

The Relevance Of United States-Thailand Military Cooperation In 2010-2020

Lazuardi Loqman Ar Rahman¹, Anak Agung Banyu Perwita², Agung Rishidianto³, Naura Ardianasari⁴

¹Defense Diplomacy

Faculty of Defense Strategy, Indonesia Defense University, Indonesia
ardhyofficial@gmail.com

²Defense Diplomacy

Faculty of Defense Strategy, Indonesia Defense University, Indonesia

³Defense Diplomacy

Faculty of Defense Strategy, Indonesia Defense University, Indonesia

⁴International Relation

Faculty of Social and Political Science, Airlangga University, Indonesia



Abstract—The United States and Thailand have maintained an intensive military cooperation since the Cold War. However, the current international landscape has evolved, with the Cold War receding into history, yet the military collaboration between the two nations continues to strengthen. This research scrutinizes the relevance of the partnership between the United States and Thailand, particularly during the period of 2010-2020. Drawing upon the theoretical framework of foreign policy and military cooperation, the study reveals that the consistency of military collaboration between the two nations is driven by the imperative interests of the United States to uphold its engagement in the Southeast Asian region, particularly considering the perceived threat posed by the Rise of China.

Keywords—Military Cooperation, United States-Thailand, Rise Of China

I. INTRODUCTION

Thailand is a key military partner for the United States in the Asian region, so its stability and growth are important in peace efforts in the region [1]. Through the establishment of the South-East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954, Thailand became an alliance of the United States in the field of security. Given Thailand's geographical position bordering the regional Cold War battlefield of Indochina, the country received special attention from the United States [2]. In the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program, Thailand is one of the five priority countries receiving assistance. The other four countries are Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, and Vietnam [3].

The relationship between the United States and Thailand strengthened during the Cold War era, particularly in the economic and strategic realms [4]. The U.S. military cooperation during the Cold War aimed at implementing the containment policy against communist influence and seeking support during the Vietnam War. For Thailand, the United States played a crucial role in helping address the impact of the Vietnam invasion of Cambodia, which posed a threat to Thailand's stability. However, post-Cold War, several factors led to a deterioration in their relations. These included coups in 1992, 2006, and 2014, as well as Thailand's rejection of the proposition to position military assets in its waters in 1994. The United States withdrew military aid due to concerns over non-democratic regimes resulting from the coups. Nevertheless, relations improved in the early 21st century when Thailand contributed troops to U.S. military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq in 2003 [5]. Military cooperation with the

United States persisted, even though political instability continued in Thailand following the 2014 coup and the subsequent authoritarian regime. Additionally, the absence of a communist threat, prevalent during the Cold War, marked a significant shift in the geopolitical landscape. With the conclusion of the Cold War, the confrontation with the Soviet Union faded, and the U.S. relationships with Southeast Asian nations, including Thailand, were no longer primarily driven by the need to contain Soviet influence [6].

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Darling (1967) outlined three primary motivations behind the United States' alliance with Thailand, focusing on geographical, societal, and natural resource aspects. Geographically, Thailand's strategic location in Southeast Asia positioned it as a buffer zone during the conflicts in Indochina in the Cold War era. Policymakers in the United States perceived Thailand as crucial in maintaining stability amidst the Cold War tensions. Societally, the approximately 6 million inhabitants in the northeastern provinces of Thailand were seen as potentially susceptible to insurgency led by communist groups in Laos. The United States aimed to address this situation to prevent the spread of communism within Thailand and beyond. In terms of natural resources, although Thailand's commodities did not significantly contribute to U.S. foreign trade, its resources were deemed important to support the economic development of non-communist nations in Asia, such as Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, India, and the Philippines. Securing Thailand's resources from the reach of communist nations, particularly China, was essential to prevent their utilization against U.S. interests in Southeast Asia.

Chambers (2015) explained that after the end of the Cold War in 1991, the United States adopted a non-militaristic stance toward the Thai government. Financial assistance was provided to aid security sector reforms in Thailand and promote civilian control. In 1991, a military coup occurred against the elected government, and in 1992, a crisis emerged due to clashes between the military and protesters. Both situations influenced criticisms and delays in joint military exercises like Cobra Gold by the United States. Similar actions were taken after the 2006 coup, although Cobra Gold 2007 proceeded without delay. Overall, the relationship experienced ups and downs during domestic political crises in Thailand. Lee (2017) shared a similar viewpoint, arguing that domestic instability raised questions about the stability of the U.S.-Thailand alliance. Thailand's conditions could impact U.S. foreign policy objectives and prospects for economic and security cooperation in Southeast Asia [7].

Masina (2017) addressed issues in U.S.-Thailand military cooperation, noting a shift in Thailand's foreign policy towards strengthening bilateral relations with China over its traditional ally, the United States. Evidence included economic and military collaborations between Thailand and China, such as joint military exercises and discussions on military facility development in Thailand. Dalpino (2017) observed that U.S.-Thailand military cooperation, particularly during the Trump era, lacked common crucial issues. Chong (2017) also mentioned that their relationship tended to reflect transactional diplomacy. On the other hand, Chambers (2004) noted significant changes in the relationship between 2001 and early 2004. Under PM Thaksin's leadership, Thailand prioritized relations with China, the European Union, India, and Japan over the United States. PM Thaksin aimed to diminish Thailand's image as a country consistently accommodating U.S. desires. However, behind this agenda, Bangkok still maintained military and economic ties with Washington to balance the increasing presence of China in Southeast Asia.

III. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This research is an explanatory study as it provides explanations regarding the relevance of U.S.-Thailand military cooperation from 2010 to 2020. Explanatory research aims to elucidate a phenomenon, and the ultimate outcome of such research is typically a cause-and-effect relationship [8]. The study is confined to the relevance of U.S.-Thailand military cooperation during the specified period compared to the Cold War era. This is elucidated through the framework of foreign policy and measured based on military cooperation indicators. The research data is derived from primary sources, referring to official statements from the respective governments, and secondary sources, including books, literature, and prior research. The focus is on understanding the dynamics of military cooperation between the United States and Thailand during the specified timeframe, shedding light on the cause-and-effect relationships within the context of foreign policy frameworks.

IV. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

The relationship between the United States and Thailand dates back to 1818 when they first established diplomatic ties and subsequently signed the Treaty of Amity and Commerce in 1833. In 1954, both nations entered into the Manila Pact, which served as the foundation for the formation of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). The SEATO agreement played a

pivotal role in shaping the formal relationship between the United States and Thailand and continues to influence their ties today [9,10]. SEATO, while existing for political purposes, served as a multilateral framework for the United States' containment strategy in Southeast Asia. Despite its dissolution in 1977, SEATO evolved into a bilateral security pact between the United States and Thailand. The security alliance between the two nations is rooted in the framework established by SEATO [11]. The U.S.-Thailand relationship strengthened significantly during the Cold War era, particularly in terms of economic collaboration and shared strategic interests [12]. Thailand holds a strategic position at the heart of the regional Cold War dynamics in the Indochina region [13]. Serving as a key ally of the United States, Thailand played a frontline role in the battle against communism in the Indochina region. Even after the conclusion of the Cold War, the alliance persisted through joint exercises like Cobra Gold and Thailand's status as a significant non-NATO ally. During the Vietnam War (1961-1975), Thailand granted permission for the United States to use its territory as a military base. Up to 80% of the U.S. airstrikes against North Vietnam were launched from airbases in Thailand, notably U-Tapao, reciprocating substantial military aid from the United States

The most recent military coup in Thailand occurred in 2014, leading to an increased influence of the military and traditional elites during the royal transition, ostensibly done under the pretext of safeguarding democracy, according to Chachavalpongpun (2014, 170). Such a process weakened democratic institutions, disregarding fundamental civil rights, including the rights to assemble and express opinions, which Chachavalpongpun referred to as a "political deadlock." The rift resulting from the coup and the unstable political situation in Thailand became factors influencing the dynamics of military cooperation between the United States and Thailand. On the other hand, the current international situation differs from the Cold War era between the United States and the former Soviet Union. Weatherbee (2009, 46) explained that even though the confrontation with the Soviet Union is no longer relevant, the United States' interests as a dominant power in Southeast Asia or as a balancer in the Balance of Power still necessitate strategic access to the region. Since the end of the Cold War, the foreign policy goals of the United States in East Asia have shifted from preventing communist expansion to addressing challenges arising from China's economic and military rise [14]. Despite the internal dynamics and changes in the international situation compared to the Cold War, military cooperation between the United States and Thailand continues to be maintained.

United States and Thailand Military Cooperation (2010-2020)

Military cooperation involves various activities conducted between the United States and Thailand across several indicators. Firstly, in terms of formal alliances, the defense agreements between the United States and Thailand began with the Manila Pact, forming the basis for the establishment of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), subsequently strengthened by the Thanat-Rusk Communiqué in 1962. According to VOA reports in 2012, the two nations renewed their military alliance by signing a joint vision statement, represented by U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and Thai Defense Minister Sukampol Suwannathat [15]. This document addressed security concerns in Southeast Asia, regional stability in the Asia-Pacific, joint military force readiness for missions, and the enhancement of bilateral defense relations. Panetta emphasized the U.S. commitment to assisting the Thai military in developing capabilities, particularly in maritime security, humanitarian aid delivery, and peacekeeping missions. This support is materialized through the sale of weapons or other defense instruments produced by the United States, Excess Defense Article transfers, Foreign Military Financing (FMF), International Military Education and Training (IMET), and other forms of assistance.

Secondly, as outlined in the 2012 joint vision statement, joint military exercises are mentioned to strengthen interoperability, cooperation, and camaraderie among the forces. Military-to-military exchanges help fortify relationships between the forces, fostering mutual respect and appreciation for shared values [16]. Consequently, joint military exercises continue to be conducted by both nations, aligning with the U.S. interest in upholding the alliance. Following the 2014 coup, the United States planned to relocate the execution of Cobra Gold from Thailand to another country, but this initiative required extensive preparation. Additionally, partner countries in the Asia-Pacific would find it challenging to accommodate the arrival of thousands of U.S. and other allied forces for large-scale joint military exercises.

The third indicator, as per Chong (2017, 3), highlights weapon purchases from the United States as part of a long-term strategic relationship established since the Cold War. Weapon purchases also indicate diplomacy by gifting, indirectly expressing respect to a nation, irrespective of its major or non-major status. The provision of financial aid and sales impacts the recipient country's inclination to showcase alignment [17].

The fourth indicator encompasses military aid, international military education, exchange programs, and international peacekeeping operations. The United States provides military aid and international military education to Thailand through the IMET program. According to the Executive Budget Summary from 2011 to 2014, Thailand was a priority recipient of IMET assistance in the East Asia and Pacific region. IMET programs in this region focus on English language training and the enhancement of professionalism within the forces, enabling them to work alongside U.S. troops in peacekeeping missions regionally and internationally. IMET also supports the development of maritime security capabilities and respect for law, human rights, and civilian control over the military [18].

Another role of IMET is to contribute to strengthening military-to-military relationships and incorporating civilian participation in military capabilities and democratic life. The top five priority countries are also key partners for the United States in the global fight against terrorism [19]. Meanwhile, the provision of FMF to Thailand is designated to support counter-terrorism special units, address terrorism threats and transnational criminal activities, support military reforms, and align with U.S. goals [20].

The Rise of China

The rise of China and its pursuit of maritime power have been longstanding historical objectives, and the period from 2010 to 2020 is considered a pivotal time for China to actualize these goals [21]. The ascent of China is seen as having a significant impact on U.S.-Thailand military cooperation, reflecting one of the key interests of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region. China's military modernization is perceived to have serious implications for U.S. national interests and the security of the international world order [22]. China understands that its military capabilities enable it to play a more active role in realizing its foreign policy objectives on a global scale. The rivalry between the United States and China is notably pronounced across Asia, spanning from the Indian Ocean to the western Pacific [23], and Thailand finds itself within the sphere of influence of both China and the United States.

China employs not only militarization but also other approaches, such as economic engagement with neighboring countries. Wuthnow suggests that the increasing ties between China and various nations could undermine U.S. influence in Asia, particularly in the maritime sector. Russia is among the countries aligning with China, showcasing a counter stance against the United States by criticizing the placement of THAAD in South Korea and conducting large-scale joint naval exercises near disputed regions. Four U.S. alliance countries—Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and Australia—are also subjects of China's attention. In the international system configuration, China is categorized by Xuetong (2006, 20) as a major power, on par with Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and India. The outcomes of China's military modernization and reforms include advancements in weaponry systems, such as anti-ship ballistic missiles like DF-21 and DF-26 with tracking warheads. Following China's rise, Thailand's relations with China, particularly in the military domain, may pose threats. First, from the U.S. perspective, since the 2014 coup, the Thai military junta has sought assistance from China, considering China, which generally refrains from meddling in domestic politics, as an "Asian Alternative" to the United States [24]. This shift has the potential to undermine U.S. influence. Second, from Thailand's viewpoint, the growing power of China can be perceived as a threat when considering historical factors. Referring to Kislenco (2004, 2), China has cast a shadow over Southeast Asian countries, including Thailand, as it developed into a communist state. The advocacy of communism, with its emphasis on violence, revolution, and atheism, is seen as contrasting with Thailand's rich religious values rooted in Buddhism. Communism is perceived not only as a threat to Thailand as a nation but also as a challenge to the "way of life" of the Thai people [24].

China-Thailand-United States Interest Relations

Behind the military cooperation between the United States and Thailand lies the urgency to uphold the defense and security alliance between them. According to the joint vision statement of 2012, it is emphasized that this defense alliance is crucial for achieving "greater peace and prosperity" for the United States, Thailand, and the broader Asia-Pacific region. In 2017 and 2019, joint statements were further issued, demonstrating a concerted interest between the United States and Thailand in sustaining their military cooperation.

Shambaugh (2018, 101) categorizes Southeast Asian nations based on their proximity to China, placing Thailand specifically as aligned accommodationists, not solely driven by shared dependencies like Malaysia. Thailand's character necessitates careful consideration from Washington to prevent it from falling under China's sway. This categorization aligns with Cogan's (2019, 42) view of Thailand's foreign policy as one that "bends with the wind." This is illustrated by Thailand's arms

purchases from China during strained relations with the United States in the Obama era, followed by diplomatic improvements and discussions on arms purchases under the Trump administration [25]. For Thailand, maintaining relationships with major powers, including cooperation with China, is driven by economic interests [26].

China's presence offers "Asian alternatives" to the United States, especially when the U.S. distances itself from its allies in the Asia-Pacific region. The rise of China introduces competition for the United States, requiring other nations to adapt. The dynamics in Southeast Asia are influenced by the U.S.-China competition, with ASEAN member states attempting to position themselves through hedging strategies. Since 2016-2017, ASEAN countries have shown a tendency toward Beijing, affecting relations with traditional U.S. allies like Thailand and the Philippines [27]. In the face of the challenges and opportunities presented by China's rise, the United States needs to maintain its alliance with Thailand.

To counterbalance China's rise, Southeast Asian countries, including Thailand, seek power alignments such as with the United States. Richard Weitz suggests that the U.S. should enhance military relations with the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand [28]. The external factor of China behind U.S.-Thailand military cooperation is also reflected in the policies of the Obama administration, which began focusing on China's rise economically, diplomatically, and militarily through the pivot or rebalance to Asia [29].

Understanding China's capabilities is crucial for the United States to respond effectively. In the post-Cold War international system, where the United States is a dominant power, its position needs to be maintained [30]. While China is considered in regional and global issues, the Asian-Pacific nations face opportunities, uncertainties, and risks in dealing with China, leading to various strategies such as balancing, engagement, hedging, or accommodation [31]. In response to this situation, the U.S. reallocates resources in the Asia-Pacific region, strengthening joint efforts with allies like Thailand to counterbalance China's growth [32].

The military presence of the United States is seen by China as an offensive move. Therefore, maintaining military cooperation with Thailand becomes essential. Despite the seventh fleet being stationed in Japan, forging close alliances with Asian countries can be advantageous for the United States, given its global military projection capabilities. The close ties between the two countries offer benefits to both sides [38]. The uncertainty surrounding China's position as Thailand's major power partner is acknowledged. The Thai junta's approach to China is viewed as a consequence of limited options due to strained relations with the European Union and the United States under military rule. This approach serves as a way for the junta to demonstrate its ability to secure economic, strategic, or political gains through international relations. However, aligning with China does not necessarily imply Thailand accepting China's leadership in the region [37].

The long-standing alliance between the two countries is a significant asset [38]. While China is rising, the United States remains relevant to Thailand. Although military-to-military exchanges between China and Thailand are increasing, they are not equivalent to the various forms of cooperation between the United States and Thailand. Despite Thailand's increasing ties with China, maintaining strong relations with the United States is essential, as Thailand adheres to a strategic balancing act with major powers [40].

Shambaugh (2018, 87) argues that China's growing military and economic power does not entirely eliminate U.S. influence and power. The longstanding security ties, diplomatic interactions, and commercial relationships across Southeast Asia provide the United States with a comprehensive advantage over China. While China gains diplomatic influence, trade, and rapid FDI growth, the United States has overall comparative advantages over China in Southeast Asia, including a broad commercial footprint and strong soft power [41]. In conclusion, the United States and Thailand, recognizing the challenges posed by China's rise, maintain military cooperation to sustain their alliance. Thailand's strategic balancing act between major powers, its economic interests, and the historical ties with the United States make the military alliance crucial for both nations amidst the changing dynamics in the Asia-Pacific region.

V. CONCLUSION

The military cooperation between the United States and Thailand from 2010 to 2020 remains relevant, considering two key factors. Firstly, the assessment of military cooperation is based on existing indicators. According to the gathered data, during the period from 2010 to 2020, the United States and Thailand met indicators such as the existence of a formal alliance, military collaboration, arms sales, and financial assistance for military purposes, along with participation in multilateral peacekeeping

missions. Secondly, external factors in foreign cooperation play a crucial role. In a different international scenario from the Cold War tensions, where the communist threat is no longer imminent, the United States still finds it imperative to collaborate with Thailand. Research findings indicate that the ongoing cooperation is influenced by the factor of China's rise. For the United States, Thailand maintains its relevance as a military partner due to the need to preserve a longstanding alliance and address the challenges posed by China's ascent. On the other hand, for Thailand, the alliance with the United States is deemed crucial. Despite engaging in military cooperation with China and meeting several collaboration indicators, the depth of this collaboration falls significantly short compared to the partnership with the United States.

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