

## CHAPTER 6

---

# Thailand's Security Outlook: External Trends and Internal Crises

*Thitinan Pongsudhirak*

### Introduction

In view of its Cold War status as the last domino and frontline state that first withstood communist expansionism in Indochina and later Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, Thailand's threat perception has become markedly inward-looking. Leading military planners and the security and foreign policy establishment have had a rather difficult time identifying clear and present external threats. To the extent that these exist, they are focused on Thailand's immediate neighbourhood — its near-abroad — rather than far-flung and nebulous sources such as the Soviet Union or China as in years past or the ideological dogma of communism. Burma/Myanmar is the chief source of threat perceptions on this front, with the Thai–Cambodia border tensions and politicised bilateral relationship as secondary. Beyond the immediate threats from next door, the Thai security outlook is focused on non-traditional security (NTS) issues, largely emanating from transnational crime, running the gamut from the trafficking of arms, humans, and light and heavy weapons, and also including natural disasters, money laundering, food security, and energy security. Equally important, Thailand's security concerns continue to focus on the threat of terrorism, as distinct and apart from the Malay-Muslim insurgency in its southernmost border provinces, and touch on maritime piracy.

But Thailand's overriding threats are fundamentally internal. The southern insurgency has claimed more than 3,800 lives since its flare-up from January 2004. It has transcended a host of governments and military strategies and tactics. The insurgents are in command. Although they have not stated their objectives, local Malay-Muslim grievances have called for greater administrative autonomy. While Bangkok is preoccupied with its colour-coded crisis and confrontation, these southern grievances also constitute a fertile ground for exploitation by terrorist groups, mainly Al-Qaeda and its regional offshoot Jemaah Islamiah (JI). In addition to its violence-prone deep south, Thailand has been stuck in a political endgame as the reign of its revered monarch reaches its twilight and denouement. The crisis in Bangkok is all domestic

and internal, but it can be deemed a security threat to the Thai state in the absence of a workable way forward. This home-grown instability should not be discounted even though it does not fall into conventional threat perceptions mould. Thais are threatening each other, which has far-reaching consequences for security-related policy areas. The following sections enumerate some of these security perceptions, both external and internal.

## **Security Concerns on Burma/Myanmar**

Thailand's chief security concern lies on its western front with Burma/Myanmar, and focuses on migration, drugs production and trafficking, nuclearisation, internal conflicts, and energy. As the Thai military now plays a predominant role in politics, human rights and democracy preferences are invariably subsumed under security and economic concerns. Its post-September 2006 putsch puts Thailand in this mode unless and until democratization and democratic rule makes a comeback, which is a function of Thailand's internal transformation from a monarchy-centred socio-economic hierarchy to a more people-centred democratic system. For all of its rhetoric about the rule of law, good governance, human rights and democracy, the government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva has been beholden to the army and its preferences. On the other hand, these valid security and economic concerns are shared among the foreign and security policy establishment and even the general Thai public. Thailand is host to more than two million Burmese/Myanmar migrant workers, mostly Karen and Shan but virtually include all of the major ethnic groups. Only a fraction of them is legally registered, whereas the bulk of them are employed in the construction and menial-labour industries. Burmese/Myanmar labourers have become an indispensable component of the Thai economy. Local officials are concerned that while these labourers benefit the labour pool and keep wages competitive they can also be associated with the criminal underground.

Apart from cross-border migration for jobs in Thailand, human and drug trafficking also are a security concern, as Thailand is already seen as a popular passage way for transnational crime. The drugs trade, for example, used Thailand in the past as a transit point for Western markets. More recently, amphetamines originating from the Wa State have ended up in Thailand aimed at Thai consumers, posing widening social problems. Burmese/Myanmar labourers have also been traded and trafficked on Thai

soil destined for nearby economies. Such trafficking feeds the criminal elements that thrive in the Thai underground economy. Most alarming to Thai security planners is the reported interest of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), Burma/Myanmar's ruling military regime, in acquiring nuclear weapons. Although its quest for a nuclear research reactor is well known, Burma/Myanmar is a curious case of nuclear expansion. A reclusive country and arguably the largest regional source of international controversy and criticism for its militaristic dominance of domestic politics, Burma/Myanmar is a net energy exporter. It is likely to remain so for some years, as local energy demand is hemmed in by the lack of economic development and political unpredictability and as vast energy resources have been discovered. Its military regime is top-down and notoriously repressive, notwithstanding manoeuvres that have produced a new constitution with planned national elections this year.

In the ASEAN context, Burma/Myanmar has been an albatross, a laggard of regional norms, possibly in violation of the ASEAN Charter on the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms in view of its ongoing incarceration of political prisoners and renewed confinement of Aung San Suu Kyi, the iconic oppositional figure. On the international front, Burma/Myanmar has been a pariah state under military rule, a repeated target of Western sanctions for human rights violations. Yet it has powerful friends nearby. India has energy and other strategic interests in Burma/Myanmar. China treats its richly endowed neighbour to the southwest virtually as a client state. It has been pointed out that Burma/Myanmar may be trying to develop not just one nuclear research reactor but perhaps a second reactor for subsequent weapons grade production with the assistance of North Korea whose contribution to the construction of tunnels around the Burmese/Myanmar capital is an established fact.<sup>1</sup> The SPDC has vehemently denied the nuclear weapons story, which has neither been verified nor found traction among relevant analysts. However, Burma/Myanmar's nuclear expansion warrants scrutiny. A nuclear weapons program in the country would violate the Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone Treaty (SEANWFZ) and dramatically alter the dynamics of regional security among the ASEAN states. For Thailand, a nuclearised Burma/Myanmar is likely to be greeted with loudest alarm bells and countervailing responses. Similar concerns can be heard in connection with the SPDC's interests in missiles and missile technology and with the continued

---

<sup>1</sup> "Revealed: Burma's Nuclear Bombshell" *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 1, 2009.

strengthening of the Tatmadaw's standing army, already one of the largest in Asia. Unlike migration, drugs and human trafficking, these are traditional security concerns among the relevant authorities and experts in Thailand. They form the premise and calculus of Thailand's security outlook vis-à-vis Burma/Myanmar in the immediate geographical vicinity.

With these security concerns lurking beneath the policy surface, the Thai foreign and security establishment are against any moves that could lead to the breakup or "balkanisation" of Burma/Myanmar. Large-scale and uncontrollable insurgent wars between the armies of ethnic minority groups and the Tatmadaw are Thailand's nightmare scenarios. They would lead to a greater influx of refugees and migrants, and possibly more drugs production by ethnic groups like the Wa to finance war aims and arms acquisitions. Thus the "union" of Burma/Myanmar is paramount in Thai security considerations. Another cold reality facing Bangkok is the Thai economic dependence on natural gas imports from the Yadana and Yetagun fields. No less than 20 percent of natural gas consumed in Thailand originates from Burma/Myanmar, while more than 60 percent of Thai power generation derives from natural gas. Moreover, the electricity-generation capacity from the Salween river areas will also add to Thailand's energy dependence and insecurity vis-à-vis Burma/Myanmar. Ethnic wars or official moves that disrupt this supply would be debilitating to the Thai economy.

### **Thai–Cambodian Relations and Border Tensions**

Like its western front, Thailand's soured relations with its easternmost neighbour have become a security concern. It focuses on overlapping claims on a small piece of borderland with huge historical significance as well as vast resources in contested continental shelf areas in the Gulf of Thailand. Cambodians have referred to the small borderland plot, which situates an ancient temple, namely Preah Vihear, although the Thais call it Phra Viharn. The main points of contention stem from Phnom Penh's insistence that the 4.6 square kilometres adjoining the Preah Vihear temple complex has been under Cambodia's territorial sovereignty since the International Court of Justice (ICJ's) landmark adjudication in 1962. In its 9-to-3 verdict, the ICJ ruled that Cambodia's submitted map, drawn up by French surveyors during 1904–07, put the temple area in Cambodian proper because Thailand (then known as Siam

until 1939) did not object. Without Siam's visible and vigorous objections during the interim, the ICJ ruled that Cambodia's map carried the day. Unsurprisingly, none of the judges in 1962 said that the French map was fair and just. Thus the Thais never recognised the French maps, and withdrew only from the temple but not the adjoining area. Ultimately this area was entangled in Thailand's political polarisation when a government loyal to Thaksin Shinawatra, Thailand's former Prime Minister who was deposed in a military coup in 2006, signed a joint communiqué allowing Phnom Penh to register Preah Vihear as a World Heritage Site. The situation worsened when the pro-Thaksin government was ousted in December 2008, enabling an anti-Thaksin coalition government to take shape under Prime Minister Abhisit. It proceeded to invalidate the joint communiqué, leaving the area next to Preah Vihear in limbo.

The Thai–Cambodian tussle signified that Thailand's domestic crisis impinged on foreign relations with a next-door neighbour for the first time. Subsequently, in a series of calculated offensive manoeuvres, Prime Minister Hun Sen of Cambodia put the Abhisit government on the back foot by appointing Thaksin as an economic advisor to the Cambodia government in November 2009. Posing a test for ASEAN's unity and coherence in the face of the lofty ASEAN Charter, the bilateral spat accelerated from mid-October with the Cambodian leader's warm reception in Phnom Pehn of Gen Chavalit Yongchaiyuth, a Thaksin proxy. At the time, Hun Sen expressed sympathy for the exiled Thaksin, hinting the latter could find refuge in Cambodia. A week later at the ASEAN Summit in Thailand, Hun Sen orchestrated his second move with statements to the media indicating that Thaksin should be made an advisor to the Cambodian government. Hun Sen then returned to Phnom Penh to officially appoint Thaksin as a government advisor. His fourth move was to invite Thaksin to give a lecture on 12 November in the Cambodian capital. All of these moves took place just prior to the APEC leaders' meeting and the inaugural ASEAN–US summit, in which Abhisit presided as the ASEAN chair.

When Hun Sen appointed Thaksin, the Abhisit government was livid and overreacted when it should have been more measured and nuanced. It could have recalled the Thai ambassador from Phnom Penh for consultations and sent him back, not an indefinite ambassadorial withdrawal. The intensity and rapidity of Bangkok's level of responses, including the revocation of a memorandum of understanding on overlapping claims in the Gulf of Thailand and suspension of aid and soft loans, made

the Abhisit government appeared flustered and blustered. Moreover, it reflected the Abhisit government's misguided estimation of Thailand's leverage over Cambodia, as Hun Sen had his reasons for action. Unlike bygone years, new geopolitical realities now mean that Bangkok is merely one among many in the pecking order of importance to Cambodia. China, Vietnam, Russia, Japan, and even South Korea have been instrumental players in Cambodia's economic development.

The Abhisit government needed to accept Cambodia's status as an up-and-coming emerging economy after decades of war, conflict and tragedy, with more than its fair share of natural resources and relative political stability alongside electoral legitimacy. Hun Sen had been pent up on a number of old scores, including Abhisit's choice of Foreign Minister who publicly called Hun Sen a "gangster" and Abhisit's renegeing on Cambodia's registration of Preah Vihear a world heritage site. And the Abhisit government did little to rein in right-wing anti-Thaksin groups from demonstrating at Preah Vihear areas. With an expulsion of a Thai diplomat and concurrent prosecution and subsequent pardon of a Thai engineer on spying charges, the bilateral rift degenerated. Over the past year, border skirmishes and armed clashes between opposing sides have resulted in a handful of deaths and injuries. This tense status quo with the potential for limited border clashes will remain alongside Thailand's polarisation and Thaksin's use of Cambodia as a staging ground for his political activities.

### **Terrorism and the Southern Malay-Muslim Insurgency**

International terrorism and Thailand's internal insurgency in the deep south need to be viewed in tandem and in separation. On the one hand, the southernmost border provinces of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat have been rocked by a Malay-Muslim insurgency and almost daily violence. The insurgents appear to have the upper hand with command and control on the ground. They have been able to perpetrate violence at will against the Thai civilian and military authorities as well as against both Buddhist and Muslim populations in the targeted areas. The insurgent violence whose aims range from greater administrative autonomy to outright separatism in southern Thailand against the Thai state is triangulated between historiography, domestic politics, and external involvement, with considerable overlap. It is tied to the history of the old Patani Kingdom, which was under the suzerainty of Siam until

it was split up and annexed in accordance with the 1909 Anglo-Siamese Treaty. While insurgency and violence date back decades, its most recent recurrence has been the fiercest. Remarkably, the insurgent attacks have been confined to the southernmost Malay-Muslim provinces, and have not widened geographically to other areas in the country. This indicates a rather ethno-nationalist nature of the insurgents.

The way forward for ameliorating the southern insurgency appears clear. Political solutions are urged as often as they are discarded. Greater administrative autonomy for the southern border provinces is needed, including the recognition of local grievances and demands for legal and bureaucratic reforms. Malay-Muslims require their own “yawi” tongue to be in official use as second language and corresponding marital and inheritance laws. Local governance needs to be indigenised, and taxation decentralised. Many of these recommendations and the like were included in Thailand's National Reconciliation Commission Report as far back as 2006 but Bangkok has been consumed by its own crisis and by its centralised governing structure. While the Abhisit government has recognised this imperative, it has made little headway in policy formulation and implementation, partly because it is beholden to the military, which has a leading role in handling the insurgency. While progress in reaching accommodation in the deep south will be complex and time-consuming, it necessarily starts with the will and resolve of the political leadership in Bangkok. It requires the resetting of government-army relations. Whether the Thai government can change tack on the ground will determine if the spiral in what is now one of the world's deadliest internal conflicts, with the loss of lives approaching 4,000, can be reversed. Domestic politics thus underpins the southern insurgency and ways to resolve and reconcile Malay-Muslim grievances going forward.

The flip side of the insurgency is terrorism from exploitative germination by JI or Al-Qaeda. So far the limited geographical coverage, the absence of clear insurgent demands, and the means and methods of violence do not suggest the handiwork of international terrorists. But Bangkok should never be complacent. Festering local grievances are conducive for JI or Al-Qaeda operatives to manipulate for their own ends, especially since Bangkok remains out of touch and the Thai military and paramilitary groups have run amok. The widespread sense of injustice exacerbates this threat. As a leading US counterterrorism official noted, the global focus on Iraq

and AfPak makes smaller theatres like southern Thailand that much more vulnerable.<sup>2</sup> A major terrorist incident, such as those witnessed in Indonesia in recent years, would dramatically alter Thailand's security outlook, with far-reaching ramifications for its conduct of foreign relations and the prospects for economic growth. International terrorism is thus an important and not neglected source of Thai security perceptions.

### **Other Threat Perceptions**

Thailand, of course, is beset with myriad other security threats of the unconventional nature. These non-traditional security items feature transnational crime in the forms of small arms and light weapons (SALW) smuggling. Owing to its lax law enforcement, hospitable environment and unscrupulous officials, Thai territory has been an attractive transit point. Moreover, the arrest on Thai soil in March 2008 of Viktor Bout, a Ukrainian arms dealer cinematised as "Lord of War" in 2005, is proof that heavier and more sophisticated war weapons have also been traded in Thailand. The same was evident in the seizure of an aircraft containing more than 40 tons of North Korean arms in December 2009 destined for an unrevealed location. International money-laundering and the trafficking of women and children have also rendered Thailand a hotbed for NTS concerns. Natural disasters, such as the devastating Tsunami in December 2004, are a cause for concern where local officials have had to take up defensive steps. In addition to the aforementioned energy security, food security is a growing concern. Reports of foreigners buying up rice farms in Thailand's fertile rural areas have caused alarm as well.<sup>3</sup> And international piracy and maritime security are well within the scope of Thai security outlook. The piracy in the Straits of Malacca and as far as off Somalia's coast has adversely affected the Thai fishing and frozen seafood industry in the recent past.

### **Implications for Thailand's Defence Sector**

Thailand's security outlook is a function of domestic politics and civil-military relations. When the elected civilian leadership is in charge, security concerns tend to be more nuanced and more focused on the NTS agenda. When the military takes

---

<sup>2</sup> "FT Interview with John Brennan," *Financial Times*, December 28, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> "Farmers Fear Officials' Role in Farmland Selling" *The Nation*, September 7, 2009.

a leading role, a relatively more conventional security outlook prevails. Almost by definition, the military has reigned supreme in key policy areas since the September 2006 putsch. These include the management and responses to the southern insurgency and the threat perceptions vis-à-vis Burma/Myanmar on the western front and Cambodia to the east. On Burma/Myanmar's nuclearisation, the Thai military is unlikely to stay idle in the event of a nuclear neighbour next door, whereas the Thaksin years were dominated by warm ties and increased trade and investment. On Cambodia, the Samak government was more accommodating and agreed to the Phnom Penh's registration of Preah Vihear in a working relationship. This differed from the Abhisit government's prickly response, as it had been an ally of and was brokered into office by the military.

The ascendancy of the Thai military has already resulted in a manifold increase in the defence budget and strengthened laws within the military's domain such as the Internal Security Act. The upshot is that Thailand's security sector reform from the 1990s have been stalled and reversed over the past four years. With decreasing civilian and legislative oversight, the military has added more personnel and salaries, and acquired more advanced weapons such as Sweden's Gripen combat aircraft. The navy has talked of procuring a training submarine ahead of acquiring one to three operational ones down the road. The army has purchased armoured fighting vehicles from the Ukraine under controversy and allegations of corruption. It has also acquired Chinese-made tanks. These weapons procurement programs are diversified and do not rely primarily on US-made equipment as in the past, and represent a broad arms modernisation plan that can spiral into an arms race if left unchecked. They also call for a more concerted regional effort to maintain a stable and secure arms procurement environment. The ASEAN framework and international bodies that guard against nuclear proliferation and missile technology sales are needed to keep Thailand and its neighbours on a moving parity and stability in military development and regional relations. Intra-ASEAN cooperation, such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meetings framework in favour of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief should be encouraged and joint training exercises, such as the Cobra Gold, should be expanded to include more regional military forces. SEANWFZ should be made sacrosanct and verifiable.

