

CHAPTER 5

Thailand's Security Outlook: Next-Door, Indoor, Non-Traditional and Geo-Regional

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Introduction

While the contours and dynamics of Thailand's security outlook in 2011 remained broadly similar to recent patterns over the past decade, there has been a shift in weight and emphases from traditional to non-traditional. The fluid geostrategic equation in view of the United States assertive re-engagement and China's rise also has influenced Thai security perceptions. At the forefront remain Thai relations with next-door neighbours. Of the four border neighbours, bilateral relationships with Cambodia and Myanmar have been the most prickly and frictional, but they have ebbed and flowed with the cut and thrust of domestic Thai politics.

Indeed, Thailand's domestic political polarisation continues to loom large over security perceptions and their handling. During the Democrat Party-led government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva in 2009-10, relations with Cambodia hit rock bottom, characterised by armed skirmishes over the Preah Vihear temple complex, politicised and exploited by right-wing royalist extremists under the yellow-clad People's Alliance for Democracy and its offshoot the Thai Patriots Network. However, after Abhisit's Democrat Party lost the 3 July 2011 election to Pheu Thai Party, led by Yingluck Shinawatra and supervised by her exiled brother Thaksin Shinawatra, a former prime minister who was deposed by a military coup in September 2006, Thai-Cambodian relations were immediately put on the mend. The rapprochement was underscored by Yingluck's visit to Cambodia in mid-September 2011. Relations with Myanmar, on the other hand, were not as controversial and inflamed. The Democrat Party traditionally focused on human rights and democracy as a basis for foreign policy formulation. However, during the Abhisit administration, Thai foreign policy towards Myanmar was tame and pragmatic, a reflection of Thailand's growing dependence on Myanmar's energy resources and migrant labour. In the latter half of the Abhisit government, spilling over and continued under the Yingluck administration, Thailand banked on a huge multi-billion-dollar port development

project at Dawei for its development and energy needs.

Apart from neighbours east and west, internal security from the still-virulent Malay-Muslim insurgency in the southern border provinces has remained a conundrum. More than 5,000 have died, with many thousands more injured, since the southern insurgency flared up in January 2004. No solution and settlement appears in sight. However, the insurgency has not been germinated by international terrorism as earlier feared. It appears localised and involves illicit crimes, enmeshed with insurgent elements. Thailand's non-traditional security threats rose to prominence when its central region encountered massive floods in the second half of 2011 that devastated towns and industries. As a result, water security gained unprecedented attention. The great floods incurred high costs and threatened economic vitality. Following a Tsunami in December 2004, and reinforced by regular cruel acts of nature since, disaster prevention and relief have finally been prioritised on the national agenda. With the US-China rivalry in the region, Thai security perceptions have hedged increasingly towards Beijing, although Bangkok still fulfils its obligations as a US treaty ally. These trends encompass a security outlook that reflects poorly on Thailand's defence sector. The Thai military and security establishment does not have a unified, coherent and forward-looking strategic vision to handle Thailand's more challenged and more nuanced security environment.

Next-Door: Cambodia

Thai-Cambodian relations during the Abhisit administration further deteriorated in 2011 when both sides conducted deadly military skirmishes that claimed more than two dozen lives, scores of injuries and tens of thousands of displaced bystanders in the three months from February. At the time, it loomed potentially as Southeast Asia's first significant military conflict since the limited war between China and Vietnam in early 1979. The armed confrontation between Thailand and Cambodia was attributable to domestic political dynamics in both countries, rooted in historical enmity and colonial legacy, with adverse repercussions for regionalism in Southeast Asia and implications for international politics. While the conflict has dissipated after Yingluck took office in early August after winning the July election by a wide margin, the Thai-Cambodian rift in the long term will require a final settlement based on negotiations and perhaps third-party mediation. At the same time, the

ultimate restoration of peace and order along Thailand's western border will also depend on Thailand's domestic endgame and how it plays out. If the democratically elected government of Yingluck and Pheu Thai party are dislodged and replaced by a royalist successor, it is likely that relations with Cambodia would sour again. As Prime Minister Hun Sen has taken sides in Thailand's divide by favouring the Thaksin camp, Cambodia now has a direct stake in Thailand's endgame.

At issue in the bilateral spat between Thailand and Cambodia is the contested 4.6 square kilometres that adjoin a millennium-old Hindu temple known as "Preah Vihear" to Cambodians and "Phra Viharn" to Thais. Phnom Penh insisted the disputed land has been under Cambodia's territorial sovereignty since the International Court of Justice's landmark case in 1962. In its 9-to-3 verdict, the ICJ ruled that Cambodia's map, drawn up by French surveyors during 1904-07, put the temple area in Cambodia proper because Thailand (known as Siam until 1939) had not shown discernible objections previously. During the hearings, Cambodia further requested the ICJ's adjudication over the adjoining land area but the judges confined their jurisdiction only over the temple as per Cambodia's original submission.

This French-made map became the core of contention because it manipulated natural geographic divisions. Thailand does not accept the map because it contravenes the Franco-Siamese agreement in 1904, stipulating a demarcation along a watershed line separating the two countries. French mapping also took place just a decade after Siam ceded a clutch of territories — much of western Cambodia today — to France. It was a period when France perched atop Indochina as colonial master and when vulnerable Siam was compelled to trade off a host of unequal treaties with European powers for its independence.

Until recently, the overlapping claims on the 4.6 square kilometres were not an issue. Villagers and merchants from both sides conducted brisk business and border trade unfettered by the authorities. Bilateral political temperatures rose when Thai politics heated up following the military coup in September 2006 that overthrew Thaksin. In 2008, after Thaksin's proxy People's Power Party took power following an election victory, the Thai government signed a joint communiqué agreeing to Cambodia's listing of Preah Vihear Temple as a UNESCO World Heritage site. The communiqué became the lightning rod for Thaksin's opponents at home, spearheaded

by the yellow-clad People's Alliance for Democracy. They depicted the UNESCO registration of Preah Vihear as a treasonous sell-out of Thai sovereignty and used it as an instrumental plank to destabilise the pro-Thaksin government. During its rampage in 2008, when the PAD seized control of Government House and Bangkok's two airports, its protest leaders hectored Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen and likened him to a hooligan. Exacerbating matters, the PAD progenitor of the insult became Thailand's foreign minister.

When Thaksin's opponents succeeded in taking power back from his nominees in December 2008, led by Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and reinforced by the army, bilateral tensions with Cambodia became inevitable. Hun Sen had scores to settle with the anti-Thaksin coalition of Democrat Party, PAD and army. In 2009, Hun Sen appointed Thaksin as economic advisor of the Cambodian government and invited him to deliver a high-profile public address in Phnom Penh. The bilateral relationship has been rocky since, alternating between periods of friction and conciliation. The latest spate of armed clashes along the border this past year stems from the PAD's provocation. Although some of its members entered cabinet under Abhisit, PAD leaders felt betrayed and abandoned by Abhisit and some of his powerful backers. The yellow shirts, some moving to the extreme royalist right-wing under the Thai Patriots Network, returned to the streets with ultra-nationalism over Preah Vihear on the one hand and a domestic anti-corruption drive on the other. The PAD has openly called for a military coup to ostensibly clear the slate and clean up Thai politics and to take back the disputed land from Cambodia.

The PAD initially found little traction. The Thai army stayed out of the Preah Vihear controversy and the Abhisit government shrugged off PAD machinations. But as the anti-Establishment red shirts increasingly went on the march against the army's suppression of their fellow demonstrators in April-May 2010, the men in uniform became agitated. A major tipping point may have been the red-shirt leaders' allusion to the conspicuous royal silence that coincided with the army's violent suppression. The army's fear of a clear and present danger to the monarchy was heightened. From a neutral posture, the Thai army became increasingly assertive. It unilaterally ruled out the presence of regional observers on the Thai-Cambodian border, a deal mediated by Indonesia's Foreign Minister Marty Natelegawa in February 2011. The Abhisit government, congenitally beholden to the army, soon took the same cue and

effectively reneged on the Indonesia-brokered peace drive. It was a blow not only to Indonesia as the chair of Association of Southeast Asian Nations this year but also to the regional organisation itself and its quest to become an ASEAN Community by 2015.

Cambodia has aimed to multilateralise the border conflict as much as Thailand has tried to limit it to bilateral negotiations. Phnom Penh has also petitioned the ICJ for further clarification of its 1962 decision, whose outcome could turn against Thai claims and ignite more domestic turmoil in Bangkok. However, the Thai-Cambodian border battles that involved tanks and heavy artillery in 2019-10 are unlikely to flare up again to the point of open warfare on a large scale, especially as long as the Yingluck government and Thaksin's camp are in office. But much will depend on who holds power in Thailand. If power-holders are from the opposite side of Thaksin, they will be tempted to politicise Preah Vihear for royalist-conservative aims, a nationalist tool to maintain and galvanise domestic political order. But if the Thaksin side is in charge, a negotiated solution or even a long-term political settlement over disputed border areas can be reached. As an illustration, Thaksin quickly made an informal visit to Phnom Penh after Pheu Thai's election victory, soon followed by Yingluck's official visit, which was feted by her Cambodian counterpart.¹ The commercial stakes and trade and investment interests are high as the overlapping claims between the two countries over rich energy deposits in the Gulf of Thailand are at a standstill.

Next-Door: Myanmar

While armed conflict with Cambodia focused Thai security perceptions, relations with Myanmar were also high on the agenda. Myanmar is arguably the single most important country in view of Thailand's immediate national interests. It is difficult to pinpoint the turning point in Myanmar's recent progress on democratic reforms and political dialogue between the government of Prime Minister Thein Sein and the leader of opposition groups, Aung San Suu Kyi, who had spent 15 of the past 21 years under house arrest by the same military regime who now governs under

¹ See "Yingluck Visit Boosts Thai-Cambodia Relations," *Voice of America News*, 15 September 2011.

civilian guises. As the constitution that was promulgated in 2008 and the consequent elections in 2010 were both deemed illegitimate, it seemed like a bogus government was produced by a bogus election. Yet recent events on the ground have suggested otherwise.

It appears that the meeting between Thein Sein and Suu Kyi on 19 August 2011 was a threshold of sorts. After that meeting, goodwill, dialogue and reforms have carried the day, now generating a breathtaking momentum that will not be easily halted or reversed. This momentum has been punctuated by key concessions from the parties involved from the Naypyidaw government's release of many political prisoners and ease on Suu Kyi's National League of Democracy party to the limited curtailment of sanctions from Western countries and ASEAN's granting its rotational chairmanship to Myanmar for 2014. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's three-day visit to Myanmar from 30 November 2011, following President Barack Obama's overture during the East Asia Summit, provided a green light for high-level visits from other countries. Secretary Clinton met with both Thein Sein and Suu Kyi where symbolism was more important than substance. Despite the apparent turnaround and progress, it is unclear if or how this remarkable reform momentum will be maintained. Myanmar has come so far in so short a time but it has a long way to go to become a genuine democracy. By-elections on 1 April 2012 which is likely to send Suu Kyi to parliament is the next tell-tale sign of near-term political directions.

That such reforms and concessions have been implemented in short order and the formidable Suu Kyi's willingness to join in the dialogue is puzzling. Why the sudden flicker of light after long years of darkness? In fact, it may well have to do with the women's network in the heart of Yangon, the former capital. From sources that have been verified, it appears Thein Sein's wife is an admirer of Suu Kyi. The two women hold fond regards for each other, and hence Suu Kyi's goodwill towards Thein Sein. As relayed through an informant, "if that woman can be married to him for so long, he must not be that bad a man" (author's interview with an informant and a European ambassador). The Thein Sein-Suu Kyi axis is thus fundamental to the reform momentum.

All the same, the reforms in Myanmar bear far-reaching repercussions for Thai security. The upshot of these reforms is a mixed bag. On the one hand, the threat

of nuclear weapons emanating from Naypyidaw has dissipated. Myanmar was reportedly interested in developing crude nuclear capabilities with North Korean assistance. A nuclearised Myanmar would likely have been a game changer for Thai security, leaving Bangkok vulnerable to nuclear blackmail and triggering a Thai response to eliminate such insecurity. However, Clinton's visit and the Obama administration's overall engagement were reportedly hinged on a halt to Myanmar's nuclear program. It was a "deal maker" with which the Myanmar military and Thein Sein's government complied.

While the nuclear threat has waned, Thailand's energy insecurity has grown. The recent cancellation of a coal-fired power plant in the Dawei Special Economic Zone due to environmental concern serves as a case in point. This plant was designed to produce 4,000 megawatts of electricity for the Dawei Development Project, a \$58 billion agreement between the governments of Myanmar and Thailand in May 2008. The Dawei Development Project, in turn, would be a lifeline for Thai energy and development needs for years to come, shifting some of the polluting industries from Thailand to its neighbour.² The long-term project would include industrial zones, a new city, deep-sea ports, a chemical fertiliser plant, a coal-fired power plant, a steel plant, chemical fuel plants, oil refineries, ship maintenance buildings, a railroad, roads, and oil and natural gas pipelines. It would quench some of the Thai thirst for natural gas which produces more than 70 percent of electricity supplies in Thailand. Thailand now imports more than 25 percent of its natural gas consumption from Myanmar and this figure will only grow in the future. The Dawei project is a desperate sign of Thai energy insecurity.

Moreover, Thailand relies on migrant labourers from Myanmar, especially from Karen and Shan states. More than two million of these workers take up back-breaking and menial jobs all over the Thai economy, and have become a vital component of Thai economic growth. As these workers have entered their second generation, Thai authorities still do not have adequate plans to integrate them or provide long-term human security for them to avoid medium-term social problems from a lack of education and healthcare. In addition, other non-traditional security issues such as

² "Dawei project developers seek KNU cooperation," *Mizzima*, 5 January 2012; "Dawei Power Plant Cancelled," *The Irrawaddy*, 10 January 2012.

drug trafficking have been up and down but the reforms in Myanmar offer optimism that these problems may be dealt with at the leaders' levels.

Indoor: Southern Insurgency

The Malay-Muslim insurgency in Thailand's southern border provinces of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat has become intractable. With effective counter-terrorism efforts by the Indonesian authorities in Southeast Asia and by the United States farther away, the threat of terrorism infecting the Thai insurgency has markedly declined. Jemaah Islamiyah, for example, is no longer a major source of concern as an al-Qaeda regional outpost. Yet the southern insurgency in Thailand remains virulent. It has consumed more than 160 billion Thai baht (\$5.3 billion) and has claimed 5,243 losses of life and nearly 9,000 wounded victims in 12,604 insurgent attacks.³ The perpetrators remain unclear, whereas the victims have covered a diverse range, including both Buddhists and Muslims, civilians and state officials, police and army, young and old.

There is a converging consensus that no single party is responsible for this spate of violence, one of the top ten deadliest internal conflicts in the world. No doubt an unfavourable historical legacy plays a part, where the Malay Muslims were incorporated and assimilated into the Thai state over the past century. Some insurgent groups, particularly the BRN-C, have made sporadic statements but have shown no unified command or collective action. Nor have they made clear their stated aims. Mediation efforts have been attempted to no avail. Some suggest that the Thai military and police, with their corporate and individual interests in illicit trade in contraband and racketeering, are instrumental in sustaining the violence. The Thai army's Fourth Region benefits from state largess as long as the insurgency remains virulent. Any prognosis of the insurgency in Thailand's deep south is necessarily murky but it requires two imperatives. First, civilian supremacy over the military is a prerequisite for tackling the sources of insurgency. Second, a negotiated settlement is likely to be the ultimate way forward. Meantime, more violence is expected as the southern insurgency has become Thailand's chief internal insecurity.

³ *Isra News Agency* (Thai South Archive); Southern Border Police Operation Centre.

Non-Traditional: Floods

As with other countries, Thailand is not alien to natural disasters of a grand scale. In December 2004, it was struck by a Boxing Day Tsunami that powerfully rippled from Aceh. While Tsunami damages and death toll were massive, with more than 5,000 losses of life in Thailand's Phuket and Phang-nga provinces alone, it was a natural disaster. A more effective early warning system would have saved many lives but many still would have perished. From mid-2011, Thailand was struck by a more manmade flooding disaster, akin to a slowly seeping inland Tsunami. Inaccurate information, poor management and Mother Nature all combined to unleash one of Thailand's worst floods in decades. It claimed more than 600 victims, far less than those from the Tsunami, but its economic impact was much more severe. When Yingluck's newly elected government took office in early August 2011, it wasted no time in rolling out populist policies catered to its upcountry supporters, putting in motion the policy legacy of Thaksin. Floods are not uncommon in Thailand's low-lying central provinces just north of Bangkok, the country's traditional "rice bowl" that have also spawned manufacturing estates for multinational companies in recent decades. Severe floods also beset the central plains and Bangkok in 1983 and 1995, with 1942 as the most catastrophic.

But as the Thai economy became more developed, the cost of each flood has risen dramatically over the years. Early rainfall in 2011, intensified by a string of monsoonal storms, should have prompted early release of waters in the country's main upstream dams along the Chao Phraya river, the main waterway through the central region descending on Bangkok before it reaches the sea. But the dams did not release enough water to accommodate the monsoons. When the dam gates gushed in earnest, it was met with torrential downpours, thereby submerging adjacent provinces. The damages to farms and factories were in the tens of billions of dollars. Unsurprisingly, the floods did not strengthen the Yingluck government. Few governments anywhere can emerge from a disaster of this magnitude looking stronger. Structural problems from decades of neglect and poor development plans were compounded by bureaucratic ineptitude and government mismanagement. But while her government was weakened by the floods, Yingluck emerged more intact than anticipated. Like a sponge, she absorbed criticisms and personal attacks but yet has the wherewithal to come back for more. Her political baptism by the

floods strengthened Ms Yingluck's hand significantly. Two blue-ribbon committees were consequently set up to devise flood-management plans and restore investor confidence. The flood-management programmes have been estimated to cost more than \$10 billion over five years.

Natural disasters such as the Tsunami and the floods over the past decade have been increasingly securitised. These natural disasters adversely affect lives and livelihoods in ways not unlike traditional warfare and human conflict. During the Thai floods, many regiments of soldiers were out in force for relief and recovery efforts. The army was most equipped with heavy machinery and automobiles to aid victims. The army chief took command in cooperation with the prime minister. Scenes of them in charge over flood relief efforts resemble battlefield commanders. Excessive water from nature became their enemy. These non-traditional security threats have caught the Thai security establishment off guard but it is becoming increasing in tune with the changing global landscape.

Geo-regional: Between the United States and China

In line with Hillary Clinton's "America's Pacific Century" foreign policy outline⁴, President Barack Obama's recently announced new military strategy⁵ that repositions American resources from elsewhere to the Asia-Pacific is a broader concern for the Thai security outlook. China is a resident power and emerging superpower with all attendant attributes, whereas America is a staying superpower with immense wherewithal even under hard fiscal times. China's growing influence and weight in Southeast Asia is viewed differently in various ASEAN capitals. In the arena of contest in the South China Sea, where Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia have encountered overlapping territorial claims vis-a-vis Beijing, the US' role is likely more welcome than in other ASEAN capitals, particularly Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar.

While Thailand is not a claimant in the South China Sea disputes, it is centrally located in the Mekong Subregion which is under growing influence of China. Bangkok's ties

⁴ Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, November 2011.

⁵ "Obama Outlines New Military Strategy," *New York Times*, 6 January 2012.

with Beijing have always been warm since rapprochement in the mid-1970s, and increasingly so after the Thai military coup. Yet Thailand is a US treaty ally. In terms of the stock of security ties and longstanding relationship, the US has much more to count on in its Thai ally, as opposed to a newer and more controversial and once communism-exporting People's Republic. But times have changed. On the flow of ties, Bangkok may well be tilting towards Beijing in what is not necessarily a zero-sum outlook. But the geo-regional rivalry between Washington and Beijing over the South China Sea on one hand and the Mekong region on the other may well divide a wedge into ASEAN long-term unity and pose a dilemma for the Thai security outlook in the medium term.

Implications for the Defence Sector

These security concerns with next-door neighbours, internal conflict in the deep south, natural disasters and regional superpower rivalry make the Thai security outlook varied, nuanced and challenged. Thai security planners have not shown sufficient coherence, unity and wherewithal to tackle these problems. Thai weapons procurement programs, for example, are diverse and disparate, completely uncoordinated among the armed forces and often involved corruptions and kickbacks. Weapon systems are not streamlined. Thailand is the only ASEAN country which owns a small aircraft carrier but it has practically been a museum piece, moored at a naval base for Thai tourists to visit and put in operation only occasionally for disaster relief. The Thai navy has requested possession of two to four used submarines which the Yingluck government has endorsed in principle but without a budget commitment so far. In 2011, the Thai air force put in motion its new generation of fighter jets. For the first time, American aircraft no longer is the currency of front-line Thai aerial capabilities. Sweden's Gripen fighters are now the attack and aerial defence choice.

The list goes on of the armed forces going their own way in procurement without a coordinated, common strategic vision on the Thai security outlook. This trend is likely to continue in the near term because the Thai army has become increasingly political and politicised after September 2006 and more powerful as the current royal reign enters late twilight. While the defence budget has kept pace (167 billion baht, or \$5.4 billion for 2012) with steady economic growth, there is unlikely to be a complete civilian control of the Thai military for the foreseeable future until after the royal

succession is sorted out. Accordingly, the next-door security concerns and internal security threat in the deep south will be problematic and depend on vicissitudes of the fluid and contested Thai power structure. But on the non-traditional security concerns, there is likely to be more progress, especially regional cooperation on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, as non-traditional issues offer the Thai military a role that promotes its political legitimacy.