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From Looks to Action: Thailand-India Strategic Convergence and Defence Cooperation

Sasiwan Chingchit



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Introduction

For more than six decades, Indo-Thai bilateral cooperation concentrated on education, culture, and technical exchanges. After India's Look East and Thailand's Look West policies coincided in 1990's, the cooperation between the two countries gained a new momentum in the last few years. The strategic transformation of Indo-Pacific region and the political changes within Myanmar now provide a new background for Thailand and India to step up their relations in every respect, including defence cooperation. The paper argues that with the increasing strategic significance of each party, Thailand-India defence relations remain a weak link which does not correspond to the new strategic context, and which requires attention and improvement.

India in Thailand's strategic vision

In Thailand's strategic vision, the place of India has undergone several periods of change. Since its independence in 1947, India has sought to establish warm and cordial relations with all Southeast Asian countries, including Thailand. The two countries have had cordial ties since the 1950's when India looked for trade opportunities with Thailand, offered assistance in education and technical training, and encouraged cultural and educational exchanges. Even after India drew close to the Soviet Union in 1971, Indo-Thai relations remained healthy, although barely growing. While Thailand was a key American ally in Asia, India was seen as being under the USSR's influence.¹

¹ Unlike Indonesia, Myanmar and Philippines, Thailand did not accept India's offer to ink a Treaty of Friendship in 1951. There were some military to military contacts in the form of India's ship port calls and exchange of armed force personnel's visits during the 1950's. But Thailand never had an agreement on cooperation between armed forces with India like Indonesia did in 1956. See the information in the Indian Ministry of External Affairs' (MEA's) Annual Reports from 1950 onwards.

When Thailand's foreign policy assumed a more economic focus in 1988, Bangkok began to attach greater importance to New Delhi by virtue of India's geopolitical pre-eminence and economic potential in South Asia.

Economics and development: Look West policy

In 1988, the Cold War and the political conflict in Cambodia were coming to an end and a new peaceful era dawned upon mainland Southeast Asia. The context suited Thailand with its high economic growth rates and burgeoning ambitions. Appreciation of the Yen and increasing costs of production in Japan, as a result of the Plaza Accord in 1985, generated another wave of Japanese investment in Southeast Asia. Thailand became one of Japan's main production bases in the region. From an import substituting economy, Thailand became an export oriented one. This change took place in tandem with the Thai military's declining influence in politics and foreign policy.

Thailand no longer just "bended with the wind" by letting the two hegemonic powers, the United States (US) and China which had once protected it from the Vietnamese threat, determine its foreign policy. In 1988, when Prime Minister Chatchai Chunhawan announced his new policy to "turn the battlefields into marketplaces", Thailand was set to take on a new role as an economic power and generator of economic transformation in Indochina.² It adopted an economics-driven foreign policy seeking to expand its role in the neighbouring countries while fostering the region's economic development. As Buszinsky notes, at that juncture Thailand not only started to see itself as a regional power but also identified its success with economic achievement and its role in regional development.³

² Leszek Buszinsky, "Thailand's Foreign Policy: Management of Regional Vision", *Asian Survey* 34 (1994): p. 723

³ Ibid.

In 1989, Prime Minister Chatchai became the first Thai Prime Minister to visit India. The visit was followed by the establishment of an India-Thailand Joint Commission, a Joint Business Council (JBC) and an MoU on cooperation between India's Oil and Natural Gas Cooperation (ONGC) and the Petroleum Authority of Thailand (PTT). This came after Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit to Thailand in 1986 and the four decades of several exchanges of high level visits from the two sides and many trade and investment initiatives and cooperation which had been mostly initiated by India.

The economics-oriented approach and a new self-perception laid the foundation for Thailand's 1996 "Look West policy." The Thai approach responded to India's "Look East policy's" call for more engagement and partnership with Southeast Asia. Since the 1990s, as a corollary to its self-assumed role as Indochina's regional power, Thailand has started several sub-regional cooperation initiatives in the region. They entail Thailand acting as the main coordinator by bringing in external great powers to partner with it in generating development in mainland Southeast Asia.⁴ At present, this strategic collaboration includes non-ASEAN countries like China, Japan, South Korea, US, India, Germany and France in several development related projects in both trilateral and multilateral settings.

The primary aim of Thailand's Look West policy is to engage economically with India and other countries in South Asia. It has also led to initiatives like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) in 1997 and the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC). Both position India as Thailand's major partner in the development initiatives that involve countries in mainland Southeast Asia.⁵

⁴ See Pongphisoot Busbarat, "A Review of Thailand's Foreign Policy in Mainland Southeast Asia: Exploring an Ideational Approach", *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 2(2012).

⁵ Pavin Chatchavalpongpan, "Look East meets Look West: India-Southeast Asia Evolving Relations", *Foreign Policy Research Centre* 8(2011): p.62

The frameworks of both BIMSTEC and MGC⁶ reveal how Indo-Thai relations rest mostly on cooperation in trade and investment, inter-regional transportation development, non-traditional security matters, education and cultural exchange.⁷ Thai policy makers see Thailand and India as complementing each other economically. This is natural since Thailand is seeking new markets for export and investment and looks to be a gateway to Southeast Asia and the rest of the Pacific Rim while India is a technology hub and provides a market of 360 million medium-income customers. However, for the vision to be realised, there is an urgent need for enhanced economic cooperation. Tariff barriers must be reduced and infrastructure and transportation linkages must be improved.⁸

For several years, the Thai government has spent most of its energy and resources boosting trade and investment between Thailand and India. In 2003, Thailand managed to be the first ASEAN country to secure a Framework Agreement for establishing a bilateral Free Trade Area (FTA) with India. Under this framework, the Early Harvest Scheme for tariff reduction on listed agricultural items was adopted in 2004. It has been ten years since, but the FTA in goods has not been concluded, even though it was meant to be enforced in 2010. The elusive FTA has naturally remained Thailand's top priority with regard to India.

⁶ BIMSTEC seeks to promote among the member countries cooperation in the areas of trade and investment, technology, energy, transport and communication, tourism, fisheries, agriculture, cultural cooperation, environment and disaster management, public health, people to people contact, poverty alleviation, terrorism and transnational crimes. MGC focuses on cooperation in tourism, culture, education and transportation linkages, which serves as basis for further development of trade and investment between the members.

⁷ This manifests in all joint press statements between India and Thailand during prime ministerial visits.

⁸ Chularat Suteethorn, Deputy-Director General of Fiscal Policy Office, Thailand's Ministry of Commerce, "Economic Cooperation between Thailand and India and Its Implication on the Asian Community", http://www.ide.go.jp/Japanese/Event/Sympo/pdf/suteethorn_hand.pdf

Figure 1: Thailand between the Indian and Pacific oceans.⁹



Cooperation in developing transportation links between India, Myanmar and Thailand, seen to be pivotal for strengthening economic growth and integration, is considered another linchpin in Indo-Thai relations.¹⁰ The two countries have placed much importance on the Trilateral Highway project linking Moreh in India (Manipur) with Mae Sot in Northern Thailand, via Bagan in Myanmar. Also to be on the highway's route is Myanmar's Dawei deep sea port which will facilitate goods transportation between Thailand, India, Myanmar and beyond (see Figure 1). India hopes that the Trilateral Highway will connect its underdeveloped North-eastern states with Southeast Asia. On the other hand, Thailand

⁹ Picture source: <http://www.thailand-maps.com/south-east-asia-map.htm>

¹⁰ "Joint Press Statement on India, Myanmar, Thailand Ministerial Meeting on Transport Linkages", December 23, 2003, <http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/7689/Joint+Press+Statement+on+India+Myanmar+Thailand+Ministerial+Meeting+on+Transport+Linkages>

also sees it as an opportunity to penetrate markets in the seven North Eastern states whose population share cultural proximity and similar consumption tastes with Thailand.¹¹

Emerging security partner

On the security front, Thailand and India have cooperated mainly in combating transnational terrorism, organised crime, illicit drug and human trafficking, cyber and financial crimes. All this is done through intelligence sharing and an extradition agreement. In 2009, Delhi and Bangkok established a Joint Working Group (JWG) on Security Cooperation and signed a Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) Convention on cooperation in combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organised Crime (TOC) and Illicit Drug Trafficking. A Treaty of the Transfer of Sentenced Prisoners was signed in 2012. It was followed by an MoU on Cooperation in the exchange of Financial Intelligence related to Money Laundering and Terrorism Financing in 2013.

As a global tourist destination with very relaxed entry and immigration rules, Thailand is known to be a perfect hideout and transit point for many international criminals and terrorists. Collaborating with other countries in tackling transnational crimes has been central to Thailand's national security policies. Thailand also cooperates with other countries so as not to allow organised crime groups to use its soil as a hideout and a base to mobilise, network and acquire financial support and arms supplies.¹² Apart

¹¹ "Seven Sisters: The Market of Hope", interview with Tharadol Thongruang, Regional Connectivity Sub-Committee under Thailand's Parliamentarian Committee on Thailand, Myanmar and India Border Trade, *Commercial World Magazine*, March 21, 2010, http://www.cwmagazine.com/Home/frmNews.aspx?Detail_Id=163&fCatID=5

¹² Thailand's National Security Council, "National Security Policies B.E. 2550-2554": p.42.

from India, it has collaborated closely with the US, Australia and Indonesia on these security matters.

Cooperating with India on these security concerns is complementary to the existing Indo-Thai cordial relations and economic cooperation. India has received Thailand's assistance in dealing with its North Eastern insurgents who take refuge and receive arms supplies from international actors on Thai territory.¹³ Peace and security in India's North East, in Myanmar and along the borders of the contiguous countries is vital to the success of Indian and Southeast Asian land trade and people-to-people contacts. Close cooperation in security can also invigorate other areas of cooperation and fuel Thai economic interests in India's North East. But since criminals carrying out illicit trade, including drug trafficking along the Thai border, hardly go to India as the two countries do not share a land border and Thailand's Southern insurgents usually take refuge and receive training in Islamic countries, the Indo-Thai security cooperation has benefitted India more than Thailand.

However, Thailand's economics-determined foreign policy towards India is becoming inadequate. India's rising status as a great power and the changing power and security dynamics within Asia and the world have driven Thailand to gradually readjust its policy towards India and the other emerging powers. In recent years, India is being mentioned more regularly in Thailand's foreign policy and security white papers, contrary to more than a decade ago when it was overlooked by Thai foreign policy community.

The national security policies paper for 1998-2001 proposed that for national security and prosperity, Thailand "should maintain and enhance good relations with US, China, Japan and groups of countries of high national power" in bilateral and multilateral

¹³ Interview with Thai government officials on December 3, 2013.

settings. There was no reference to India as it was not considered significant to Thailand's strategic vision.¹⁴ This outlook has changed in the national security policy paper for 2007-11 which observed that the global power structure has gradually been shifting from uni-polar to multi-polar. It noted that "While China's influence [in the world] is increasing in the way that its economic power may be equivalent to a superpower, India, Australia and Japan also aim to play a leading role in the region [Asia]".¹⁵ The document further suggested that Thailand should encourage balancing of power among major powers in the Asia-Pacific.¹⁶

As a very close friend of China in Southeast Asia and a non-claimant country in the South China Sea territorial disputes which have sparked new tension in the Asia Pacific since 2010, Thailand had been quite slow to take up these conflicts with greater concern. This dynamic has changed when the US announced its pivot (or "rebalance") to Asia in early 2012 and Thailand assumed its new role as the rotating country coordinator for ASEAN-China relations in 2012-15.

The Royal Thai Navy (RTN) was the first to respond to this changing scenario in its maritime national security strategy for 2012-16. Drafted around May 2012, the document emphasises the multi-polar global system in which several great powers including India compete, balance and, at the same time, cooperate with each other. It highlights the U.S. pivot to Asia, China's conflict ridden relations with several neighbours and Japan's attempt to contain China. Besides, the document dwells at considerable length on India's military capability, its role and interest in the Indian Ocean and

¹⁴ Thailand's National Security Council, "National Security Policies B.E. 2540-2544", http://www.nsc.go.th/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=573&Itemid=63

¹⁵ Thailand's National Security Council, "National Security Policies B.E. 2550-2554": pp.16-17.

¹⁶ Ibid: 48.

Southeast Asia as well as its relations with Thailand, China, Japan, the US and other players in the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region.

In the Royal Thai Navy's view, Thailand's location is in the middle between the Indian Ocean which is regaining its global geostrategic significance due to Indo-China rivalry and other maritime security threats, and the Western Pacific where territorial conflicts and great power manoeuvres are playing an increasingly important role. The document also suggests that Thailand must emphasise its neutrality and seek to develop international cooperation in order to generate trust and mediate conflicts between members.¹⁷ The increasing concerns about balancing great powers' competition and contestation in Asia also manifest in Thailand's national strategic policy for 2012-2016¹⁸ featuring a newly added "strategy towards great powers."¹⁹

Bangkok's balancing bet

Thailand is a U.S. military treaty ally in Asia and also a close friend of China since the late 1970s when Bangkok needed Beijing's help to cope with expansionist Vietnam. Thailand-China relations were elevated to a strategic partnership in 2001, and in 2007 the two signed a Joint Action Plan on Strategic Cooperation in 15 sectors. To position itself as a neutral country open to cooperation with all parties, Thailand signed important agreements and sought to establish strategic partnership with many different countries in 2012-13. This brought balance back to its foreign policy which had been perceived to be too pro-China.

¹⁷ Royal Thai Navy, "Draft of Maritime National Security Strategy B.E. 2555-58", <http://www.navy.mi.th/navedu/stg/databasestory/data/youttasart/youttasarttalae/thai/youttasartcharttralee/youttasart-copytest51-60.pdf>

¹⁸ The draft's approval by the Prime Minister's Office has been pending for two years due to internal problems.

¹⁹ Danai Moosa, power point presentation on Thai national security strategy and conflict resolution in Southern Thailand, Thailand's National Security Council (NSC).

Former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh agreed to work on establishing a strategic partnership when the former visited India as the chief guest in the 2012 Republic Day celebrations. The same year, Thailand concluded a strategic partnership with Japan in March, with Germany in July, and with South Korea in November. The highlights of 2012 were Thailand's MOU on defence cooperation with Vietnam, a claimant of the disputed Spratly Island in the South China Sea, in September, and the signing of a Joint Vision Statement for the Thai-U.S. Defence Alliance in November. The latter declares Thailand's support for a U.S. regional presence which will allow Asia Pacific to prosper by allowing open access by all to a shared maritime domain.²⁰ In December 2012, the Thai Army chief Prayuth Chan-ocha also visited the Philippines, another active party, along with China, to the South China Sea disputes.

Thailand's relations with Vietnam were upgraded to a strategic partnership with the aim to enhance and deepen cooperation in several areas in June of the following year. While in October 2013, during Prime Minister Li Keqiang's visit to Thailand, China also discussed the plan to further upgrade the existing ties towards Thailand-China Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership.²¹ This indicated the Chinese effort to maintain a privileged position in Thai foreign relations.

In this complex environment, as it becomes increasingly involved in regional conflicts and great power competition, Thailand's strategy to conduct its foreign policy and relations with global and regional powers is more significant than ever. Against this

²⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, "News Release", November 15, 2012, <http://www.defense.gov/releases/release.aspx?releaseid=15685>

²¹ "Thailand and China move to boost their comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership", http://www.thaiembassy.sg/press_media/news-highlights/thailand-and-china-move-to-boost-their-comprehensive-strategic-cooperati

background, India's rising profile in Southeast Asia is of crucial importance.

India's rising strategic profile in Southeast Asia

With its growing economy expected to be the third largest in the world by the end of the next decade and its formidable capability as a conventional and nuclear military power, India in the last decade has been recognised by the global community as an emerging power. Its ascending status comes with attached expectations, from both within and without the country, that India will now play a more significant role on the global and extra-regional stages. The West, for example, expects India to take a more proactive role in supporting Afghanistan's security and development and act overall as a "net security provider" in areas such as the Indian Ocean. The ASEAN too is encouraging greater Indian involvement in its regional economic and security agendas.

It is quite clear that India is moving in the direction of assuming the new role of a global player, despite some resistance in New Delhi's political establishment to acknowledge India's rise and consequent responsibilities.²² Indian ambition, for example, is displayed by India joining with other major powers to campaign for a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) reform, in its bid for a UNSC permanent seat, and in the growing Indian contribution to UN peacekeeping and international anti-piracy efforts. At the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2006, India's former Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee articulated this new ambition when he remarked that India's emergence, as a global player "will have a far-reaching

²² C. Raja. Mohan, "An Uncertain Trumpet? India's Role in Southeast Asian Security", *India Review* 12(2013): p.138.

impact on the international economy, politics and security. In each of these areas, India is poised to play an increasing larger role”²³.

Indian strategy of contributing to international security is also reflected in the 2011-12 Annual Report of Ministry of Defence (MoD). The report seeks to increase Indian participation in multilateral institutions and strengthen its strategic partnership with various countries “to effectively contribute, as a responsible stakeholder, to regional and global peace and stability”²⁴.

Beyond just looking East

Beyond just words, status and reputation, India’s increasing involvement in Southeast Asia can be seen as emerging from obvious self-interest and as an attempt to respond to domestic economic and security needs. The primary aim of the Look East Policy announced in 1992 was to tap into the emerging robust Southeast Asian economies. An additional objective was to accommodate the country’s reformist agenda which urged India to become more active in looking for economic opportunity elsewhere.²⁵ The Look East Policy soon expanded as ASEAN welcomed India in several of its forums and began to cover other areas of engagement like politics and security.

After concluding a Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation (CECA) with ASEAN in 2004 and a bilateral FTA with individual countries in Southeast Asia, India has focused on “connectivity diplomacy” between South and Southeast Asia. Greater connectivity remains crucial to economic

²³ Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, “Furthering Maritime Cooperation with Southeast Asia” in *Changing Security Dynamic in Southeast Asia*, ed. N. S. Sisodia and SreeradhaDatta (New Delhi: Magnum Book, 2008), p.157.

²⁴ Ministry of Defence, Government of India, *Annual Report 2006-2007*, p.2.

²⁵ Jaffrelot, Christophe, “India’s Look East Policy: An Asianist Strategy in Perspective,” *India Review*, 2, (2)pp.35-68, 2003.

integration and needs to be prioritised as a neglected area since trade agreements have enormously increased the mobility of goods, services and investment between India and ASEAN.²⁶ India has been working on several road, rail, maritime and air link projects to respond to this challenge, including the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, and the India-Hanoi Rail Link that will connect India, especially its Northeast, with Myanmar and the rest of Southeast Asia. When completed, these projects will speed up goods' transport and generate development in the landlocked and backward Northeast. The economic and political opening of Myanmar has opened new possibilities in this regard.

Geographical factors also necessitate India to forge closer ties with Southeast Asia in the domain of security cooperation. An added factor is China's growing influence in the region. India shares maritime boundaries with Indonesia, Myanmar and Thailand and perceives any disturbance or external intervention in this area as a potential threat. India is, thus, very concerned with China's influence in Myanmar. It is also suspicious of Chinese naval port construction as well as a rumoured Chinese surveillance station in the Coco Islands. Misgivings about China are the underlying reason behind the Indian efforts to maintain amicable relations with the Burmese military regime, apart from the *Tatmadan's* cooperation in the operation against Indian insurgents based in Myanmar.²⁷

India's primary areas of strategic interest, as stated in its Maritime Military Strategy (2007), are the parts of the Indian and Pacific oceans linked by the Strait of Malacca. This is unsurprising, as 55 per cent of Indian trade transit goes through the Strait of Malacca's

²⁶ Anushree Bhattacharya, "Linking Southeast Asia to India: More Connectivity, Better Ties", *IPCS Special Report 50* (2008) http://www.ipcs.org/pdf_file/issue/935268060IPCS-SpecialReport50.pdf

²⁷ Ministry of Defence, Government of India, *Annual Report 2006-2007*, p.8.

choke point to and from the South China Sea.²⁸ India has recently also started to diversify its energy sources and import oil and gas from Russia's Sakhalin fields in Northeast Asia. It is also in negotiation with Malaysia for the purchase of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG).²⁹

Since India relies heavily on offshore energy and its new energy suppliers transport oil and gas through the Strait of Malacca from the East, it is natural for India to become more involved in different security dimensions covering Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific. Apart from this geo-economic interest, David Scott argues that Sino-Indian rivalry is also behind India's intent to contain China's pre-eminence in the Indian Ocean.³⁰

India has used the ASEAN Regional Forum and ASEAN-India Vision Statement to articulate its security stake in the South China Sea and announce its support for the liberal norms of freedom of navigation, principles of international law, and cooperation in maritime security. Diplomacy and ASEAN support have facilitated this Indian endeavour. The Indian Navy operates regularly in the Western Pacific and launches frequent deployments and port calls to friendly countries in the area. In the last decade, New Delhi has also strengthened its defence cooperation with the ASEAN and its individual members with many defence related agreements and its participation in regional security forums like the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asian Summit and the ASEAN Defence Minister Meeting-PLUS.³¹

²⁸ David Scott, "India's Role in the South China Sea: Geopolitics and Geoeconomics in Play", *Indian Review* 12 (2013):p55.

²⁹ Gurpreet S. Khurana, "The Malacca Straits 'Conundrum' and India" " in *Changing Security Dynamic in Southeast Asia*, ed. N.S. Sisodia and Sreeradha Datta New Delhi: Magnum Book, 2008.

³⁰ See David Scott, "India's Role in the South China Sea: Geopolitics and Geoeconomics in Play", *Indian Review* 12 (2013).

³¹ Ibid and Ministry of Defence, Government of India, *Annual Report, 2011-2012*, 4.

Beyond the ASEAN-led architecture, India also looks to consolidate its sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean with the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) a maritime security forum and cooperation. The IORA is a broad-spectrum cooperation similar to BIMSTEC and includes countries around the Indian Ocean across continents.³² The IORA and the IONS were initiated by India in 1997 and 2008 respectively and include major Southeast Asian countries, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.

Indo-Thai strategic convergence in the New Asia

Thailand must now accommodate India's rising profile and increasing presence in Southeast Asia and the South China Sea into its strategic calculus and consider how best to position itself in ASEAN's and Asia's changing great power relations. Thailand's cosy relations with China and initial reluctance to welcome the U.S.'s rebalancing act in Asia have frustrated Washington and enfeebled the Thai-US alliance.³³ Thailand, as a result, is trying to carefully rebalance its foreign relations so as to avoid being branded as China's client.

This context furnishes various reasons and advantages for Bangkok and New Delhi to build closer ties and a more robust strategic cooperation. First, it is necessary for Bangkok's economics-oriented foreign policy to seek friendly relations with countries, especially with economic powers of all camps. The changing power dynamics and rivalry between neighbours and close partners make it necessary for Thailand to maintain the image of a cooperative and neutral

³² IORA in 2011 announced six priority areas; (i) Maritime Safety and Security; (ii) Trade and Investment Facilitation; (iii) Fisheries Management; (iv) Disaster Risk Reduction; (v) Academic and S&T Cooperation; and (vi) Tourism Promotion and Cultural Exchanges. The organisation currently has 20 countries from Southeast Asia, South Asia, Middle East and Africa.

³³ John Lee, "China's Economic Engagement with Southeast Asia; Thailand", *Trends in Southeast Asia (1)*, Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2013, p.1.

country. Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) emphasises this quality of Thailand in its international campaign for a UNSC temporary membership in 2016.³⁴

Thailand's inclination for cooperation and neutrality fits well with New Delhi's continued adherence to a pragmatic policy of nonalignment, diversification, and strategic autonomy as a part of which it has engaged in a variety of key strategic partnerships with the US, China and Japan. Now India is another pole in an increasingly multi-polar world and the Indo-Pacific region and, thus, requires special attention. John Garver observes that the U.S.-China-India relations have become a strategic triangle in which "each other fears alignment of the other two against itself."³⁵ Attaching considerable significance to India is a must for smaller countries like Thailand situated in between this Indo-Pacific strategic triangle, especially since it will not affect the balance of their relations with the U.S. and China.

Indo-Thai economic and development partnerships are essential to their mutual interests in India-ASEAN economic integration. Thailand, because of its geographical location, is pivotal to India's Look East Policy and the prospects of its connectivity plan to the East are brighter after Myanmar's democratisation. The growing significance of the Thai partnership in Indian perspective can be seen in 2012 when Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra was invited as the chief guest in India's Republic Day Parade and several interconnectivity and economic cooperation projects which were conceived in the early 2000s become revitalised.³⁶ Prime Minister Manmohan Singh also paid a state visit to Thailand in May

³⁴ See Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Annual Report 2012*.

³⁵ John Garver, "The China-India-U.S. Triangle: Strategic Relations in the Post-Cold War Era", *The National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) Analysis* 13(2002) p. 6.

³⁶ The Trilateral Highway was initiated in 2002 while India expressed its support and interest in Dawei project in 2003 when Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee visited Thailand.

2013. Observers, hopeful and excited with the revived Indo-Thai relations, called the last two decades “the golden age of India-Thailand friendship”.³⁷

India and Thailand have complemented each other’s efforts to provide Myanmar with infrastructure and knowledge support. Road construction and improvement inside Myanmar as part of the Trilateral Highway is being largely funded by the two countries. To gain a firm footing in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indochina which can be another diplomatic battleground between India and China, India will require significant support from Thailand.

Beyond cooperation in Indochina, and in the BIMSTEC and MGC frameworks, Thailand also supports India’s engagement with the ASEAN and other regions. In 1996, while the US and Japan were reluctant to extend *ASEAN Regional Forum* (ARF) membership to India on account of its potential nuclearisation, Thailand and Singapore were said to have strongly supported India’s inclusion.³⁸ IORA and IONS are other initiatives where in Indian and Thai interests coincide as they provide opportunities for both to increase engagement and cooperation with countries in the Middle East and Africa. At the 13th Council of Ministers Meeting in November 2013, Thailand expressed its strong support for these forums and the willingness to play a more active role. Also in 2013, the Thai Government launched the Thai-Africa Initiative. As a part of the measure, Thailand offered to host the 4th Bi-Annual Meeting of the Committee of the Senior Officials in 2014 at IORA besides

³⁷ Arshis Mohan, “India and Thailand: New Horizon Beckon”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Publication, May 30, 2013, <http://www.mea.gov.in/in-focus-article.htm?21751/India+and+Thailand+New+Horizons+Beckon>

³⁸ The National Institute for Defence Studies, “Chapter 1: India’s Foreign and Security Policy: Expanding Roles and Influence in the Region and Beyond”, *East Asian Strategic Review 2013* Tokyo: *The Japan Times*, 2013, p. 34.

other conferences and workshops relevant to the interests of IORA and IONS.³⁹

Given their geostrategic positions in the region, the changing power dynamics in Asia and the existing inter-regional economic partnership, there is an urgent need for New Delhi and Bangkok to further strengthen their security and defence cooperation.⁴⁰

The untapped potential of defence cooperation

Defence diplomacy or “peacetime cooperative use of armed forces and related infrastructure as a tool of foreign and security policy”⁴¹ has been increasingly employed by India since the 1990s to increase ties with Southeast Asian countries, although there had been earlier links since at least the 1950s. Apparently, Thailand too employs the concept to strengthen relations with other ASEAN countries and balance its relations with great powers in the region while seeking to combine the advantages of both Western and Asian military approaches.⁴²

However, despite significant potential in the area and the need for India and Thailand to become strategic partners, both have not yet

³⁹ Press Releases: Statement by Advisor to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand at the 13th Council of Ministers Meeting of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, November 6, 2013, <http://www.mfa.go.th/main/en/media-center/14/40670-Statement-by-Advisor-to-the-Minister-of-Foreign-Af.html>

⁴⁰ See Arshis Mohan, “India and Thailand: New Horizon Beckon”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Publication, May 30, 2013, <http://www.mea.gov.in/in-focus-article.htm?21751/India+and+Thailand+New+Horizons+Beckon>

⁴¹ Andrew Cottey and Anthony Forster, *Reshaping Defense Diplomacy: New Roles for Military Cooperation and Assistance*, Adelphi Paper No. 365, Oxford: Oxford University Press for the International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2004, pp.5-6.

⁴² Directorate of Joint Intelligence, *Operation Plan FY 2011*, Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters.

capitalised on their defence diplomacy to boost ties in other dimensions. Without a serious traditional security threat (the conflict with Cambodia is about a minor border issue) and still maintaining a privileged defence alliance with the US, Thailand's defence sector does not receive much attention from the public and policy makers, be it for an augmentation of military capability or its utility in diplomatic domain. This has put Indo-Thai defence cooperation under the shadow of economic and development cooperation, which have overall taken the lead in bilateral relations.

Late and limited state of affairs

Before the start of an Indo-Thai coordinated naval patrol in 2005, Thailand's only substantive military engagement with India was the Thai Navy's participation in India-hosted multilateral exercise, MILAN, launched in 1995 and attended initially by three other littoral ASEAN countries. Unlike Singapore, whose substantive defence ties with India started in 1993 with a joint naval exercise and were followed by the conclusion of Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement 2005, Thailand has not managed to even secure an FTA with India. While other ASEAN members, including Singapore, have, for some years, enjoyed Indian visa exemption, Thailand, Malaysia and Brunei just recently received this privilege. The present Indo-Thai relations are overall good but not so close when compared to India's active relations with Singapore, Vietnam, Myanmar and Indonesia.

Because of sporadic domestic political turmoil and instability, Thailand has been quite slow in pushing for greater defence cooperation with India. In 2007, when Thai Prime Minister Surayud Chulanond visited India, the joint statement stated that both countries agreed to "expedite negotiations on pending defence and security-related agreements and MoU with a view to achieving their early conclusion and implementation."⁴³ Prime Minister Abhisit

⁴³ Sandeep Dikshit, "India to Step up Defence Ties with Thailand", *The Hindu*, June 26, 2007 <http://www.hindu.com/2007/06/27/01hdline.htm>

Vejjajiva reiterated these intentions during his state visit to India in 2011.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the MoU on Defence Cooperation was actually signed only in 2012, during Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's visit. The fact that it took more than five years to sign a simple defence agreement speaks volumes of the lethargy on both sides.

Defence cooperation in the naval domain has often been the exception to this state of affairs. This is understandable given the contiguousness of the two countries' maritime borders (delimited in a tripartite agreement with Burma in the early 1990s) and the proximity of India's Andaman and Nicobar archipelago to Thailand and the Malacca strait. Thailand has 894 kilometres of Andaman coastline, which rests within India's area of strategic influence. At present, the Royal Thai Navy and the Indian Navy have been conducting an annual Indo-Thai Joint Working Group (JWG) Meeting since 2003. In 2008 they started a bilateral Navy Staff Talk to cooperate in maritime security.

The two navies also engage in joint patrolling or Coordinated Patrol (CORPAT) in the Andaman Sea. The CORPAT has been taking place every six months since 2005. India and Thailand have also been sharing data in coordination with Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia on patrolling and other movements in the Strait of Malacca and the Andaman Sea. The RTN was one of the first participants in the biennial MILAN naval exercise being hosted by the Indian Navy (IN) since 1995. The exercise now draws naval forces from other 16 nations. The Indian Navy gave hydrography training to the Thai naval personnel in 2003. There are also frequent exchanges of port calls.

⁴⁴ "Joint Statement on the State Visit of Prime Minister of Thailand", Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India, April 5, 2011, <http://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dt1/4799/Joint+Statement+on+the+State+Visit+of+Prime+Minister+of+Thailand>

Beyond India and ASEAN member relations, RTN and IN also collaborate on training and participate in other security forums. For example, the two participate in the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium IONS, Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS), ARF Disaster and Relieve Exercise (DIREX), the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (*ReCAAP*), and Heads of Asian Coast Guard Agencies Meeting (*HACGAM*).

However, cooperation between the other services is still limited. The Royal Thai Army and Indian Army started an annual combined exercise in counterinsurgency under the code name “Maitree” in 2007. It is alternately hosted by India and Thailand. Air Force-to-Air Force staff talk was initiated in 2010 and the Thai military has also started to send one officer annually to study at India’s National Defence College in New Delhi.⁴⁵ In 2011, both countries agreed to establish a regular High-Level Dialogue on Defence Cooperation.

After the signing of an MoU on Defence Cooperation to facilitate “the ongoing defence cooperation (involving provision of training slots in each other’s institutions, exchanges at various levels, coordinated patrolling, joint exercises etc.)”⁴⁶, India and Thailand exchanged defence ministerial visits in 2012 and 2013. This was followed by agreements to increase anti-piracy cooperation, promote security of sea-lanes, cooperation between their Coast Guards and promote defence industry collaboration.⁴⁷ The 2012 MOU exhibits an effort to push Thailand-India defence cooperation into a new era of more substantive cooperation. But before all these recent

⁴⁵ Interview with Thai Naval Attaché in India on December 3, 2013.

⁴⁶ Ministry of External Affairs, “Agreements signed during the visit of Prime Minister of Thailand”, http://mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/18265_agreements_signed_01-25-2012.pdf

⁴⁷ Ajaya Kumar Das, “India’s Defence-Related Agreements With ASEAN States: A Timeline”, *India Review* 12 (2013), pp.133.

agreements are translated into practice, which is an ongoing effort, it is important to put India and Thailand's efforts in comparative perspective.

Table 1: Chronology of major events in India-Thailand defence cooperation

Year	Event
1995	Thailand with Singapore and Indonesia attends the first biennial MILAN multilateral naval exercise hosted by the Indian Navy.
2003	The Supreme Commander of the Thai Armed Forces, General Surayud Chulanont visits India.
2005	MoU for coordinated naval patrol.
2006	Indo-Thai Joint Working Group (Navy) initiated.
2007	Thai Prime Minister Surayud Chulanon visits India and requests that India and Thailand step up defence cooperation.
2007	Thai and Indian armies begin their first combined exercise "Maitree".
2008	Navy Staff Talks between the Thai and Indian navies initiated
2010	Air Force Staff Talks between the Thai and Indian air forces initiated
2011	During Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva's visit to India, both countries agree to establish a Defence Dialogue at the level of Ministry of Defence and discuss an MOU on Defence Cooperation.
2012	During Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's visit to India, Thailand and India sign an MOU on Defence Cooperation.
2012	Thai Defence Minister Sukhampol Suwannatat visits India.
2013	Indian Defence Minister A K Anthony visits Thailand, and both countries agree to increase anti-piracy cooperation, promote security of the seas, cooperation between their Coast Guards and defense industry collaboration.

India's defence cooperation with other countries in Southeast Asia

India signed an MoU or agreement on defence with seven of the 10 ASEAN countries before it did with Thailand. As about the remaining two countries - Brunei and Myanmar – the former is certainly not a key security actor and Myanmar's military already

has a strong informal tradition of cooperation with the Indian Army, including a 2004 agreement to promote regular visits of the armed forces, port calls and defence cooperation. Prior to that, India and Myanmar also conducted two joint counterinsurgency operations in the 1990s. Even Laos, the Philippines and Cambodia, which have minimal military cooperation with India, have forged relations in this field before Thailand (1997, 2006 and 2007 respectively).

Table 2: India's agreements on defence cooperation with Southeast Asian countries⁴⁸

Country	Agreements and years
Cambodia	Agreement on Defence Cooperation 2007.
Indonesia	Agreement on Cooperative Activities in the Field of Defence 2001.
Laos	Defence Cooperation Agreement 1997, Agreement on Defence Cooperation 2002.
Malaysia	MoU on Defence Cooperation 1993, Framework for India-Malaysia Strategic Partnership 2010.
Myanmar	Agreement on Cooperation between Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses and the Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies 2012 (May).
Philippines	Agreement on Defence Cooperation 2006.
Singapore	Defence Cooperation Agreement 2003, MoU for joint army exercise in India 2005, agreement on long term arrangement for conduct of joint training and exercises 2007, Bilateral Agreement on conduct of joint army training and exercises in India 2008, agreement to extend use of India's training and exercise facilities by Singapore Army 2013.
Thailand	MoU on Defence Cooperation 2012 (January).
Vietnam	Protocol on Defence Cooperation 1994, Defence Cooperation Agreement 2000, Framework of Comprehensive Cooperation 2003, Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership 2007, MOU on Defence Cooperation 2009.

⁴⁸ Ajaya Kumar Das (2013), "India's Defense-Related Agreements with ASEAN States: A Timeline, *India Review*, 12(3), pp.130-133.

Reports by the Indian Ministry of Defence in the last 11 years show that Indo-Thai defence cooperation lacks overall substance (see details in Annexure 1). Although the extracted data in Annexure 1 does not give the whole picture of India-ASEAN countries' defence collaboration, it roughly exhibits the areas in which Indian and Thai militaries have weak links.

For a country that shares a maritime border with India and is located in the Indo-Pacific, Indo-Thai bilateral defence collaboration is insignificant when compared with India's collaboration with Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and even Vietnam, a distant neighbour. India's defence ties with these countries involve more training slots offered by India, more high-level visits, and exchange of officials, more arms repair service and spare parts exchanges, and collaboration in defence industry and production. In comparison, India and Thailand exchange fewer high level visits and port calls. Almost no training collaboration or exchange of military students was reported until 2012. Also, there was barely any exchange of concrete defence supplies and only one bilateral combined exercise in which both can develop real operational advantages.

Thailand's defence cooperation with other Indo-Pacific actors

Looking at Thailand's defence relations with other significant actors in the Indo-Pacific power play, the under developed status of Indo-Thai defence relations becomes clearer.

The **US** remains Thailand's key defence partner by dint of several decades of close alliance. As an ally in the Manila Pact of 1954 and being assigned Non-NATO ally status in 2003, Thailand has received a lot of military assistance from the US for arms purchase and training under the Foreign Military Financing (FMF), Excess Defence Article (EDA) and International Military Education and Training (IMET) programmes. The FMF and IMET cost 1.18 and 1.3 million US dollars in 2012. Each year, around 40 military exercises are held by the military services of the two countries. Both also send military students to each other's military academies.

Thailand returns US favours by sending its troops to assist US missions in non-combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁴⁹

Thai-**Australia** military engagement also follows this format. Thailand and Australia conduct an astonishing number of annual bilateral and multilateral military exercises. These include nine bilateral exercises of all services and five multilateral exercises initiated by other countries and organisations. Thailand and Australia also exchange cadets to study in each other's military academies. Around 100 Thai military students and personnel receive scholarships to go for military training and study in the Australian military academies every year. Australia initiates many research projects to improve Thai military capacity in communication, surveillance, aircraft structure and GPS system etc. It is also helping the Thai Ministry of Defence to upgrade its IT systems. Both countries have several agreements to assist each other in logistics and arms acquisition.⁵⁰

Thailand and **China** had a close strategic and military partnership during the Cambodian war in the 1980s as both shared an interest in ending the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. High-level military visits have taken place since the 1980s. China started to supply small arms to Thailand in 1982, artillery guns and tanks in 1983, and from 1987 to 1992 Thailand concluded several arms deals when China offered very low "friendship prices."⁵¹ During the 2000's Thailand again made some arms purchases from China amounting to \$85 million. In 2006, Beijing extended a \$41 million credit to Thailand at a crucial time when Bangkok suffered a cut in US military aid as a part of sanctions after the military coup.

⁴⁹ See Emma Chanlett-Avery and Ben Dolven, "Thailand's Background and U.S. Relations", *Congressional Research Service*, December 20, 2013, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL32593.pdf>

⁵⁰ Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.mfa.go.th/main/th/world/75/26794>

⁵¹ Chulacheeb Chinawanno, "Rising China and Thailand's Policy of Strategic Engagement" in *Rise of China: Responses from Southeast Asia and Japan*, NIDS Joint Research Series 4, ed., Jun Tsunekawa, 2009, p.94.

In 1999, China and Thailand agreed to strengthen military consultation and start defence collaboration in research, exchange of technology as also humanitarian assistance experience. The cooperation was later upgraded in the 2007 Joint Action Plan on Thailand-China Strategic Cooperation. Thailand is the first ASEAN member to initiate an annual defence and security talk with China.⁵²In the early 2000s, both Thailand and China invited each other's observers to the military exercises held on their soil. This led China to participate as an observer in the elite US-Thailand hosted Cobra Gold exercise since 2003, and also to participate in the exercise's humanitarian relief drill in 2014. In 2005 China offered a three-month landmine-clearing programme and conducted a naval exercise with Thailand for the first time.

A regular biannual exercise between the two Armies started in 2007 under the code name Strike. After some hesitation from the Thai side, China has also managed to begin a biannual joint exercise of the Thai and Chinese Marines. As a result, the two countries held the amphibious landing exercise Blue Strike in 2010. Another Marine exercise was held in 2012 with the code name 'Blue Commando'. All of these exercises focus on non-traditional security operations like HADR and anti-terrorism. The Thai Marines also maintain some reservations about exposing some U.S. amphibious tactics to the PLA. So far, the two armed forces have been holding three regular bilateral military exercises. There have also been regular exchanges of many students and personnel, the exact numbers of whom are not revealed by both sides.⁵³ Recently, China also collaborated with Thailand in producing D'II-1G multiple-rocket launcher and expressed its hope "to expand its exercises with

⁵² Ernest Bower, "Expanding Military to Military Engagement: China and Thailand", *CogitAsia*, November 14, 2012 <http://cogitasia.com/expanding-military-to-military-engagement-china-and-thailand/>

⁵³ See Ian Storey, "China's Bilateral Defence Diplomacy in Southeast Asia", *Asian Security* 8, 2012.

Thailand to be at the same level as Cobra Gold” when its Defence Minister visited Thailand in May 2013.⁵⁴

Thailand also maintains good relations with **South Korea** and **Japan** mainly through joint participation in the U.S.-sponsored multilateral military exercises and trainings as well as in ASEAN-led forums. After signing a defence cooperation agreement in 2012, Thailand’s defence cooperation is set to increase with South Korea’s strong defence industry. Thailand has already purchased one frigate ship from Daewoo Ship Building and Marine Engineering and will collaborate with South Korea in building another frigate ship of the same type. It is also interested in buying the South Korean U-209 submarine.

Japan is Thailand’s close partner in economic and development cooperation, trade and investment. However, Japan-Thailand defence cooperation is deemed to be underdeveloped when compared with Japan’s cooperation with Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam and Philippines. At present, Thailand holds Navy-to-Navy staff talks with both South Korea and Japan. Several high level exchanges and visits were also held in the last two decades. Military cadets from Thailand are sent for higher education degrees in South Korea and Japan every year with funding support from the host country. Thailand is also the first country to send its students to the South Korean Air Force Academy after it started to receive international students in 1994.⁵⁵ There are also reciprocal cadet visits every year to the Thai defence colleges.

Persistent differences and obstacles

Thailand continues to have a close military-to-military engagement with its main strategic partners of the Cold War. When compared with its collaboration with the US, Australia and China, Thailand’s defence cooperation with India falls far short and below its potential.

⁵⁴ “Thailand-China to step up military ties”, *Bangkok Post*, May 8, 2013 <http://www.bangkokpost.com/lite/breakingnews/349040/favicon.ico>

⁵⁵ Royal Air Force Academy, http://www.rtafa.ac.th/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=455:2012-12-21-01-57-39&catid=38:2012-01-26-08-44-39

It even lags behind Thailand's defence relations with South Korea. When looking at where Bangkok posts its defence attachés abroad, and the twelve countries that host Thai attaches from all the three services, it can be seen that apart from its important ASEAN partners and Asian great powers like China and Japan, Thailand still gives more significance to old major and great Western powers over India (only two attaches) and Russia. This reflects the gap in its defence diplomacy policy and practice. The same can be said with India's posting of its defence attaches and advisers abroad, which still reflects its close ties with traditional friends and focus on the great powers of the Cold War days.

Table 3: Thailand's defence attaches abroad (2013)⁵⁶

Country	Army	Navy	Air Force
Australia	x	x	x
Brazil	x		
Cambodia	x	x	x
China	x	x	x
France	x	x	
Germany	x	x	x
India		x	x
Indonesia	x	x	x
Italy		x	
Japan	x	x	x
South Korea	x		x
Laos	x		x
Malaysia	x	x	x
Myanmar	x	x	x
Pakistan	x		
Philippines		x	x
Russia	x	x	
Singapore	x	x	x
South Africa	x		
Spain		x	x
Sweden			x
United Kingdom	x	x	x
United States	x	x	x
Vietnam	x	x	x

⁵⁶ List of Thai Defence Attaches in Foreign Countries and UN Headquarters, New York, Year 2013, Office of External Affairs, Directorate of Joint Intelligence, Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters.

Table 4: India's defence attaches in ASEAN + key Asia-Pacific actors (2013)⁵⁷

Country	Army	Navy	Air Force
Australia		x	
Brunei			
Cambodia			
China	x(2)		
Indonesia		x	
Japan	x		
Laos			
Malaysia		x	
Myanmar	x	x	
Philippines			
Russia	x	x	x
Singapore		x	
South Korea	x		
Thailand			x
United Kingdom	x	x	x
United States	x	x	x

Within Southeast Asia, China has its closest military tie with Thailand, which happens to be one of the U.S. allies and still maintains a close military engagement with the superpower. Since the 2000s, Beijing has tried to increase defence cooperation with countries in this region. It has been attracting military officers from Southeast Asia to several of its educational institutes, including the National Defence University (NDU). From 2000-2010, its arms supplies to countries in the region amounted to \$394 million. However, other than Thailand, China's agreements on defence cooperation with countries in Southeast Asia remarkably lack substance. They are not being developed upon and are confined to the domain of non-traditional security. So far, China only has one military exercise per year with Thailand⁵⁸, Singapore and Indonesia.

⁵⁷ As of March 24, 2014, compiled from Indian Embassy websites in respective countries.

⁵⁸ Exercise Strike and Blue Strike take place every two years; Strike in odd years, and Blue Strike in even years. The Blue Commando in 2012 has no sequence yet.

Thailand rarely had defence agreements prior to 2012, and in the last two decades, it were those Southeast Asian countries who approached India for defence cooperation deals, the lack of substantive engagement between Thai and Indian militaries can be seen as a result of long mutual neglect. However, unlike China, India with its benign image does not have to limit its military engagement to the domain of non-traditional security. It does not face reservations to conduct military exercises with countries which have strong military ties with the U.S. as India itself conducts most of its international military exercises and has many arms purchase deals with the U.S.

When it comes to defence cooperation with foreign countries, Thailand still looks at practical aspects such as sourcing arms and military education and training from the militarily advanced countries. The existing ties with the Western block can meet most of Thailand's defence demands. However, it recently started to focus on building its own defence industry to substitute large arms import and become militarily self-reliant.

The Thai Defence Technology Institute (DTI) was established in 2009 to take the main responsibility of research, industry support and coordination between different production units and companies. Last year, the DTI in collaboration with the Faculty of Engineering, King Mongkut's University of Technology (KMUTT), launched a Master Degree in Defence Industry. In addition to the recent agreements made with countries like South Korea, France, Israel, Italy and India, Thailand is also in discussion with many arms exporting countries such as Russia, Ukraine and Sweden for defence cooperation agreements. They are also meant to further collaboration in the area of defence industry.

On the other hand, for India, security interest seems to be the main criterion in building defence and strategic ties. Countries like Myanmar, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia have relatively better defence ties with India because of their strategic significance. India needs to maintain healthy relations with Myanmar to control cross-border insurgency and check China's influence in

the neighbourhood. Vietnam can be used to counter China in its own backyard, while cooperation with Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore is vital for patrolling the Strait of Malacca which India deems strategically significant. In contrast, India has been less proactive in expanding its defence relations with Thailand, Laos and Cambodia with which it promotes robust ties only for future cooperation outside the strategic domain.

According to Pankaj K. Jha, these countries are peripheral players and India has not primarily engaged them because they are perceived to be within China's sphere of influence.⁵⁹ This Indian view about Thailand is not only inaccurate, but also surprising because it ignores how the US, China and other major powers like Australia, Japan and Korea all look at Thailand as the main facilitator of their influence in the strategic Indochina region. This may either reflect India's reluctance to become an Asian power or its material constraints in implementing policy. New Delhi's civilian establishment generally allows the Indian military to lead the way in building military to military relationships with foreign countries. This can be another reason why India concentrates its defence diplomacy on pre-emptive defence.⁶⁰

Path dependency and a lack of shared security and military interests are the main reasons behind the underdeveloped Indo-Thai defence ties. Seven decades of healthy India-Thailand relations fundamentally focused on a low key politics of economic, cultural and educational exchanges. They continue to govern Indo-Thai relations until today. India and Thailand maintained amicable relations throughout the Cold War, even when India recognised the Vietnamese-installed government in Cambodia in 1979⁶¹, and

⁵⁹ Pankaj Kumar Jha, "India's Defence Diplomacy in Southeast Asia", *Journal of Defence Studies* 5, 2011, p. 58.

⁶⁰ David Brewster, "India's Defence Strategy and the India-ASEAN Relationship", *India Review* 12, 2013, p.152.

⁶¹ High-level visits, trade and educational exchange continued uninterrupted after 1979.

successfully concluded a maritime boundary agreement in 1993. Thailand does not pose a threat to India as its strong bonds with the US neutralise its close relations with China. But this status quo will also not support an Indian strategy to counter China.

Looking ahead: Acting out the potential

This paper offers a quantitative analysis of various sectors in the Indo-Thai defence relationship over the last years, and places this against a comparative analysis of New Delhi's and Bangkok's defence relations with other relevant global and regional actors.

It shows that given the absence of any conflicts, the geographical proximity, and overlapping security interests in the naval domain, the defence cooperation between India and Thailand remains surprisingly underdeveloped. From the Indian side, Thailand continues to rank low in terms of priorities in Southeast Asia. And while Thailand has regular military cooperation with the US, Australia, China, South Korea and Japan, particularly in the area of educational exchanges, it has invested little in reaching out to India to develop a similar relationship.

This mutual neglect and underdeveloped defence relation is anchored in a history of diverging strategic priorities and alliances during the Cold War, India remaining formally non-aligned and closer to the Soviet block, while Thailand joined the American alliance system in Asia. While the paper identifies this historical background, it also shows how the collapse of the Soviet Union, the unipolar dominance of the US and the rise of China have led a slow redefinition of strategic priorities in New Delhi and Bangkok.

With a changing security scenario in Southeast Asia and, more broadly, in the larger Indo-Pacific region, both countries have begun to diversify their security partnerships, while seeking to preserve a sustainable balance and avoid becoming entangled in a zero-sum position between the US and China.

For India, Thailand presents itself as a reliable security partner in the naval domain, a crucial hub to increase its influence in Myanmar

and across Indochina, and an indirect way to communicate and cooperate with the US and other treaty allies across Asia. For Thailand, beyond the immediate importance as a maritime neighbour, India is of great importance if Bangkok wishes to decrease reliance on the US even without falling into the orbit of Chinese influence and dependence.

For both countries, the central strategy is therefore one of diversification of the traditional set of security partners in response to a rapidly changing security context, in particular the rise of China and the persistent but relatively declining influence of the US.

Against this background, this paper argues that the underdeveloped defence relationship is untenable and that this must be corrected. For example, greater military contact and educational exchanges between both armed forces would allow Thailand and India to understand each other's strategic thinking and increase necessary inter-operability for a future strategic partnership. Thailand needs to increase the number of officers studying in Indian military academies as it did with China. Since English is the main medium in Indian military education, Thai officers do not have to face the language barrier they often face in China.

At present, both Navies cooperate and train together mostly in multilateral settings. This increases familiarity only on a limited level as there are several participants. For both armed forces to get closer, bilateral exercise and cooperation should be increased. Although, Thailand regularly receives training from the U.S. and Australia, it can follow other countries like Singapore to increase cadet exchange and seek more training from India in areas of its expertise like jungle warfare, high altitude combat, hydrography, diving operations and coast guard operations. Thailand has a long coastline but a relatively small coast guard, so India's recently established Coast Guard Academy could be of interest for Thailand to send its personnel for long-term training.

Non-traditional maritime security in the Indian Ocean is a key domain in which both countries can find convergent interests in preserving natural resources, security of coastlines, and anti-piracy

missions. Apart from collaboration in IORA and IONS, India and Thailand should strengthen bilateral cooperation on many of the issues discussed in these multilateral forums.

Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Laos and Singapore have requested India's assistance in training pilots and repair and spare part support for their Russian made aircrafts. The Russian link had been missing in Indo-Thai defence cooperation but as Thailand increasingly looks to Russia for defence supplies while India procures more defence items from the U.S. and other Western countries, new opportunities will arise for both to exchange spare parts and repair services in the future. Finally, India can share its experience in building up its defence industry, especially in shipbuilding, as Thailand seeks to access low-cost technology and skills in order to develop its own capabilities.

Given decades of mutual neglect and their increasing geostrategic convergence in the new Asian security system, these are only a few of the many possibilities for India and Thailand to act out the immense potential of their bilateral defence relationship.

Annexure 1: India's military interaction with Southeast Asian countries (2001-12)

(Compiled from all Annual Reports of India's Ministry of Defence, 2001-12, except 2009-10)

NAVY

Country	Joint patrols	Staff talks	Bilateral exercises	Multilateral exercises	Training offered by India (number of trainees)	Port calls (Total: Year + number)
Cambodia				MILAN	2002 (2), 2004(2)	2: 2003(1), 2011(1)
Indonesia	INDINDO CORPAT since 2002	Yes		MILAN, (2011) ARF Disaster Relief Exercise (DIREX)	2002 (offered by Indonesia), 2004 (3)	4: 2003(2), 2011(2)
Malaysia		Yes		MILAN, DIREX, WPNS SEA EXERCISE 2007	2002 (9), 2002-3 Hydrography, 2004(3)	7: 2002(2), 2003(1), 2011(4)
Myanmar		Yes		MILAN	Hydrography 2003, 2004(3)	4: 2003(2), 2004(1), 2011(1)
Singapore		Yes	SIMBEX, and Anti-submarine warfare exercise since 1994	DIVEX 2004, DIREX, WPNS SEA EXERCISE 2007, MILAN, Malabar	2004(1)	9: 2002(2), 2004(2), 2006(2), 2007(1), 2011(2)
Thailand	CORPAT since 2005	Yes		MILAN, DIREX, WPNS SEA EXERCISE 2007	Hydrography course 2003	2: 2003(1), 2004(1)
Vietnam			Combined exercise between marine enforcement agencies 2011	MILAN, DIREX	Hydrography course 2003, 2004(4)	7: 2003(2), 2004(1), 2007(2), 2011(2)
Philippines			Combined coast guard exercises, 2011	MILAN, DIREX		7: 2002(1), 2003(2), 2007(2), 2011(2)

AIR FORCE

Country	Air Force Staff Talks	Exercises	High level visits (Total: Year + number)	Training offered by India
Cambodia			2: 2007(2)	2002
Indonesia	Yes		6: 2003(2), 2007(3), 2011(1)	2002-3,
Laos			2: 2003(2)	2003, 2006
Malaysia	4 th Air Force Staff talk in 2011		8: 2003(1), 2004(1), 2006(2), 2007(2), 2012(2)	2002, 2003, agreement to have air force personnel trained by India For operating Su-30 MKM in 2008
Myanmar			11: 2002(1), 2003(2), 2004(2), 2006(1), 2007(3), 2011(2)	2002, 2003
Singapore	Since 2007	Annual exercise (SINDEX) at Kalaikunda since 2004	12: 2002(1), 2003(2), 2004(3), 2006(1), 2007(4), 2011(1)	
Thailand	Since 2011		3: 2003(2), 2012(1)	
Vietnam			8: 2003(2), 2006(2), 2007(2), 2011(2)	
Philippines			3: 2002(2), 2003(1)	

ARMY

Countries	Staff Talks	Exercises	Training offered by India
Cambodia			
Indonesia	Yes	Garuda Shakti	2011(Centre for United Nations Peacekeeping (CUNPK))
Laos			2003, 2006 (all services training team)
Malaysia	2 nd staff talk 2011		2011(CUNPK)
Myanmar			Army School of Physical Training 2002, 2006 MOU on Army bilateral training
Singapore	Since 2006	Artillery Exercise (Agni Warrior), Armoured Exercise (Bold Kurukshetra), Desert Camel Safari 2003	Cadet training NDA 2002, paramilitary forces at Counter-Insurgency and Jungle Warfare (CIJW) 2002, 2003, 2004
Thailand		Maitree since 2007	
Vietnam		Desert Camel Safari 2002	2011(CUNPK)
Philippines			

OTHER DEFENCE RELATIONS

Country	Officer, youth and cadet exchanges	Arms transfer + defence industry cooperation	Defence and strategic dialogues
Cambodia			
Indonesia	- Indonesian Naval Command & Staff College Course, Jakarta (2002-3)	- Service and spare part supplies for MiG-29 fighters.	- Service and spare part supplies for MiG-29 fighters.
Laos			
Malaysia		- Maintenance and repairs for MiG-29N - OFB, BEML branch opened in Malaysia and got mining contract in 2007, - HAL maintenance of Su-30MKM	- 4th Malaysia-India Defence Committee, 2002 (MIDCOM held since 1993), - 2011 bilateral cooperation in maritime search and rescue, marine oil spill response and combating crimes at sea
Myanmar		- India sells 2 light transport aircrafts in 2005, 10 armoured vehicles, 10 tanks and 10 towed guns in 2006	
Singapore	2002(15), 2003(20), 2004(43), 2006(86), 2007(40), 2011(more than 22)	- MOU with DRDO for collaboration in field of joint R&D project in Laser technology and Light Weight Towed Array technology in 2007	- Defence Policy Dialogue (7th in 2011) - Defence Technology Steering Committee for R&D cooperation (7th in 2011) - India-Singapore Defence Working Group (6th in 2012)
Thailand		- Sale of ammunition (OFB) and military vehicle (BEML)	- 4th INDOTHAI (Navy) Joint Working Group (JWG) Meeting, 2007. - Since 2011 Defence Dialogue at the level of Ministry of Defence (MoD)
Vietnam	2002(21), 2003(22), 2004 (15), 2006(15), 2007(15), 2011(number n/a)	- Midhani (Niobium alloy) 2002 m. - Certain naval spares were gifted to the Vietnamese navy in 2004 and 2007 - Engine, avionic and radar supplies for MiG-21, Assistance to construct OPV 2011	- Security dialogue since 2003
Philippines			JGCC started in 2012

After 67 years of diplomatic relations and two decades of collaboration in connecting India with Southeast Asia in January of 2012, Thailand and India finally signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Defence Cooperation. This effort to deepen defence and military ties between the two countries emerged relatively late when compared with those between India and most other Southeast Asian countries. Prior to 2012, Indo-Thai defence relations remained largely unaddressed and underdeveloped. Despite having established military engagements in the area of exercises, joint patrol and a defence dialogue under both bilateral and multilateral frameworks, the existing defence cooperation has lacked substance. This does not correspond with the increasing significance of the India-Thailand partnership and Asia's changing power and security dynamics. From merely focusing on economic and mutual security interests, Thailand-India relations have in recent years expanded to recognise each other's strategic significance. As a part of defence diplomacy, both sides now need to strengthen their military ties to complement their growing engagement in other dimensions and also fortify their changing foreign policy and security position in the region. Domestic demand is also there for each side to seek deeper defence collaboration with foreign countries in order to increase their military capacity and effectiveness and also defence industry. It remains to be seen to what extent and in what domain Thailand and India can manage to push their defence relations forward to explore this potential.



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