kilometer off-limits perimeter around Thailand's borders.

17. An informative monography on the technical possibilities for increased ASEAN defense cooperation is J. N. Mak's "Directions for Greater Defence Co-operation" (Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Strategic and International Studies, 1986)

18. On the probability of greatly expanded ASEAN military cooperation, Dr. Thanat--one of the original founders of ASEAN --told me that "ASEAN was not built as a security relationship." He did not expect significantly greater military cooperation. From his view, the other ASEAN nations preferred rhetoric over military support for Thailand. However, it does appear that the F-16 purchase will spur greater military cooperation among the ASEAN nations.