

# Strategic Culture and Thailand's Response to Vietnam's Occupation of Cambodia, 1979–1989

A Cold War Epilogue

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Thailand's Cold War role is usually seen through the prism of its support for the U.S. wars in Indochina. Serving as an unsinkable aircraft carrier, Thailand hosted as many as 48,000 U.S. troops for operations in neighboring Laos and Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> In exchange, Thailand received U.S. military assistance on a massive scale. From 1951 to 1971, this assistance totaled \$935 million, equivalent to 50 percent of the Thai military's own budget for the same period.<sup>2</sup> U.S. military aid allowed construction of a deep-water port at Sattahip and an airbase at nearby Utapao supporting B-52 missions from 1967.<sup>3</sup>

But after President Richard Nixon's enunciation of the Guam Doctrine in 1969 and the fall of Saigon in 1975, U.S. troops departed from Thailand and Indochina. Most were gone by 1976.<sup>4</sup> This separation was more than physical. A recently declassified intelligence assessment reveals that neighboring Australia saw the United States as increasingly detached from the arena: "since the Vietnam War, the United States has not behaved as though it had any important national interest at stake in Indochina."<sup>5</sup> This suggests that,

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1. Donald Kirk, *Wider War: The Struggle for Cambodia, Thailand and Laos* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), pp. 179, 181.

2. Chai-Anan Samudavanija, Kusuma Snitwongse, and Suchit Bunbongkarn, *From Armed Suppression to Political Offensive: Attitudinal Transformation of Thai Military Officers since 1976* (Bangkok: Institute of Security and International Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1990), p. 21. Unless otherwise noted, all dollar amounts are in U.S. dollars.

3. Kirk, *Wider War*, p. 180.

4. Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 196.

5. Cabinet Memorandum, No. 5, "Vietnam's Invasion of Kampuchea: Chinese and Soviet Policies and Their Implications," Office of National Assessments, 2 February 1979, pp. 5–6, in National Archives of Australia.

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for the last decade and a half of the Cold War, Thailand's security was, much more than previously, a matter predominantly for Thailand, not for others.

Vietnam's 1979 invasion and occupation of Cambodia was, therefore, a serious test of Thailand's capacity to manage its own defense.<sup>6</sup> Although the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Cambodian peace process, and the spread of high economic growth across Southeast Asia were only ten years away, this was hardly apparent at the time. Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia came less than four years after the defeat of the global superpower in South Vietnam in April 1975 and the establishment of the Communist Lao People's Democratic Republic in December 1975.<sup>7</sup> Vietnamese troops were then less than 300 kilometers from Bangkok at a time when Thailand was struggling to quell its own Communist insurgency. Nothing, it appeared, could contain the influence of Communist Vietnam, China, and the Soviet Union. Against this backdrop, the invasion's removal of the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime was small comfort.

Following the invasion, Vietnamese forces occupying Cambodia significantly degraded Thailand's border security. Vietnamese troops crossed into Thailand in pursuit of Khmer Rouge and other rebel Cambodian forces, shelled Thai border towns, and forced refugees onto Thai territory.<sup>8</sup> Despite these incursions and the credible threat of full-scale invasion, Thailand did relatively little to strengthen its defense. Few additional forces were assigned, and fortifications of its eastern border remained minimal. Although the Thais did make additional investments in conventional arms, they paid little attention to developing the doctrine, training, and preparedness needed to maximize the effectiveness of the purchases. In contrast, Thailand's diplomacy and coalition-building were comprehensive, active, and effective. How can that anomaly be explained?

In this article, I explore Thailand's military response to Vietnam's invasion and occupation of Cambodia from 1979 to 1989. Although some scholars have retrospectively assessed the Thai political and diplomatic response to this crisis, there has not been an equivalent analysis of Thailand's defense

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6. At the time of the invasion, Cambodia was called "Democratic Kampuchea." After the invasion it became the People's Republic of Kampuchea. For simplicity, this article uses "Cambodia" throughout.

7. Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, *Power in Indo China since 1975* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1981), pp. 21–35.

8. Besides the Khmer Rouge, other resistance forces included the Khmer People's National Liberation Front and the United National Front for an Independent Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia.

planning during this period.<sup>9</sup> The article seeks to fill this gap in the literature by drawing on Thai-language sources, including parliamentary records, unpublished theses, and Thai military journals, as well as declassified Western intelligence assessments. The analysis here allows for a fresh, richer, more holistic assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of Thailand's management of the defense aspects of the crisis.

The strategic culture that developed in Thailand from the late nineteenth century onward influenced the politico-military choices that Thailand's security elites made in the 1980s. Drawing from the lessons learned in dealing with colonialism in the later nineteenth century, Thai elites sought to meet the security threat through skillful management of international relationships. Thai elites also focused on the importance of internal unity as a way to protect against external threats. Furthermore, Thai strategic culture had long encompassed the Thai military's organizational culture, two key aspects of which—royalism and factionalism—contributed to inefficient military planning.

The article uses an analytically eclectic approach, combining strategic culture with other theoretical concepts to explain the empirical record. The article shows that, at the level of *politico-military decision-making*, Thailand's strategic culture—in the form of politico-military narratives—influenced policymakers, shaping a response that emphasized the building of an international coalition over military capability. At the level of military operational planning, Thailand's strategic culture—in the form of *military organizational culture*—contributed to the inefficiency of Thai military planning by limiting the development of a coherent and suitable military doctrine. This explanation of military-operational planning also considers Thai civil-military relations and organizational theory.<sup>10</sup>

At the politico-military level, security elites' behavior was consistent with the imperatives of the politico-military narratives embedded in Thailand's

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9. An in-depth reflection on Thai diplomacy can be found in John Funston, "Thailand's Diplomacy on Cambodia: Success of Realpolitik," *Asian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 6 No. 1 (June 1998), pp. 17–30. Most scholars who have written on the military aspects did so while the crisis was still unfolding. For example, see Muthiah Alagappa, *The National Security of Developing States: Lessons from Thailand* (Dover, MA: Auburn House Publishing Company, 1987); Surachart Bumrungsuk, "The Thai Military and the Indochinese War: A Look at Some Issues," in *Rabop thahan Thai botsueksa kongthap nai boriptha thang sangkhom kanmueang* (Bangkok: Institute of Security and International Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1987), pp. 111–134; and Surachart Bumrungsuk, "Foreign Weapons Procurement of the Thai Armed Forces: Problems and Background," in *Rabop thahan Thai*, pp. 17–18.

10. Peter Katzenstein and Rudra Sil describe analytical eclecticism as the approach employed by those who "draw on causal mechanisms and processes from multiple analytical perspectives." Rudra Sil and Peter J. Katzenstein, *Beyond Paradigms: Analytical Eclecticism in the Study of World Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 59. My explanation is analytically eclectic because it goes beyond Thai strategic culture to incorporate civil-military relations, a product of domestic political culture.

strategic culture. Thai policymakers made considerable efforts to build an international coalition to offset the threat from Vietnam, by renewing Thailand's alliance with the United States, developing a new quasi-alliance with China, and mobilizing a diplomatic strategy based on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Nationally, Thai leaders emphasized unity through civil defense and paramilitary programs and thus sought to bolster these formations rather than develop a purely conventional military response.

However, problems emerged at the levels of military strategy and implementation. Thailand did not make additional resources available to its paramilitary and civil defense organizations. Instead, funding for conventional military forces was increased. However, leaders neglected to develop a coherent, joint doctrine to direct the increased investment in conventional weaponry. This led to poor decision-making, such as purchases of strategically ineffective quantities of F-16 combat aircraft. Few resources were shifted to the eastern border or to the development of fortifications to impede a large-scale Vietnamese incursion. Analysis of the clashes with Vietnamese forces suggests that Thai forces were poorly prepared.

Thai military organizational culture can help explain the military planning response. The royalism of the Thai military fostered a view that any central government (particularly, an elected central government) was transient and lacked legitimacy in comparison with the armed forces and monarchy. This mindset limited the capacity of Thailand's central government to direct efforts to improve military operational planning, doctrinal development, training, and preparedness. The factionalism of the Thai military, in turn, spurred a focus on political ambition and political involvement, diverting the attention of high-ranking officials away from operational issues and further weakening the authority of the central government to direct the military. Additionally, security elites were prepared to accept the substandard military-strategic response because of their confidence that Thailand's diplomatic and coalition-building efforts would be more effective.

In this way, Thailand's strategic culture shaped an "accommodative response." Though ineffective in military operational terms, the response was strategically successful and accommodated the realities of Thailand's internal political and external security situations. During the 1979 security crisis, as in previous ones, Thailand accommodated a diminution of its sovereignty. In the past, this might have meant accepting the loss of territory or granting extraterritorial rights to foreigners. In the waning years of the Cold War, it meant accepting Vietnamese incursions into and shelling of Thai border areas.

This article argues that Thailand survived the last phase of the Cold War by calling on institutionalized habits and patterns of thought. These had

developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when Thai elites successfully managed the existential threat posed by colonialism. Thailand's politico-military narratives meant that, at the politico-military level, the kingdom adjusted rapidly to its fading alliance with the United States. However, at the military operational level, the organizational culture of the Thai military was an obstacle to the military doctrinal reform needed to allow the country to face a significant conventional threat. Thailand's experience also has broader applicability to other states in the Asia Pacific, such as India and China, whose historical experiences of colonization and subordinate status in relation to the West continued to shape their foreign policy throughout the Cold War and after.<sup>11</sup> It also has applicability to states such as Indonesia whose civil-military relations prevent strong civil control and military reform.<sup>12</sup>

### **Thailand's Confrontation with Vietnam from 1979 to 1989**

At the end of the 1970s, Vietnam's patience for Khmer Rouge attacks on its communities was exhausted.<sup>13</sup> In December 1978 Vietnamese troops massed and, at the end of the month, attacked Cambodia on five fronts from the northeast to the south.<sup>14</sup> The Pol Pot regime was deposed on 7 January 1979.<sup>15</sup> By mid-January 1979 Angkor Wat and the northwestern towns of Battambang and Siem Reap, only 60 kilometers from the Thai border, were under Vietnamese control.<sup>16</sup>

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11. On the legacy of colonialism for China and India, see, for example, Manjari Chatterjee Miller, *Wronged by Empire: Post-Imperial Ideology and Foreign Policy in India and China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013). On subaltern states and international relations, see Mohammed Ayob, "Inequality and Theorizing in International Relations: The Case for Subaltern Realism," *International Studies Review*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Autumn 2002), pp. 27–48.

12. See, for example, Salim Said, *Soeharto's Armed Forces: Problems of Civil Military Relations in Indonesia* (Jakarta: Pustaka Sinar Harapan, 2006); and Mark Beeson, "Civil-Military Relations in Indonesia and the Philippines: Will the Thai Coup Prove Contagious," *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (April 2008), pp. 454–477.

13. Over two years these attacks destroyed 25 townships and 96 villages, displacing 257,000 Vietnamese. Grant Evans and Kelvin Rowley, *Red Brotherhood at War* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 107.

14. "80,000–90,000 VM troops 25–35 km border," *Bangkok Post*, 10 December 1978, p. 3; "VN Shifts Troops in Laos to Khmer Border," *Bangkok Post*, 10 December 1978, p. 2; and "Rebels Claim Major Gains in Cambodia—2 More Provinces Fall," *Bangkok Post*, 6 January 1979, p. 1.

15. King C. Chen, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979: Issues, Decisions, and Implications* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1987), p. 36.

16. "Battambang, Siem Reap Fall to Rebels," *Bangkok Post*, 14 January 1979, p. 4.

As early reports of the Vietnamese incursions filtered through, the initial reactions in Thailand were surprisingly nonchalant. The chief of the Thai army, General Prem Tinsulanonda, said he was “optimistic that Phnom Penh would not fall to the Vietnamese.”<sup>17</sup> As the magnitude of the invasion became clearer, official Thai statements remained muted, suggestive of a government struggling to come to terms with the sudden deterioration in events. Prime Minister Kriangsak Chomanan expressed hope “that neither Vietnamese troops nor the Cambodian guerrillas would try to set foot on Thai soil.”<sup>18</sup>

International responses were less sanguine. In calling for a united ASEAN response, the Singapore government exclaimed, “what is happening in Cambodia today could happen to us tomorrow . . . and Thailand is on the front-line.”<sup>19</sup> The views of Western governments were somber. Australia’s Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee of Cabinet concluded that “the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea had created an extremely dangerous situation which had the potential for expansion into a war involving the Soviet Union.”<sup>20</sup>

Having successfully established control of the capital and subdued the majority of the former regime’s military forces, Vietnam installed the People’s Republic of Kampuchea under Heng Samrin at the end of January 1979.<sup>21</sup> On 18 February, Heng Samrin and the Vietnamese Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng signed the Vietnamese-Kampuchean Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation, which “legitimized the Vietnamese military occupation and operation in Kampuchea.”<sup>22</sup> However, fighting continued against the remaining Khmer Rouge elements sheltering along the Thai-Cambodian border, and Vietnam was compelled to maintain six divisions of troops along the 734-kilometer border with Thailand.<sup>23</sup> Over the next decade, their presence had a significant impact on Thai border security in three main ways: border incursions, stray artillery bombardment, and refugee flows.

Large-scale Vietnamese incursions into Thai territory occurred frequently in the 1980s, sometimes with lethal consequences. On 23 June 1980, for

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17. “Talks May Herald Summit on Indochina,” *Bangkok Post*, 6 December 1978, p. 1; and “Prince Sihanouk Goes to Peking—Kriangsak,” *Bangkok Post*, 7 January 1979, p. 3.

18. “Government Ready ‘For Any Eventuality,’” *Bangkok Post*, 9 January 1979, p. 1.

19. See the official statement in *Bangkok Post*, 13 December 1978, p. 1.

20. Cabinet Minute, Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee, Government of Australia, 5 February 1979, in National Archives of Australia.

21. Chen, *China’s War with Vietnam*, p. 38.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Jim Wolf, “Thailand’s Security and Armed Forces,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 2 November 1985, pp. 978–986.

example, Vietnamese soldiers attacked the Thai village of Ban Non Mark Mun, about 250 kilometers east of Bangkok near the border of Cambodia. According to the Thai government, the clash left 22 Thai and 75 Vietnamese soldiers dead.<sup>24</sup> In March 1985, a Vietnamese attack in Surin Province resulted in about 30 additional Thai losses. That same year, Vietnamese forces occupied parts of Trat Province for more than six weeks before being dislodged.<sup>25</sup> In 1988, Vietnamese soldiers bunkered in hills as far as three kilometers into Thai territory, seeking to disrupt Khmer Rouge forces using the Chong Bok pass in northeastern Ubon Ratchathani Province as a route into Cambodia. In the effort to dislodge the Vietnamese, at least 45 and possibly as many as 200 Thai troops were killed.<sup>26</sup>

Vietnamese artillery shells and gunfire frequently fell on Thai territory, often near or within inhabited villages. In the 1985 dry season alone, shells fell on Thai soil 200 times, including fourteen barrages that fell as far as seventeen kilometers inland.<sup>27</sup> The incidents continued in 1988, as recounted by the Thai member of parliament for the province of Sisaket:

on 8 August 1988 at about 7.20 pm Vietnamese soldiers fired about five artillery shells into the villages of Sao Thongchai, subdistrict Sao Thongchai, district Kantonlak. The first shell landed about fifty meters south of the village and on 9 August 1988 at about 10.10 am Vietnamese bullets strayed into the area of the school of Sao Thongchai, just five meters away from a school building causing damage to the building. Due only to luck, on that day the school was not open and consequently, staff and students were not injured.<sup>28</sup>

Vietnamese troops also forced significant numbers of Cambodian refugees into Thailand, adding to the significant number of refugees who had already arrived from Vietnam after the fall of Saigon in 1975. By early 1980, as many as one million Cambodians were displaced along either side of the border.<sup>29</sup>

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24. Statement by General Prem Tinsulanonda, Prime Minister of Thailand, Thai Parliamentary Records, "Khrang thi 6/2423 Wan Phruehatsabodi thi 26 Mithunayon 2423 Rueang Duan Khanarat-montri Kho Thaelong Khorthetcharing thi Koet Khuen Kiaokap Sathankan Chaidae," pp. 247–267.

25. Sukhumbhand Paribatra, "Military Management and Thailand's Defense," in *Rabop thaban Thai*, p. 75.

26. "The Battle of Chong Bok," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Vol. 136, No. 25 (18 June 1987), p. 19.

27. Wolf, "Thailand's Security and Armed Forces," p. 978.

28. A question from Khun Chamnong Photisaro, Member for Sri Saket, concerning the security and safety of life and property of the people in the border region of Sri Saket, Thai Parliamentary Records, "Raingam Kanprachum Sapha Phuthaen Ratdon Khrang thi 16/2531," pp. 322–330.

29. Thomas A. Marks, "Thailand—The Threatened Kingdom," *Conflict Studies*, No. 115 (January/February 1980), p. 7.

As late as 1988, the Thai assistant foreign minister put the number of refugees fleeing war and residing in Thailand at 334,106.<sup>30</sup>

Although Thailand was the frontline state, the geopolitical implications of Vietnam's invasion were of considerable concern to other neighboring countries, which were determined to resist the permanent incorporation of Cambodia into Vietnam's sphere of influence. China and ASEAN were especially active in opposing continued occupation and conflict.

Firmly opposed to the growth of Vietnamese power, the People's Republic of China (PRC) took significant steps to contain Vietnam's Cambodian ambitions. China sent 100,000 troops into northern Vietnam on 17 February 1979, seeking to "teach Vietnam a lesson."<sup>31</sup> Losses on the Vietnamese side may have numbered as high as 30,000 and on the Chinese side, 26,000.<sup>32</sup> Although the invasion did not achieve the PRC's objective of forcing Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia, the demonstration of China's willingness to use force limited the number of troops Vietnam could divert to the Cambodian theater.<sup>33</sup> The PRC also moved to channel arms and supplies to Khmer Rouge guerrillas in Thailand, thus extending the life of the Cambodian insurgency and significantly increasing the costs of Vietnam's occupation.

ASEAN, together with China and the United States, ensured that Vietnam's actions were denied legitimacy. ASEAN linked Vietnam's behavior to Soviet grand strategy. The group used the United Nations (UN) to internationalize the conflict; for example, by inviting UN observers to monitor border violations and inviting the UN General Assembly to issue resolutions on the conflict.

Throughout the crisis Thailand was the foreign policy linchpin, mediating between China and ASEAN. Thai leaders stressed the principle of non-intervention and pushed relentlessly for the complete withdrawal of Vietnamese troops. Prime Minister Kriangsak Chomanan led this effort until April 1980, when he was succeeded by General Prem Tinsulanonda and his foreign minister, Air Chief Marshal Siddhi Savetsila. During their eight-year tenure, Prem and Siddhi overcame two challenges. One was assembling

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30. Thai Parliamentary Records, "Raingan Kanprachum Sapha Phuthaen Ratdon Khrang thi 16/2531," pp. 322-330.

31. Chen, *China's War with Vietnam*, p. 105.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 105, 114.

33. China maintained as many as twelve divisions along its border with Vietnam after the 1979 attack. Michael R. Chambers, "The Chinese and the Thais Are Brothers: The Evolution of the Sino-Thai Friendship," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 14, No. 45 (2005), pp. 599-629.

a Cambodian resistance acceptable to both China, which prioritized the Khmer Rouge's capacity for armed struggle, and ASEAN, which sought a more palatable alternative Cambodian government. In tough negotiations in 1981, ASEAN gave up its demand for the Khmer Rouge to disarm, and Thailand reconciled with the former Cambodian monarch, Sihanouk.<sup>34</sup> Finally, on 22 June 1982, the leadership of the Cambodian resistance—comprising Sihanouk as president, nationalist Son Sann as prime minister, and Khmer Rouge member Khieu Samphan as foreign minister—was formally established as the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea.<sup>35</sup> The second challenge was preventing Indonesia and Malaysia from moving ASEAN toward a softer line on the Cambodian situation. Indonesia's General President Suharto, and Foreign Minister Mochtar, and Malaysia's Foreign Minister Ghazali Shafie, all feared growing Chinese influence more than Vietnamese expansion. From 1980 to 1987 they suggested that ASEAN might accept the continuation of the Vietnam-installed People's Republic of Kampuchea.<sup>36</sup> Prem and Siddhi consistently managed to neutralize these proposals without splitting ASEAN.

Although Thai, ASEAN, and Chinese opposition were all important, changing political directions in the Soviet Union were decisive in blocking Vietnamese ambitions for control of Cambodia. In the early 1980s, the Soviet Union provided as much as \$1 billion in annual aid to Vietnam, helping it to sustain the costs of its military occupation of Cambodia.<sup>37</sup> But the arrival of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985 brought a shift in Soviet foreign policy. Seeking to normalize relations with China, the Soviet Union ended its subsidy of Vietnam's military occupation of Cambodia. On 5 April 1989, Saigon announced the withdrawal of all Vietnamese troops from Cambodia by the end of September.<sup>38</sup>

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34. Until that point Thai elites had remained bitter toward Sihanouk because of Thailand's loss of the Phra Viharn (Preah Vihear) temple to Cambodia in the 1962 International Court of Justice case.

35. Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War after the War* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), p. 391.

36. Funston, "Thailand's Diplomacy," p. 69.

37. Alagappa, *National Security*, p. 113.

38. Richard H. Solomon, *Exiting Indochina: U.S. Leadership of the Cambodia Settlement and Normalization with Vietnam* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2000), p. 16. Peace, however, did not come to Cambodia until 1992, after an intensive series of negotiations in Jakarta and Paris had engineered agreement between the Cambodian factions and installed a UN force in Cambodia. See also Margaret Slocombe, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea, 1979–1989: The Revolution after Pol Pot* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2003), pp. 345–347.

## The Threat to Thailand from Vietnam's Occupation of Cambodia

How seriously did Thailand view the invasion? Although the Vietnamese presence never became an election issue, Thai security elites believed that Vietnam's posture was threatening.<sup>39</sup> Thai military colleges believed that Vietnamese had plans to seize parts of northeastern Thailand.<sup>40</sup> Some believed Vietnam wanted to establish an Indochina union under Vietnam's leadership and believed that Vietnam had a two-phase plan: first, to establish Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam as a Vietnamese-controlled union; second, to extend influence outward to other Southeast Asian countries—including Thailand—so that they, too, would eventually come under Vietnamese control.<sup>41</sup> Phaniang Kanotrat, who served as Thai defense minister and air chief marshal from August 1986 to August 1988, subscribed to this view. He stated in an interview with a Thai scholar on 3 February 1988 that “the invasion of Cambodia and Laos by Vietnam could be considered a direct threat to Thailand because of Vietnam's plan to unite the territory as an Indochina Federation which would include Thailand as well.”<sup>42</sup>

Other Thai elites also viewed Vietnam as a serious threat. An academic work published in 1983 under the title *The Thai Elite's National Security Perspectives: Implications for Southeast Asia* surveyed 200 members of the Thai governing elite in political, military, bureaucratic, business, intellectual, and labor circles. Three-quarters of respondents regarded Vietnam as Thailand's biggest military threat. Vietnam was also rated the highest threat for causing loss of territory and just as threatening as China or the Soviet Union in its capacity for political subversion.<sup>43</sup>

China shared Thailand's concerns about Vietnam's ambitions. In his 1979 visit to the United States, Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping told the White House that “the so-called Indochinese Federation is to include more than three states. Ho Chi Minh cherished this idea. The three states are only the

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39. Funston, “Thailand's Diplomacy,” p. 73.

40. Suchit Bunbongkarn, “Opinions toward the Threat and Arms Requirements of the Thai Military,” in *Rabop thaban Thai*, pp. 128–129.

41. Flight Lieutenant Pannida Dhupatemiya, “Kansue Awut Thansamai Kap Kanmueang Rawang Prather: Sueksa Konni Prather Thai Kap Khruengbin F-16,” M.A. thesis, Chulalongkorn University 1988, p. 61.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

43. Kramol Tongdhamchart et al., *The Thai Elite's National Security Perspectives: Implications for Southeast Asia* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 1983), p. 19.

first step. Then Thailand is to be included.”<sup>44</sup> There is no indication in the archives or elsewhere that leaders in Hanoi actually aspired to that goal, but Deng may have alleged that Vietnam harbored such ambitions when he met with Thai leaders in Thailand in January 1979.<sup>45</sup>

Thailand’s capacity to repel an invasion was woeful. Thai military planners likely would not have been confident of their capacity to repel a full-scale military attack without significant external assistance. A Thai-Vietnamese conflict along the Cambodian border would have been mainly a land conflict. Total Vietnamese forces in Cambodia numbered 160,000, divided into two commands and twelve divisions.<sup>46</sup> The number of Vietnamese troops in Cambodia alone exceeded that of the entire Thai army. In addition to numerical strength, Vietnamese forces had good equipment and considerable combat experience.

Less certain is what combat assistance Thailand could have reasonably expected from its allies. Thailand’s alliance with the United States provided assurance that any major Vietnamese attempt to invade Thailand would be actively opposed by the United States. In combination, the 1954 Manila Pact and the 1962 Rusk-Thanat agreement amounted to a substantial security guarantee, especially given the many references made to these agreements by various U.S. presidents and senior personnel. For example, when Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger visited Thailand in 1982, he said the two agreements were completely binding on the United States.<sup>47</sup>

The agreements were clearly beneficial, not least because they would complicate any moves by an adversary. But Thailand was unlikely to read in them a guarantee that the United States would send troops—particularly land forces—in the event of a Vietnamese attack. The Manila Pact had always been seen as weak because of its requirement that all Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) partners unanimously agree to military action. Although Weinberger guaranteed the continuing validity of the Manila Pact, the fact that SEATO had disbanded in 1977—the year before the 1978 invasion—would have worried the Thai.<sup>48</sup> The Rusk-Thanat communiqué committed the United States to act without waiting for SEATO agreement but did not

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44. Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Allen Lane, 2011), p. 364.

45. Tawanchai N. Xoomsai, “China’s Role in Thai-Vietnamese Tensions,” Working Paper No. 47, Joint Centre on Modern Asia, University of Toronto—University of York, January 1987, pp. 8–9.

46. Surachart, “The Thai Military and the Indochinese War,” p. 125.

47. Alagappa, *National Security*, p. 108.

48. Bjorn Hagelin, “Military Dependency: Thailand and the Philippines,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (1988), p. 431.

include automatic commitments in the event of a contingency.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, in a crisis, the United States could have honored its obligations merely by providing logistical and intelligence support.

Weighing at least as heavily in Thai calculations would have been the 1969 Nixon Doctrine. Under the Nixon (or Guam) Doctrine, the United States had declared a policy of providing material assistance to friends and partners to help them oppose Communist aggression, rather than sending its own forces. The Nixon Doctrine and the subsequent withdrawal of U.S. forces from Southeast Asia beginning in 1973 prompted Thailand to take a correspondingly greater interest in defense self-reliance.<sup>50</sup>

If Thailand felt less supported under the Guam Doctrine, especially after the departure of U.S. forces from Vietnam, it was not alone. By the late 1970s, Australia's main intelligence organization assessed that the United States no longer saw Indochina as important. The agency further assessed that the annexation of Cambodia might be irreversible, stating that Washington's self-denial of military or economic leverage in Indochina would make it difficult for the United States, and the West generally, to prevent or reverse a *fait accompli* in Cambodia.<sup>51</sup>

In the absence of iron-clad U.S. guarantees, could Thailand look to China? The People's Republic had demonstrated it was willing to shed blood to prevent Vietnam from amassing a rival empire on its doorstep. But Thailand had witnessed the limitations of China's military capability in its sixteen-day attempt to "teach Vietnam a lesson."<sup>52</sup> In that conflict, Vietnamese forces had shown themselves to be formidable, and China's weaknesses, including outdated weaponry and poor logistics, had been clearly exposed.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, although Thailand might have hoped that China's incursion was enough to warn off the Vietnamese and complicate its strategic calculations, it could not necessarily rely on Chinese forces routing or dislodging a rapid Vietnamese invasion.

Could material assistance have reduced Thailand's security concerns? In the post-Guam Doctrine environment, U.S. material assistance remained a

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49. Wolf, "Thailand's Security and Armed Forces," p. 951.

50. Pannida, "Kansue Awut Thansamai," p. 60.

51. Cabinet Memorandum, No. 5, "Vietnam's Invasion of Kampuchea: Chinese and Soviet Policies and Their Implications," Office of National Assessments, 2 February 1979, pp. 5–6, in National Archives of Australia.

52. Deng Xiaoping stated to U.S. President Carter that one of China's war aims was to "put a restraint on the wild ambitions of the Vietnamese and to give them an appropriate lesson." Cited in Kissinger, *On China*, p. 368.

53. Chen, *China's War with Vietnam*, p. 115.

substantial benefit. Immediately after the Vietnamese invasion, the United States increased its level of material assistance from \$24 million to \$30 million with an arms sale program that allowed Thailand to buy at low interest rates.<sup>54</sup> A memorandum of understanding on logistical support signed on 3 October 1985 provided Thailand with a stockpile of ammunition upon which it could draw in a crisis.<sup>55</sup> By 1986, military assistance was flowing at \$100 million per annum.<sup>56</sup> The United States also showed its willingness to respond quickly when it airlifted supplies, including rifles, howitzers, and machine-gun ammunition, to Thailand less than a month after the June 1980 Ban Non Mark Mun incursion.<sup>57</sup>

Though substantial, this was still significantly lower than during the 1951 to 1972 period, when U.S. material assistance never amounted to less than 25 percent of the Thai defense budget. On thirteen occasions U.S. aid had accounted for more than 50 percent of Thailand's defense budget.<sup>58</sup> But after the enunciation of the Guam Doctrine, the United States had moved to end large-scale gifts and had embraced discounted sales or credit arrangements for its allies, including Thailand. To finance the first purchase of U.S. Foreign Military Sales (FMS) under the new regime, the Thai government had to borrow 20 million Thai baht.<sup>59</sup>

Vietnam, meanwhile, was annually receiving \$1 billion worth of economic assistance from the Soviet Union, as well as large quantities of Soviet weaponry free of charge.<sup>60</sup> In the lead-up to the invasion of Cambodia, for example, the Soviet Union had provided Vietnam with MiG-23 combat aircraft and two 2,000-ton escort vessels.<sup>61</sup> When assessing several key factors—Vietnam's intentions, the strength of Vietnam's forces relative to that of Thai forces, the likelihood of external assistance, and the levels of material assistance on offer to each country—Thai officials should have had ample incentive to reevaluate their country's security posture in light of the crisis that began with Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia.

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54. "U.S. Increases Arms Sales to Thailand," *Bangkok Post*, 24 Jan 1979, p. 1.

55. Wolf, "Thailand's Security and Armed Forces," p. 951.

56. Alagappa, *National Security*, p. 113.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

58. Sukhumbhand, "Military Management and Thailand's Defense," p. 69.

59. Surachart, "Foreign Weapons Procurement," p. 140. The agreement was for counterinsurgency equipment.

60. Alagappa, *National Security*, p. 113.

61. Chen, *China's War with Vietnam*, p. 36.

Only two propositions might lead to a different conclusion. One is the possibility that Thai planners believed they could wait out the crisis, in hope of a unilateral Vietnamese withdrawal. Some quarters continued to believe that the Cambodian resistance forces, which allegedly had the support of the local population and the material support of China, would prevail in the long run.<sup>62</sup> However, as late as 1987 this was not a consensus view. In that year, the Thai academic Muthiah Alagappa predicted that Vietnam would *not* be forced from Cambodia within five years and wrote that “the Thai assumption of the weakness of the Vietnamese economy becomes less credible with time.” Moreover, he pessimistically commented that the “dynamics of world politics is such that it will be difficult to continuously draw and keep international attention focused on the Cambodian conflict.”<sup>63</sup>

The second proposition is that Thai planners had firm intelligence that Vietnam was not planning a major offensive against Thailand. Was the Vietnamese army's K5 plan such an indication? Begun in 1984, the K5 plan called for the closing of the border to stop Cambodian resistance forces crossing from Thailand into Cambodia. As part of this, the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) built a two-kilometer-wide barricade comprising “first a 500m strip of clear terrain, then a fence, a minefield, another fence and more clear terrain.”<sup>64</sup> Whether the barricade extended the length of the 734-kilometer border is unknown. But two points militate against the notion that the K5 figured prominently in Thai strategic planning. First, the plan was not implemented until some five years after the Vietnamese invasion. Second, in 1984, PAVN capability in Cambodia remained high. Douglas Pike, writing in 1986, stated that the “PAVN has the military capability even now to crush Thailand's small, lightly equipped armed force in frontal battle.”<sup>65</sup> Even without gaps in the barricade—an unlikely reality given continuing cross-border raids after 1984—Vietnam could have launched a large-scale attack after dismantling the barriers.

A similar logic applies to the presence of the refugee camps on the Thai side of the Cambodian border. John Funston suggests these may have served a Thai military purpose as a buffer against Vietnamese invasion.<sup>66</sup> But Thai

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62. Stephen Orlov, “The Military Situation in Cambodia” (speech to the International Conference on Cambodia, Bangkok, 1987).

63. Alagappa, *National Security*, pp. 137–142.

64. “A Fence to Be Tested,” *Bangkok Post*, 16 May 1986, reprinted in Jacques Bekaert, *Kampuchea Diary 1983–1986* (Bangkok: DD Books, 1987).

65. Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1966), p. 270.

66. Funston, “Thailand's Diplomacy,” p. 54.

military planners would have understood that the camps would have at most complicated, rather than precluded, any serious PAVN invasion plan. This can be seen simply in the fact that the refugee camps did not prevent significant PAVN attacks such as the 1985 Trat and 1988 Chong Bok incursions.

Because the Thai military believed both that Vietnam had plans for a greater Indochina union and that a Vietnamese assault on Thailand was militarily feasible, Thai security elites should have viewed the presence of Vietnam in Cambodia as a serious long-term threat.

## **The Influence of Thai Strategic Culture: Two Politico-Military Narratives**

Strategic culture scholars argue that embedded and enduring patterns of thought shape countries' approaches to strategic matters. This remains a core tenet of the strategic culture literature despite the emergence of three generations of strategic culture writing since Jack Snyder's pioneering 1970s study of Soviet nuclear doctrine.<sup>67</sup> If a fourth generation has emerged, it has remained focused on seeking a resolution of the methodological debates between the first and third generations. These include disagreements about whether strategic culture should be understood within positivist or interpretive frameworks and whether strategic behavior should be included as part of strategic culture.<sup>68</sup> Michael Desch's description in 1998 of the strategic culture field as comprising a cluster of theories is still an accurate characterization.<sup>69</sup> This

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67. Snyder argues that Soviet thinking about nuclear strategy had achieved a "state of semi permanence . . . on the level of 'culture' rather than mere 'policy.'" Jack L. Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1977), p. 39. Alistair Iain Johnston's typology of three generations from the 1970s to the 1990s is widely accepted and cited. Johnston argues that the three generations consist of a first generation of writers such as Carnes Lord, Colin Gray, and David Jones who use an expansive and deterministic view of strategic culture; a second generation of writers such as Bradley Klein and Robin Luckham who focused on the instrumental use of culture; and a third generation, represented by Johnston, Elizabeth Kier, and Jeffrey Legro, that is more inclined toward positivism, rigor, and competitive theory testing in their strategic culture work. See Alistair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 5–22.

68. Alan Bloomfield, "Time to Move On: Reconceptualizing the Strategic Culture Debate," *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (2012), pp. 437–461. Bloomfield's solution to the problem of how to explain why a state's strategic behavior and policy might exhibit both continuity and change—that there are multiple competing strategic cultures in many states—is not new. Johnston proposed this in his 1995 study of Chinese strategic culture. For an example of the debate, see Colin S. Gray, "Strategic Culture as Context: The First Generation of Theory Strikes Back," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (January 1999), p. 53.

69. Michael C. Desch, "Culture Clash: Assessing the Importance of Ideas in Security Studies," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Summer 1998), pp. 141–170. The majority of work in the strategic

article is firmly within the tradition of Alistair Iain Johnston's third-generation approach, which seeks to frame culture as an independent variable capable of influencing strategic actions and choices while at the same time accepting that strategic behavior is overdetermined. Johnston's work remains among the most defensible and rigorous in the strategic culture canon. In his study of China's strategic culture, he sought to devise a research method that could "credibly measure the effects of strategic culture on the process of making strategic choices."<sup>70</sup> My own hypotheses about Thai strategic culture were formulated after an examining a range of Thai texts, including speeches and historical texts, as well as consideration of Thai historiography. My analysis of Thai strategic culture at the level of military organizational culture draws on key third-generation strategic culture thinkers, including Elizabeth Kier and Jeffrey Legro, whose methodology remains substantially unchallenged.<sup>71</sup>

Modern Thailand's enduring currents of politico-military thought can first be located in the reign of King Chulalongkorn Rama V (1853–1910). There are three reasons for this. The first is the enduring and towering stature of Chulalongkorn in Thai history. For all Thai, especially for the Thai military, Chulalongkorn remains the most important source of wisdom on how to deal with the international environment. According to Irene Stengs, "nearly all Thais have at least a basic knowledge of his life, his personality, and his achievements. Mainly through the school history curriculum, a general knowledge of King Chulalongkorn exists."<sup>72</sup> One former senior Thai military officer I interviewed in 2012 said, "Chulalongkorn is the monarch who

culture field since Johnston has tended to expand the geographic and empirical scope of strategic culture investigation rather than advance strategic culture theory and methodology. For examples of the former, see Alex Burns and Ben Eltham, "Australia's Strategic Culture: Constraints and Opportunities in Security Policymaking," *Contemporary Security Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (2014), pp. 187–210; Andrew Oros, "Japan's Strategic Culture: Security Identity in a Fourth Modern Incarnation," *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (2014), pp. 227–248; Tiejun Zhang, "Chinese Strategic Culture: Traditional and Present Features," *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2002), pp. 73–90; and Renato Cruz De Castro, "Philippine Strategic Culture: Continuity in the Face of Changing Regional Dynamics," *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (2014), pp. 249–269. One example of strategic culture methodological innovation is Forrest E Morgan, *Compellence and the Strategic Culture of Imperial Japan: Implications for Coercive Diplomacy in the Twenty-First Century* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003). However, the approach Morgan uses for the Japanese case, which identifies cultural habits at the societal or family level that may influence state behavior at the international level, is not well suited to Thailand.

70. Alistair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 5.

71. Jeffrey W. Legro, "Military Culture and Inadvertent Escalation in World War II," *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Spring 1994), pp. 108–142; and Elizabeth Kier, "Culture and Military Doctrine: France between the Wars," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Spring 1995), pp. 65–93.

72. Irene Stengs, *Worshipping the Great Moderniser: King Chulalongkorn, Patron Saint of the Thai Middle Class* (Singapore: NUS Press with University of Washington Press, 2009), pp. 61–63.

has had the biggest role in leading the nation to prosperity and progress. He founded the military and had great expertise in matters of foreign policy. He had great intelligence and vision in foreign policy.<sup>73</sup> Within the Thai military, sentiment about Rama V extends to an almost mystical reverence. Officer cadets at the Royal Thai Army's Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy (CRMA) still pledge loyalty before a statue of Chulalongkorn every day, promising "I will maintain your heritage with my blood and life."<sup>74</sup> Many officers pray weekly before the equestrian Chulalongkorn statue in Bangkok's Lumpini Park.<sup>75</sup>

Second, Chulalongkorn's reign was a formative period for the modern Thai state, comparable in many ways to the Meiji period in Japan.<sup>76</sup> Under Chulalongkorn, Thailand laid the foundations of a Westphalian state—establishing a bureaucracy, building systems of education, and putting its security organization under centralized control. As Thomas Berger's work on Japanese and German post–World War II strategic cultures has demonstrated, new norms can emerge in periods of flux.<sup>77</sup>

The third reason for ascribing special importance to the era of Chulalongkorn's reign is that it was a period of great external threat. Thailand had long known of the dangers of resisting trade with Western powers, having observed the humiliation of China and Burma at Western hands. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the pressure on Siam from France and Britain reached its zenith. Thailand's vulnerability resulted not only from the greater military strength of the colonial powers but also from the ability of those powers to exploit Thailand's multiethnic divisions.<sup>78</sup> But what about Thailand's experience of Japanese occupation from 1941 to 1945? For a variety of reasons, including the relatively light impact on the Thai population and Prime Minister Field Marshal Phibun Songkram's decision to side

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73. Retired Royal Thai Armed Forces officer, interview, Bangkok, July 2012.

74. Wasana Nanuam, *Lap Luang Phrang Phak* (Bangkok: PostIt Books, 2009), p. 32.

75. *Ibid.*

76. This comparison was made by Chulalongkorn's successor, Rama VII Prajadhipok. Eiji Murashima, "The Origin of Modern Official State Ideology in Thailand," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (March 1988), p. 85.

77. Thomas U. Berger, "Norms, Identity and National Security in Germany and Japan," in Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 317.

78. As Panitan Wattanayagorn writes, it was not until Chulalongkorn's reign that "the idea that all the people in Siam—the Mon, Burmese, Shan, Vietnamese, Khmer, Lao and Chinese—were in some way 'Thai' began to appear." Panitan Wattanayagorn, "Thailand: The Elite's Shifting Conceptions of Security," in Muthiah Alagappa, ed., *Asian Security Practice: Material and Ideational Influences* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 418.

**Table 1.** Thai Politico-Military Narratives

Subaltern Challenge	Politico-Military Narrative	Memorable Episodes	Security Imperative
Building and protecting a state against external and internal threats	Fall of Ayutthaya	1767 Burmese sacking of former capital	Maintain national unity as a defense against external intervention
Living with “giants”—dealing with colonial powers	Deeds of Chulalongkorn	1893 crisis with France	
	Emphasize diplomacy but maintain a military	1897 trip to Europe	

with Japan, the occupation did not leave a lasting imprint on Thai strategic thought—especially in comparison to the experience of Chulalongkorn’s reign.

The new norms about state security that were articulated, crystallized, and promulgated under Chulalongkorn comprised two distinct politico-military narratives, which can be labeled the “deeds of Chulalongkorn” narrative and the “fall of Ayutthaya” narrative. The former conveys that diplomacy is critical but incomplete in the absence of military force. The latter conveys the idea that national unity prevents opportunities for foreign intervention.

Both narratives draw on iconic moments in Thai history. The “fall of Ayutthaya” narrative alludes to Burma’s sacking of the former Siamese capital Ayutthaya in 1767. This event is widely understood to have occurred because of disunity among Siamese leaders. The story has become associated with a line of strategic thinking that emphasizes the virtues of unity and nationalism as a bulwark against external intervention. The Burmese sacking of Ayutthaya occurred almost a century before Chulalongkorn ascended the throne. But not until Chulalongkorn’s half-brother historian Prince Damrong Rajanubhab began to promote his own account of Thailand’s wars with Burma, *Our Wars with the Burmese*, did this event enter the popular imagination.<sup>79</sup>

The “deeds of Chulalongkorn” narrative alludes to two critical events during Rama V’s reign. In 1893, France used gunboat diplomacy to extort significant territorial concessions from Siam. Chulalongkorn’s regime was

79. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, *Our Wars with the Burmese* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2001).

humiliated, and the incident later spurred him to build a more substantial Thai defense force.<sup>80</sup> The incident remains a symbol of the painful territorial sacrifices Thailand was forced to endure to preserve its independence. Chulalongkorn's trip to Europe in 1897 is of similarly iconic status. The king visited the capitals of major European states seeking to project an image of Thailand as a civilized state worthy of independence. The trip later came to symbolize the importance of astute diplomacy in preserving Thailand's independence.

These politico-military narratives have persisted because Thailand's nationalist history and its quasi-religious royalist social order provide a vehicle for their sustained transmission.<sup>81</sup> Other significant strategic events, such as Japan's occupation of Thailand during World War II, do not compare as sources of strategic culture, partly because of the absence of any link to Thailand's dominant royalist-nationalist culture.<sup>82</sup> Today, institutions both civilian and military, as well as the popular print and electronic media, promote a royalist-nationalist history in which Chulalongkorn is a central and revered figure. According to Stengs,

nearly all Thais have at least a basic knowledge of his life, his personality, and his achievements. Mainly through the school history curriculum, a general body of knowledge on King Chulalongkorn exists, that is shared by at least those who have followed secondary education.<sup>83</sup>

Thai royalist history continues to emphasize the role of Thailand's kings in saving the nation. A 2005 Thai defense white paper, for example, cites Chulalongkorn's diplomacy as allowing Thailand to stay independent:

in the reign of King Rama V (1868–1910), Thailand was threatened by major powers that possessed greater strength than had ever been seen before. For the

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80. Noel Alfred Battye, "The Military, Government and Society in Siam, 1868–1910: Politics and Military Reform during the Reign of King Chulalongkorn," Ph.D. Diss., Cornell University, 1974, p. 550.

81. Even in today's Thailand, anyone challenging "royalist constructions regarding politics and governance" risks prosecution and imprisonment. See, for example, Kevin Hewison and Kengkij Kiti-rianglarp, "'Thai-Style Democracy': The Royalist Struggle for Thailand's Politics," in Soren Ivarsson and Lotte Isager, eds., *Saying the Unsayable: Monarchy and Democracy in Thailand* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2010), p. 147.

82. Official Thai memory of Japanese occupation during World War II is complicated by (1) continuing regret that the territories ceded by Chulalongkorn and regained by the Thai military in 1940 were returned to France as part of the post-World War II settlement; (2) the dubious status of then Prime Minister Phibun Songkram, who, in addition to collaborating with Japan, was one of the leaders of the 1932 revolution to overthrow the absolute monarch; and (3) the even more dubious status of Pridi Phanomyong, who, despite leading the Free Thai movement against the Japanese, was also a 1932 revolutionary who later was implicated in the 1946 shooting death of the young king Ananda Mahidol.

83. Stengs, *Worshipping the Great Moderniser*, pp. 61–63.

survival of the Kingdom, King Rama V employed a *strategy of diplomacy by making friends with other countries*. . . . The strategy of King Rama V has enable [sic] Thailand to survive as an independent nation till today.<sup>84</sup>

Royalist history's emphasis on Chulalongkorn's diplomatic accomplishments means that a "legacy of skillful diplomacy . . . is firmly embedded in the collective memory of Thailand today."<sup>85</sup> The remembrance of these accomplishments gives Thailand's politico-military narratives resonance and power because each is linked to a memorable historic episode concerning statecraft, war, and the preservation of the Thai state.

### **Politico-Military Narratives and Thailand's Strategic Response to Vietnam's Threat**

These narratives and their implicit imperatives were fully present in the thinking of Thai military personnel and other security elites during the decade 1979 to 1989. They may have bounded decision-making rationality, limiting the attention of Thai security elites "to less than the full range of alternative behaviors, problems, and solutions which are logically possible."<sup>86</sup> The "deeds of Chulalongkorn" narrative ought to have shaped a preference to use the military to support diplomacy and alliance building rather than to build an outright superior military capability. The "fall of Ayutthaya" narrative ought to have led to an emphasis on the maintenance of internal unity as a hedge against Vietnam's threat.

At the politico-military level, Thailand chose to counter the threat of a Vietnamese attack by drawing on its alliance with the United States, moving closer to China, and exploiting its membership in ASEAN. Thai leaders conducted a skillful and energetic campaign to build effective coalitions, sustain the Khmer Rouge resistance, and ensure that world opinion remained opposed to Vietnam's actions.

Thailand was highly skillful in shaping international perceptions. In October 1979, the Kriangsak government allowed all Cambodian refugees to take temporary refuge in Thai territory. This fostered a shared sense of

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84. Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Thailand 2005* (Bangkok: Ministry of Defense, 2005), p. 32, emphasis added.

85. Stefan Hell, *Siam and the League of Nations: Modernisation, Sovereignty and Multilateral Diplomacy, 1920–1940* (Bangkok: River Books, 2010), p. 12.

86. Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, p. 35.

international responsibility for the Cambodian problem.<sup>87</sup> To publicize Vietnamese incursions, the Thai Foreign Ministry published a white paper in 1980 titled “Vietnam’s Acts of Aggression against Thailand’s Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity.” Thailand’s Foreign Minister Air Vice Marshal Siddhi Savetsila traveled constantly to urge allies and partners to help in solving the Cambodian problem and to isolate Vietnam.<sup>88</sup> Siddhi also ensured that diplomatic and military efforts moved in lockstep by appointing a military-political coordinator in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>89</sup>

The Thai military supported diplomacy by conducting cross-border intelligence-gathering. General Surayud Chulanond was commander of the 838 unit of the special forces operating secretly in Cambodia.<sup>90</sup> Surayud, who eventually rose to the ranks of army chief and prime minister, also later played a significant role in bringing the Khmer Rouge into the peace process:

If “Big Chio” Chaovalit Yongchaiyudh was known worldwide in his capacity as a peacemaker in Cambodia that brought together the four Cambodian factions to negotiating a peace in Paris, then General Surayud likewise had an important part in bringing peace to the Cambodian people.<sup>91</sup>

Surayud got to know many of the Khmer Rouge leaders, who gave him the name of “lightning boss” (in Thai, *hua na wichu*).

The Thai military also worked assiduously to realize the benefits of Thai-U.S. security agreements by undertaking training and large-scale joint exercises. For example, Thai personnel were trained in the use of U.S.-made anti-tank weapons.<sup>92</sup> The 1986 Cobra Gold exercise involved 9,300 U.S. troops and 3,500 Thai troops in air, land, and sea operations, providing a visible sign of the closeness of the two countries’ militaries.<sup>93</sup>

Turning what had been an antagonistic relationship with China into a quasi-alliance against Vietnam was Thailand’s trump card. Following advances

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87. Patcharie Limpoka, “Nayobai Khong Thai to Panha Phuopyop Chaokamphucha Samai Ratban Phonek Kriangsak,” unpub. thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 1984.

88. Binthong Jaisutthi, “Nayobai Tangprathet Khong Thai to Panha Rawang 2518–2534,” unpub. thesis, Srinakarin University, March 1993, p. 90.

89. John Funston, “The Role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Thailand: Some Preliminary Observations,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (December 1987), p. 238.

90. Wasana Nanuam, *Senthang Lek Ponek Surayud Chulanond Naikratmontri Khon thi* (Bangkok: Matichon Press, 2006), p. 89.

91. *Ibid.*

92. Larry A. Niksch, “Thailand in 1980: Confrontation with Vietnam and the Fall of Kriangsak,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (February 1981), p. 228.

93. Ansil Ramsay, “Thailand: Surviving the 1980s,” *Current History*, Vol. 86, No. 519 (April 1987), pp. 164–187.

from China's Premier Deng Xiaoping to the Thai Deputy Foreign Minister Sunthorn Hongladarom in January 1979, Thailand began to cooperate with China in lending support to the Khmer Rouge.<sup>94</sup> This included channeling significant amounts of military aid to the insurgent group. By early 1979, some 500 tons per month were being transported, an amount that doubled to 1,000 tons per month in the first half of 1980.<sup>95</sup> Alignment with China also benefited Thailand's internal security insofar as China agreed to stop assisting the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). In 1980, China ceased broadcasting (via Radio Yunnan) calls for Communist insurrection and sharply curtailed its relations with the CPT.<sup>96</sup> The withdrawal of this support was a severe blow to the Thai insurgency, which had 10,000 CPT members in 1979 and as many as 3.9 million Thai citizens in areas under its control.<sup>97</sup> In conjunction with Thailand's diplomatic and coalition-building strategy, cooperation with China and support for the Khmer Rouge and other resistance groups were effective in raising the costs to Vietnam of maintaining troops in Cambodia.

Conversely, despite a range of conventional arms purchases ostensibly to oppose any attempt by Vietnam to use force against Thai interests, Thailand did not significantly increase its conventional military capability. The most compelling evidence for this is the moderate increase in Thai defense spending that occurred. This increase was not sufficient to deliver significantly increased levels of defense capability. From 1975 to 1986, Thai defense spending rose from 2.8 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) to 3.95 percent in the face of the Vietnam threat.<sup>98</sup> Most of this spending, 60–65 percent, was to cover operating costs rather than to purchase new hardware and increase the military's capabilities.<sup>99</sup> In 1985 the U.S. government believed Thailand was underinvesting in light of its serious threat environment. In congressional testimony at the time, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South East Asia James Kelly said Thailand should be spending \$350 million per

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94. Tawanchai, "China's Role in Thai-Vietnamese Tensions," pp. 8–9.

95. *Ibid.*

96. Surachart Bumrungsuk, "From Dominance to Power Sharing: The Military and Politics in Thailand, 1973–1992," Ph.D. Diss., Columbia University, 1999, pp. 19–20.

97. Samudavanija, Snitwongse, and Bunbongkarn, *From Armed Suppression to Political Offensive*, p. 63. By 1978, this was causing Thai army officers such as General Chaovalit Yongchaiyudh to genuinely fear a CPT victory. Surachart, "From Dominance to Power Sharing," p. 105. The Chinese policy shift, combined with the new policies of democratization pursued by the Prem government (and embodied in the prime ministerial orders 65/23 and 66/25), enabled Chaovalit to announce victory over the Communist insurgency by October 1984. See also Wolf, "Thailand's Security and Armed Forces," p. 978.

98. Alagappa, *National Security*, p. 119.

99. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

annum just to maintain its equipment but was allocating only \$250 million per annum.<sup>100</sup>

Thus, even though the change in Thailand's defense posture was responsive, it cannot be described as urgent or dramatic. The increase in spending of about 1 percent was fairly restrained. Even some five years after the invasion, an observer noted that "Thailand's force modernization [was] taking place against a background of strict budget austerity. In October 1985, the budget actually dropped by four percent when adjusted for inflation. Outlays were the lowest in ten years."<sup>101</sup>

When Thailand's National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) put forth its Economic and Social Development Plan for 1982–1986, the plan suggested diffidence about the utility of military spending. The authors, after war-gaming a Vietnamese–Thai military conflict, concluded that a conventional military response to a Vietnamese invasion force would require defense spending of 9 percent of GDP.<sup>102</sup> Thailand, however, decided not to prejudice its economic development by increasing spending to such a high level. Instead, it would bolster the two components of its paramilitary forces: territorial defense formations, and civil defense programs.

Despite the relatively slight boost to military capability, Thailand's combination of diplomacy and coalition building weakened Vietnam's hold on Cambodia. As John Funston comments, diplomacy alone could not have accomplished this, so Thailand mobilized a full array of military and economic pressures against Vietnam.<sup>103</sup>

The evidence, therefore, suggests that Thai behavior vis-à-vis Vietnam in the 1980s was consistent with the imperatives of the "deeds of Chulalongkorn" narrative. Thai elites judged astutely and took advantage of the prevailing geopolitical currents. They recognized that the United States, following its withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975 and, just as importantly, Nixon's rapprochement with China in 1971–1972, had "re-evaluated the salience of Southeast Asia."<sup>104</sup> Thailand mitigated this risk by exploiting the benefits of the Sino-Soviet split and the Sino-Vietnam split and developing a security

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100. Wolf, "Thailand's Security and Armed Forces," p. 980.

101. *Ibid.*

102. Sukhumbhand Paribatra, "Thailand: Defence Spending and Threat Perceptions," in Chin Kin Wah, ed., *Defence Spending in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1987), p. 89.

103. Funston, "Thailand's Diplomacy on Cambodia," p. 76.

104. James A Tyner, *America's Strategy in Southeast Asia: from the Cold War to the Terror War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007).

partnership with China. The Chinese military was deployed to assist in implementing this partnership, to reinforce the security relationship with the United States, and to provide a final deterrent to any serious Vietnamese consideration of an attack on Thailand.

Evidence also supports the claim that the “fall of Ayutthaya” narrative shaped Thai thinking throughout the crisis with Vietnam. This narrative extols the importance of internal unity as a bulwark against an external threat. In Kramol’s 1983 survey of security elites, the sample group was asked to rate the effectiveness of various security measures. Participants attributed greater effectiveness to *internal* measures than to *external* ones and identified “unity within the country” as being the measure of highest effectiveness.<sup>105</sup> Military preparedness was given the *lowest* ranking among the internal measures. Consistent with this ordering of priorities, some expressed concern that increased defense spending might jeopardize economic and political stability. Participants felt that, “despite [Thailand’s] long existence as an independent political entity, it is still a weak state and vulnerable to numerous internal threats that are primarily directed at the idea of the state.”<sup>106</sup> In this environment, “a dramatic increase in defense expenditure could have [had] adverse consequences on internal security.”<sup>107</sup>

### **Thailand’s Military Organizational Culture, Civil-Military Relations, and Planning and Conduct of Military Operations, 1979–1989**

Strategic culture also exists at the level of military organizations. *Military organizational culture* can shape strategic outcomes, including whether countries adopt certain weapons systems or an offensive rather than a defensive military doctrine.<sup>108</sup> A military’s organizational culture can also interact dynamically with a state’s political system. This occurred in France in the interwar period, when the French government’s insistence on conscripts receiving no more than one year’s training collided with the French military’s belief that only a professional force could employ an offensive doctrine. The result was that the French military adopted a defensive doctrine prior to World War II.

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105. Kramol et al., *Thai Elite’s National Security Perspectives*, p. 29.

106. Alagappa, *National Security*, p. 70.

107. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

108. Legro, “Military Culture and Inadvertent Escalation”; and Kier, “Culture and Military Doctrine.”

A similar *analytically eclectic* framework helps explain how Thai military organizational culture in combination with Thai civil-military relations increased the prospects of doctrinal incoherence, leadership division, and, ultimately, operational inefficiency.

Defense capability is not solely determined by equipment or resources. Careful attention to optimal military doctrine, procurement, planning, training, and exercises can allow a smaller force to defeat a larger force.<sup>109</sup> However, there is little evidence that Thai military strategy or doctrine was a strong focus of the leadership during this period. Conversely, there is significant evidence that procurement, in particular, was disconnected from strategy. Performance in operations against the Lao and Vietnamese also suggests that training and logistics may have been suboptimal. Why was this, and how did Thailand intend to conduct independent operations with its military forces in the event its politico-military strategy of coalition building proved unsuccessful?

Thai military planning during this period was divided. On the one hand, the officially endorsed Total Defense Strategy advocated relying on maximum cooperation among civil defense programs, paramilitary formations, and mainstream conventional forces. On the other hand, Thai leaders also appeared to adhere to an informal doctrine based on the acquisition of advanced, high-technology, conventional capabilities.

The Total War Strategy had been enunciated in Thailand's defense policy of 1977 and aimed to address the external and internal components of security, stating that

Thailand should have a system of defense which incorporates regular soldiers and reserves as the main force, plus paramilitaries and civic organizations, which in total is able to fight continuously especially on the border and is able to fight both internal and external threats.<sup>110</sup>

The document stated further that "there should be support for the paramilitaries and civic organizations so that they would be able to work together with the main force and according to the principle of 'total defense.'"<sup>111</sup> The Total War Strategy was also reflected in the NESDB's 1982–1986 Economic and Social Development Plan, which did not recommend

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109. According to army historian Albert Palazzo, "Well conceived doctrine . . . can provide a combatant with an advantage over an opponent—even one that is similarly armed and organized or which possesses greater mass and resources." Albert Palazzo, *From Moltke to Bin Laden: The Relevance of Doctrine in the Contemporary Military Environment* (Canberra: Land Warfare Studies Centre, 2008), p. 1.

110. Quoted in Pannida, "Kansue Awut Thansamai," pp. 44–45.

111. *Ibid.*

significantly increased defense spending but did recommend strengthening Thailand's paramilitary forces.<sup>112</sup>

The Total War Strategy was in part implemented through counterinsurgency efforts, particularly by arranging new offices and programs. The Thai army established mass-mobilization and training programs for national security, including three major mass organizations in rural areas, the National Defense Volunteers (NDV), the Volunteer Development and Self-Defense Villages, and the Organization of Military Reservists for National Security. By 1981, 4,000 self-defense villages were receiving training in rural development, village security, public health, government, and politics, and by 1984 a million NDV members had been trained to defend themselves and cooperate with government forces in opposing the Thai Communists. In 1985, 600,000 Military Reservists for National Security were ready for war.<sup>113</sup>

Yet, even though the civil-military programs were launched, they were never fully funded. The efforts probably did more for socialization and unity than for civil-military effectiveness. Suchit Bunbongkarn found that the NDV programs lacked qualified teaching personnel and adequate facilities for instructing defense volunteers in the basic use of weapons.<sup>114</sup> Moreover, knowledgeable academics like Desmond Ball and David Mathieson found no increase in the allocation of resources to paramilitary units; instead, the opposite occurred as the paramilitaries shrank in size, peaking around 1980 before falling steadily through the 1980s and 1990s. The strength of the VDC decreased from about 52,000 members in 1980 to about 33,000 in 1987. Many of the organizations established in the 1960s and 1970s, if they were still functioning in 1980, were soon disbanded.<sup>115</sup>

The other strand of Thai military strategy emphasized conventional operations based on the acquisition of platforms of superior or equivalent capability to those of the Vietnamese. A prominent Thai defense academic, Surachart Bumrungsuk, has argued that after Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia the Thai government and military turned away from non-conventional warfare doctrine and force structure. Instead, they moved to put the Thai armed forces on a more conventional war footing. The new policy embraced a

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112. Sukhumbhand, "Thailand: Defence Spending and Threat Perceptions," p. 89.

113. Suchit Bunbongkarn, *The Military in Thai Politics 1981–86* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1987), pp. 53–56.

114. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

115. Desmond Ball and David Scott Mathieson, *Militia Redux: Or Sor and the Revival of Paramilitarism in Thailand* (Bangkok: White Lotus Co.), p. 49.

conventional warfare doctrine and required a focus on sophisticated and high-quality weaponry only available from abroad.

In drawing this conclusion, Surachart does not cite any explicit military strategy or doctrine of the Thai armed forces; instead, he infers the existence of a new policy from his observations of Thai military procurement after 1979. This procurement included the boosting of airpower through the replacement of the F-5 aircraft via purchases of the F-16 (to counter the basing of Soviet-made MiG-23s in Cambodia), the boosting of artillery firepower through the procurement of self-propelled artillery (in response to the Vietnamese artillery guns deployed along the Thai-Cambodian border), and the boosting of tank firepower through the introduction of M48A5 tanks (to counter the Soviet tanks operated by Vietnam in Cambodia).<sup>116</sup>

However, there is little evidence that these procurements were accompanied by the preparedness, coherent doctrine, or appropriate logistics and training required to maximize their capabilities. Few if any attempts were made to strengthen defenses along the eastern border. In comparison to the six divisions of Vietnamese troops stationed on the Cambodian side of the border, Thailand maintained two light infantry divisions reinforced with tank and anti-tank capabilities, paramilitary rangers, and elements of the marines.<sup>117</sup> Moreover, the Thai army did not deploy units to the border with Cambodia until more than six months after the invasion. Even then it was a formation that could act only as a screening force. Three years after the invasion, an intelligence analyst stated,

The RTA [Royal Thai Army] has taken few concrete steps during the (three) years they have been in the border area to prepare an effective defense. In most cases, battalion, regimental and the one divisional headquarters have occupied the same locations . . . are easily visible from the air . . . are lacking cover from enemy artillery or air attacks. Little has been done to create obstacles or barriers to slow or impede a Vietnamese attack. . . . One "anti-tank ditch" has been dug along the Prachinburi border, but it is not covered by fire . . . and can be breached easily with rudimentary engineer work.<sup>118</sup>

Other indications, too, suggest that the Thai military was uninterested in matters at the eastern border. Not long after the invasion, the Border Patrol Police (BPP) expressed irritation at the Thai army because of its reluctance to take

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116. Surachart, "Thai Military and the Indochinese War," pp. 116–117.

117. Wolf, "Thailand's Security and Armed Forces," p. 979.

118. Robert Karniol, "Thailand's Armed Forces: From Counter-insurgency to Conventional Warfare," *International Defense Review*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (1992), pp. 98–99.

on border security roles. The BPP were quoted as saying that the “army is about 180,000 strong . . . [but] it takes roughly half the casualties of the BPP, which number only 20,000. But the army maintains its job is to garrison the heartland and only provide back-up for the [police] in emergencies.”<sup>119</sup>

Further evidence of Thailand's lack of effort to make a major upgrade in its defense posture comes from the fact that no additional defense resources were allocated to these areas during the crisis. Defense data by region for the period 1978–1982 show that the eastern region, where three of the provinces bordering Cambodia were located, received no increase in defense funding in response to the increased threat, staying at about five percent of the total. Spending in the northeast region, where four of the provinces bordering Cambodia were located, increased only slightly, from 20 to 21 percent of the total following the invasion.<sup>120</sup> Members of the Thai Parliament representing the border region also complained about the sparse attention from central authorities.<sup>121</sup> The Thai military appeared unfazed by the anxiety of Thai citizens living on the border, particularly in regard to the response to cross-border shelling and incursions by Vietnamese forces. Samruan Mahitthiburin, the member of parliament for Prachinburi, complained about the lack of government attention. Referring to the Ban Non Mark Mun incursion of 23 June 1980, he protested,

This is a big increase in violence and intensity since before. Last time when anything happened, senior members of the Government would fly in immediately, look at the situation and lift the morale of the people. But this time I only saw senior military people, the Government I'm not sure.<sup>122</sup>

Some eight years later, Chamnong Photisaro, the member for Sri Saket, complained about the lack of funds for building bomb shelters:

They [the people] have really suffered. You said when there is hardship the authorities will go and address the problems. But bombs are falling boom, boom,

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119. “Guardians of the Thai Frontier,” *The Bangkok Post*, 29 January 1979, p. 5.

120. Data from Thai Office of the National Economic and Rural Development Board, quoted in Alagappa, *National Security*, p. 125.

121. Those complaining included Samruan Mahitthiburin (Prachinburi), Chamnong Photisaro (Sri Saket), Yat Waidi (Surin), Chatwan Chomphudaeng (Roi Et), and Prawat Uttamot (Chantaburi). These provinces are located on Thailand's eastern and northeastern borders. See Thai Parliamentary Records, “Raingan Kanprachum Sapha Phuthaenratdon Khrangthi 12/2531 Kho Seno Yatti Rueang Khwammankhong Khong Prathet Chati lae Kanlopnikhaomueang Khong Chaotangchati,” pp. 119–151.

122. Thai Parliamentary Records, “Khrangthi 6/2523 Wanphrihatbadithi thi 26 June 2523 rueang duan khanaratmontri khothaengga khothetcharing thi koet khuen kiaokap sathankan chaidan,” pp. 247–267.

and they have spread to the school. That day if the school had been open, many staff and students would have died. Why don't we think of protection first, this isn't the only time. Shooting has happened many times, but this time I thought of making bomb shelters. You give soldiers and rangers to build trenches but all they have is empty hands, they have no money.<sup>123</sup>

It is also telling that a survey of the issues of the Thai army's principal journal *Yuthokhot* published from 1979 to 1989 reveals little evidence of the development of any operational-level doctrine that would have assisted operations against a large-scale Vietnamese assault. Although many articles from this period address tactical-level doctrine (i.e., how particular units would have performed their designated roles), little was written about how the units would have worked together. For example, in 1983, four years after the invasion, Colonel Chit Kayrateman wrote an article on "Doctrine for using anti-aircraft weapons in defending against low altitude air threats," Colonel Sagon Pitirat discussed the establishment of a new Thai army artillery division in 1983, and Lieutenant Colonel Boonma Da-wichay highlighted the advantages offered by U.S.-made Airborne Early Warning and Control aircraft in his article "ASEAN and AWACS."<sup>124</sup> Articles that addressed the operational level looked at the counterinsurgency doctrine required to defeat the Thai Communist insurgency, such as Lieutenant General Chaovalit's article "Concepts in Planning to Fight and Defeat Communism," rather than the doctrine required to defeat a peer conventional force.<sup>125</sup>

Another key indicator was the operational performance of the Thai army in the 1980s, which was suboptimal throughout, suggesting that, even though modern equipment was procured, it was evidently not accompanied by the "deployment, contingency, planning, training and exercises" necessary to provide a fully developed capability.<sup>126</sup> In 1987 the Thai army fought with Laos after a territorial dispute at Ban Rom Klao in Phitsanulok. By the end of the conflict, the Thai forces had suffered substantial casualties.<sup>127</sup> In the same year,

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123. Question from Chamnong Photisaro concerning the security and safety of life and property of the people in the border region of Sri Saket. Thai Parliamentary Records, "Raingan Kanprachum Sapha Phuthaenratdon Khrangthi 14/1988," pp. 322–330.

124. Colonel Sakon Phitrat, "Artillery Division," *Yuthokhot*, Vol. 91, No. 5 (June–July 1983), pp. 31–36; Colonel Chit Kheretman, "Doctrine for Using Anti-Aircraft Weapons in Defending against Low Altitude Air Threats," *Yuthokhot*, Vol. 91, No. 5 (June–July 1983), pp. 29–36; and Lieutenant Colonel Bunma Tawichai, "ASEAN and AWACS," *Yuthokhot*, Vol. 91, No. 5 (June–July, 1983), pp. 37–42.

125. Lieutenant General Chaovalit Yongchaiyudh, "Concepts in Planning to Fight and Defeat Communism," *Yuthokhot*, Vol. 92, No. 3 (February–March 1984), pp. 29–36.

126. Alagappa, *National Security*, p. 121.

127. Library of Congress Country Studies, "Laos: The Confrontational Relationship with Thailand," This source claims 1,000 deaths. A Thai book written on the conflict cites fatalities in the order

the Thai army attempted to dislodge Vietnamese forces occupying a hill in Thai territory being used by the Khmer Rouge to move arms into Cambodia. The Battle of Chong Bok proved a costly defeat for the Thai forces.<sup>128</sup>

Within the Thai air force there was doctrinal confusion regarding the purpose of Thailand's procurement of F-16s. The air force advised Thai political scientist Suchit Boonbongarn that the purchase of a squadron of new fighter aircraft was aligned with the "Active Defense Strategy."<sup>129</sup> The F-16 combat aircraft could support that strategy because it had the range necessary to conduct strikes against Hanoi. This rationale suggests that the Active Defense Strategy was a *deterrence* doctrine—a doctrine aimed at punishing an aggressor by raising its costs.<sup>130</sup> However, this conception of the Active Defense Strategy conflicts with statements made by former Chief of Air Force Air Chief Marshal Praphan Dhupatemiya:

if Vietnam acquires the MiG 23 in future, the threat and power of Vietnam will increase. When the territory of Vietnam is within its radius of operations, we can say that they can threaten Thailand in the north and central regions, and in fact almost the entire nation, especially if they use airfields in Cambodia or Laos. Therefore, our air force was at an extreme disadvantage.<sup>131</sup>

Praphan implied that the F-16 was chosen to support a *defensive* doctrine aimed at denying adversaries their objective, rather than to support a deterrence doctrine. That is, the fighter aircraft were intended to blunt the Vietnamese air force's capacity to attack northern and central Thailand rather than for the Thai air force to attack Hanoi.<sup>132</sup> The contradictory accounts of the Active Defense Strategy and the reason for the F-16 purchase point to a lack of coherence in the military strategy and doctrine underpinning the acquisition.

Whether the F-16 procurement would have effectively supported either strategy is also uncertain. The small number of F-16 aircraft (sixteen were

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of "hundreds." Y. Thaphiewmai, *Samphan Lan Bat thi Banromkiao Bueanglang Khwamkhatyaeng Rawang Thai Lao* (Bangkok: Panyachon Press, 1988), p. 360.

128. Danny Unger, "From Domino to Dominant: Thailand's Security Policies in the Twenty-First Century," *East Asia in Transition: Towards a New Regional Order* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1995), p. 243.

129. Suchit Bunbongkarn, "Opinions toward the Threat and Arms Requirements of the Thai Military," in *Rabop thaban Thai*, p. 130.

130. Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 14.

131. Quoted in Pannida, "Kansue Awut Thansamai," pp. 63–64.

132. "Active Defense is cited in some Thai defense policy documents but is not explained. A Thai military officer interviewee stated that Active Defense doctrine "concerns protection of the border" and noted that it required "an early warning system and rapid deployment of forces to the border." The comments suggest that the doctrine is defensive, aimed at denying adversaries their objectives.

acquired) would have been of limited utility in supporting whichever strategy—deterrent or defensive—the armed forces adopted.<sup>133</sup> A single squadron of F-16s could probably have defended no more than one location.<sup>134</sup> If the designated location was Bangkok, the rest of Thailand would have been protected only with lower-capability F-5s, which would have been hard-pressed to cope with Vietnam's numerical advantage. Second, because of the lack of a dedicated training squadron, Thailand would have had to choose between reduced availability for training and a smaller number of mission-ready aircraft stationed on alert. With either choice, Thai combat air patrol capability for defending one location with F-16s would have been degraded, possibly with serious consequences for aircraft survivability.

The effectiveness of a small number of F-16s in a deterrent role is also uncertain. That is, could they have delivered a punishing blow to the Vietnamese homeland? The Vietnamese air force was formidable, with 300 combat aircraft by 1979, including 70 MiG-21s with advanced electronic systems. Hanoi was also protected by a large array of Soviet-built surface-to-air missiles and radar-guided anti-aircraft batteries.<sup>135</sup> But regardless of Vietnam's defenses, strikes on Hanoi were unlikely to be effective at shaping the calculations of Vietnamese leaders. The U.S. "Rolling Thunder" campaign of strategic bombing of North Vietnam from 2 March 1965 to 31 October 1968 comprised 294,000 sorties dropping 605,000 tons of ordnance, but the campaign was not successful in

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133. Twelve of the single-seat F-16 A and four of the twin-seat F-16 B were acquired. See Pannida, "Kansue Awut Thansamai," p. 137.

134. Combat aircraft, when used in a defensive role, usually defend a particular area, asset, or activity in groups of two or four aircraft known as a combat air patrol (CAP). The extent to which a CAP task can be sustained depends on "the task's distance from home base, whether the aircraft need to be airborne or on 'strip alert', how many hours per day the CAP is needed, how many crews are available (and their recent flying programs), and *how many aircraft are available*." In an analysis of Australia's combat aircraft needs, analysts David Connery and Peter Nicholson assume that a joint strike fighter squadron (JSF squadron) of sixteen aircraft would be required to provide twelve fully mission capable (FMC) aircraft, with the remaining aircraft in either planned or unplanned maintenance. With twelve FMC aircraft supported by air-to-air refueling and airborne early warning and control aircraft, an air force could sustain CAP for 18 hours a day, 7 days a week for an extended period. However, even with the advantages of air-to-air refueling and airborne early warning and control, a complete JSF squadron could protect only one large Australian city such as Darwin. In assessing the optimum size of the total fleet—that is, how many aircraft in total Australia should purchase—Connery and Nicholson state that one of Australia's JSF squadrons would need to be a *dedicated training unit* of 12–18 aircraft because the demands of achieving proficiency in flying combat aircraft of this type are such that continual training is necessary. But because training competes with the operational role, a pool of aircraft must be reserved solely for training. See Peter Nicholson and David Connery, "Australia's Future Joint Strike Fighter Fleet: How Much Is Too Little?," Kokoda Paper No. 2, October 2005, The Kokoda Foundation; emphasis added.

135. Chen, *China's War with Vietnam*, p. 103.

ending the North's support for the Viet Cong in the South.<sup>136</sup> Therefore, even if Thai F-16s were able to penetrate Vietnam's air defenses, it is doubtful that these aircraft (even with the added force of 54 F-5 fighter aircraft) would have been able to inflict costs sufficient to dissuade the Vietnamese leadership from any course of military action they had settled on.<sup>137</sup>

If the military logic of the F-16 procurement was flawed, then implementation of a significant strand of both the Active Defense Strategy and conventional modernization military strategy was undermined. Moreover, this came at a cost to other programs. The Thai air force reportedly implemented its own 10 percent cut and postponed the procurement of C-130 transport aircraft in order to purchase the F-16s.<sup>138</sup> Fewer C-130s would have meant reduced mobility and reduced capacity for the Thai army, potentially limiting its ability to respond rapidly to either internal security or border security incidents.

Official strategy for the defense of Thailand was incoherent, and its implementation underdone. The NESDB plan to strengthen the civil contribution under the Total War Strategy was in tension with what actually occurred: a reduction in the number of paramilitary units and the emergence of an unofficial "conventional warfare" doctrine. Arms procurements were evidently not accompanied by appropriate operational-level doctrine or by improvements in training, preparedness, intelligence, command and control, and basing. Preparations to defend or secure the eastern border were thus neglected. Moreover, the doctrines that were cited were inconsistently interpreted, as in the case of the Active Defense Strategy cited by the Thai air force in support of its purchase of F-16s.

## **Applying Strategic Culture to Understanding Thai Operational Inefficiency: An Analytically Eclectic Approach**

The immediate causes of Thai operational inefficiency were a lack of appropriate military doctrine and weak command and control. These existed at least in part because of the absence of strong centralized control of the military in Thailand. Thai military organizational culture—in particular, its royalism and factionalism—shaped civil-military relations. Hence, an analytically

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136. John T. Smith, *The Linebacker Raids: The Bombing of North Vietnam, 1972* (London: Arms & Armour Press, 1998), p. 36.

137. Wolf, "Thailand's Security and Armed Forces," p. 986.

138. Ibid.

eclectic argument can be constructed to interpret Thai operational weakness in terms of military doctrine, military command and control, weak central government control, civil-military relations, and organizational culture. These factors in totality contributed to Thailand's suboptimal operational-level response to Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia from 1979 to 1989.

The Thai military was professionalized in the late-nineteenth century and over the next century achieved a strong corporate identity through participation in combat at home and abroad. Critical events and decision points in Thai history gave rise to three distinctive features of military organizational culture: royalism, army dominance, and factionalism. Of these, royalism and factionalism are the most germane to Thailand's military operational inefficiency.

Royalism emerged in the modern Thai military's organizational culture because of the circumstances of the military's establishment. The army began as a royal bodyguard—a force to protect Chulalongkorn's absolute monarchy.<sup>139</sup> A paid professional force strengthened Chulalongkorn's control of the then-dispersed sources of military power, replacing the links between commoners and nobles with links between commoners and the monarchy. This diminished the power of rival nobles, for whom control of personnel was an important source of power. Early on, members of the Thai royal family staffed the upper ranks of the military. After the 1932 revolution overthrowing Thailand's absolute monarchy, royalism subsided for a time. However, the ascent of military dictator Sarit Thanarat in 1957 paved the way for its renewal. Sarit sought the support of the monarchy to provide a more solid foundation for military rule, organized extensive exposure for the king, and increased the palace's budget and transferred the army's 21st regiment to palace duties.<sup>140</sup> In return, the king legitimized the military's involvement in politics. The partnership broadened and deepened through the Cold War, a process that has continued until today and to the point where the "sacred duty of defending the nation cannot be separated from defending the throne."<sup>141</sup>

Factionalism emerged as a core part of Thai military organizational culture in the wake of the 1932 revolution. The individual Thai armed services essentially became factions, with the navy and army used as respective power

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139. Directorate of Education and Research, *Prawat Kongthapthai Nai Rop Songroipi 2325–2525* (Bangkok: Supreme Command Headquarters, 1982), p. 101.

140. Thak Chaloeontiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 205; and Paul Handley, *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand's Bumiphol Adulyadej* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 144.

141. Chaiwat Satha-Anand, "Layers of a Strategic Culture," in Ken Booth and Russell Trood, eds., *Strategic Cultures in the Asia-Pacific Region* (London: MacMillan, 1999), p. 155.

bases for political rivals Pridi Phanomyong and Phibun Songkram.<sup>142</sup> Later on, cross-service factional groups emerged, clustered around strong leaders such as Sarit Thanarat.<sup>143</sup> Factions based on groups of military officers who entered various military colleges in the same year also emerged and became part of Thailand's military organizational culture. The most potent class-based factionalism evolved in the army's CRMA. Loyalty to CRMA classmates is deeply entrenched and persists throughout a given officer's military career and post-retirement civilian life. Some external observers argue that military officers' loyalty to their own *run* (class) can be greater than their loyalty to the royal family or even to their own family.<sup>144</sup> Although class-based factions have helped compensate for the stovepiping of the services of the Thai armed forces, they have also detracted from the unity of command.<sup>145</sup>

Royalism and factionalism affect Thailand's civil-military relations on a daily basis. Although the causes of coups and the involvement of Thailand's military in politics are complex and multifaceted, military organizational culture plays an important part.<sup>146</sup> Royalist-nationalist ideology and Thai-style democracy established under Sarit's reign revived royalism in the military to such an extent that it weakened the military's acceptance of the authority of central governments, especially elected governments.<sup>147</sup> A telling example is the 2006 analogy offered by former prime minister and privy counselor

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142. After the 1947 coup, political leader Pridi Phanomyong attempted a comeback in the Palace Rebellion. The navy supported Pridi and clashed violently with the army. Armed conflict between the army and navy broke out again during the Manhattan Rebellion of June 1951. Daniel Fineman. *A Special Relationship: The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947–1958* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), p. 84.

143. The Khana Thahan faction that formed in Sarit's time effectively ruled Thailand from 1957 to 1973. Terence C. Lee, "The Causes of Military Insubordination: Explaining Military Organizational Behavior in China, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand," Ph.D. Diss., University of Washington, 2006, p. 60.

144. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

145. Terence Lee points to factionalism as a major contributor to Thai military insubordination during the suppression of political demonstrations in 1973. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

146. For diagnoses of the causes of Thai military involvement in politics, see David A. Wilson, *Politics in Thailand* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962); John L. S. Girling, *Thailand, Society and Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966); and Fred Riggs, *Thailand: The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity* (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1966). For more recent interpretations, see Michael K. Connors, "Liberalism, Authoritarianism and the Politics of Decisionism in Thailand," *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (2009), pp. 355–373; and Nicholas Farrelly, "Why Democracy Struggles: Thailand's Elite Coup Culture," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 67, No. 3 (2013), pp. 281–296.

147. In Thai-style democracy the power of the monarchy is significantly greater than monarchies in Western constitutional monarchies. See Kevin Hewison and Kengkij Kitirianglarp, "Thai-Style Democracy: The Royalist Struggle for Thailand's Politics," in Soren Ivarsson and Lotte Isager, eds., *Saying the Unsayable: Monarchy and Democracy in Thailand* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2010).

General Prem Tinsulanonda to describe the relative positions of the military, monarchy, and government. In a widely reported speech before the coup of 19 September 2006, Prem likened the military to a horse, the monarchy to its owner, and the government to its jockey, implying that civilian control of the military was temporary and transitional, whereas the monarchy's control was permanent.<sup>148</sup>

Thai military factionalism in Thailand also affects the military's involvement in politics. Factions provide bases for campaigns and facilitate political involvement. The ascent of Army General Arthid Kamlang-Ek in the 1980s is one example. Arthid formed an alliance with the so-called Young Turks faction, which unsuccessfully challenged then Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda.<sup>149</sup> Once a faction enters government, it distributes promotions and appointments to the benefit of factional colleagues, often spurring excluded class groups to mobilize politically. Class- or faction-related promotion of officers was high during the coups and countercoups of the 1960s. Each coup was followed by purges of rival officers and promotion of loyal officers.<sup>150</sup> The coup of 1991 was in part the "result of friction between graduates of various CRMA classes beginning in 1980, which finally culminated in a major rift between the military and the government."<sup>151</sup>

The effect of Thai military involvement in politics, regardless of its origin, is that Thailand's central governments, whether they comprise military personnel or elected politicians, are reluctant to exert strong control over the various arms of the Thai military. Coups likewise deter politicians from seeking an understanding of defense issues. Consequently, central governments—especially, elected ones—tend to abstain from involvement in Thai strategic policy, military strategy, procurement, doctrine, and promotions. A Thai military officer I interviewed in 2012 baldly stated: "Civilian governments are not generally interested in strategy. They just give the budget to the Governments to try to prevent coups."<sup>152</sup>

Where military organizations are not directed by civilian (or central) authority, they will pursue the strategies and doctrines most comfortable to them and not necessarily those most effective and efficient for the achievement of

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148. "Prem: Bad Leaders Are Doomed to Failure," *The Nation*, September 1, 2006.

149. Surachart, "From Dominance to Power Sharing," p. 39.

150. Moshe Lissak, *Military Roles in Modernization: Civil-Military Relations in Thailand and Burma* (London: Sage Publications, 1976), p. 93.

151. Ukrist Pathmanand, "A Different Coup d'État," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (2008), p. 125.

152. Retired Thai army general, interview, Bangkok, July 2012.

national defense objectives. Organizational theory predicts that “military organizations . . . should be amongst the hardest to control. They are parochial, closed, large, endowed with all sorts of resources, and masters of a particularly arcane technology.”<sup>153</sup> Barry Posen argues that without strong central control,

militaries will arrange a “negotiated environment.” This is likely to take the form of either preserving a customary budgetary split or dividing shares equally. *Each service will prepare for its own war. Forces will not cooperate effectively.* Neither will they be well-balanced. A tendency will emerge for each service to set requirements as if it were fighting the war alone. This can easily result in misallocation of the scarce security resources of the state.<sup>154</sup>

Evidence suggests that operational planning for the defense of Thailand from a possible Vietnamese attack was suboptimal because of the systemic impacts of weak central control, as organizational theory predicts and Thai organizational culture helped to produce.

Throughout the 1980s, Thai military class-based factionalism encouraged coup plotting, thereby weakening civilian control of the military. Factionalism in the Thai military was endemic over the period of Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia. Middle-ranking officers and groups were organized variously along lines of command positions, shared class groups, or common ideology.<sup>155</sup> General Prem Tinsulanonda, installed as prime minister in March 1980 shortly after Vietnam's invasion, had as his most immediate challenge to “instill order in highly fractious armed forces, unifying the military under his government.”<sup>156</sup> Royalism also remained a powerful force, diminishing the authority of central governments. In the 1980s, the prominent links between the palace and the military remained visible, with the royal family's capacity to endorse or withhold approval of political power plays critical in determining the coup-makers' success. Some officers and units formed allegiances with the queen.<sup>157</sup>

Even apart from coup plotting, military involvement in politics was institutionalized throughout this period.<sup>158</sup> Although elections occurred and

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153. Posen, *Sources of Military Doctrine*, p. 39.

154. *Ibid.*, p. 54; emphasis added.

155. Surachart, “From Dominance to Power Sharing,” p. 35.

156. Paul Chambers, “A Short History of Military Influence in Thailand,” in Paul Chambers, ed., *Knights of the Realm: Thailand's Military and Police, Then and Now* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2013), pp. 207–217.

157. Chambers, “Short History,” p. 214.

158. Michael Connors, *Democracy and National Identity in Thailand* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2007), p. 97.

political parties were active, Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda was a serving military officer for the first part of his tenure and had come to power following an audience with the king rather than after an election. The Senate comprised mostly appointed military officers.<sup>159</sup> Fittingly, the Thai term for this period is *prachatipatai khrueng bai*, meaning “half-baked democracy.”<sup>160</sup> A coup-prone government with a parliament heavily shaped by the military and its factions was unable to take charge of the military and force doctrinal coherence, significant reform, or better operational performance.

The lack of strong central control explains the lack of a suitable joint doctrine for Thailand’s conventional military operations. The Total War Strategy was primarily a counterinsurgency doctrine with little applicability for conventional military operations. The active defense doctrine appeared to be barely understood. In the absence of a shared doctrine, each service appears to have employed its own doctrine. For example, the Thai air force preferred to focus on a doctrinally flawed acquisition of combat aircraft rather than providing a tactical lift to ground forces. Analysts have argued that some of the single-service doctrines were ill-suited to Thailand’s circumstances, having been adopted from U.S. counterparts with little adaptation. For example, the Thai army adopted the West Point curriculum in its entirety in 1949, without any modification or adaptation.<sup>161</sup> As a result, the Thai military used the U.S. Air-Land doctrine, which Robert Karniol argues was beyond the capabilities of the Thai military, in part because most Thai army exercises are performed at a smaller unit level, such as the battalion level.<sup>162</sup>

Royalism, factionalism, and involvement in politics together also account for the heavy concentration of military units and forces around Bangkok during the crisis and, conversely, the relative neglect of the border regions. The army had expanded its role in the capital after 1981, moving into policing roles through the establishment of a Capital Security Command.<sup>163</sup> Sukhumbhand Paribatra points out that from the military’s own perspective this was a noble and proper function, because the “military’s role was given a wide interpretation, and officers believed strongly that their *supreme duty* was to maintain order, safeguard the key national institutions, and administer the nation’s progress.”<sup>164</sup>

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159. Chambers, “Short History,” pp. 206, 217.

160. *Ibid.*, p. 205.

161. Surachart, “From Dominance to Power Sharing,” p. 99.

162. Karniol, “Thailand’s Armed Forces,” p. 102.

163. Suchit, *Military in Thai Politics*, p. 58.

164. Sukhumbhand, “Thailand: Defense Spending and Threat Perceptions,” p. 82; emphasis added.

Finally, confidence in success at the strategic and politico-military levels may have reduced elite concern about the consequences of operational ineffectiveness. Thai governments may well have been content with the security value that the Chulalongkorn-inspired politico-military strategy provided: a formal alliance with a powerful albeit distant state (the United States) able to provide weaponry and intelligence support; a quasi-alliance with a near neighbor (China) able to raise the costs of the Vietnamese in Cambodia; an effective diplomatic strategy using ASEAN and the world community to isolate its adversary; a series of internal security and volunteer programs that, even if ineffective in inculcating military skills, were effective in increasing national unity; and a well-equipped albeit poorly led and organized military that could nonetheless provide some deterrent value in the event of the worst-case scenario, a large or full-scale Vietnamese assault.

## **Conclusion**

In appraising Thailand's approach to managing the threat posed by the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia from 1979 to 1989, we can be confident that Vietnam's presence in Cambodia *was* a crisis for Thai security. Vietnam's potential designs for an Indochina union and dominance in mainland Southeast Asia, its clear military superiority (in both quality and quantity of its forces), and its support from the Soviet Union together underscore why Thailand should have reviewed its security position. Thailand also had reason to be concerned about U.S. disengagement from the region, although this concern was mitigated by the splits in the Communist bloc and, in particular, China's clear determination to oppose Vietnamese dominance in mainland Southeast Asia.

Two key narratives of Thai strategic culture—the “deeds of Chulalongkorn” and the “fall of Ayutthaya”—influenced Thai management of this crisis at the politico-military level. In line with the behaviors predicted by the “deeds of Chulalongkorn” narrative, Thai elites generally eschewed significantly increased militarization and defense spending and instead emphasized coalition building and diplomacy. The military was used as a tool of politico-military diplomacy, forging a new partnership with China through the joint provision of arms to the Khmer Rouge resistance forces. In line with the behaviors anticipated by the “fall of Ayutthaya” narrative, the maintenance of unity was strongly emphasized through a range of civic security programs.

The intent to meet the Vietnamese threat through a Total Warfare Strategy featuring paramilitary and civil defense programs was in tension with the allocation of resources away from paramilitaries and toward conventional arms purchases. Thailand also appears to have lacked a coherent operational doctrine for conventional joint operations and paid insufficient attention to defense capability inputs, including appropriate training, preparedness, logistics, intelligence, and command. The lack of doctrine may also have contributed to poor investment decisions, such as the purchase of a single squadron of F-16s whose role was uncertain. Additionally, military resources were concentrated around the capital, leaving the eastern border regions relatively neglected, despite the Vietnamese presence in neighboring Cambodia.

An analytically eclectic explanation emphasizing the interplay between military organizational culture and Thailand's political system can help explain, together with organizational theory, this operational inefficiency. Chronic factionalism at top leadership levels during the 1980s, together with the military leadership's involvement in politics, meant that no strong central government had control of the military. Organizational theory predicts that such a situation can contribute to the lack of joint conventional doctrine observed in this period. When the Total War Strategy was in place, it was not fully implemented or resourced. The lack of conventional doctrine may have prompted each service to acquire its own preferred equipment while paying scant attention to achieving operational coherence through thorough exercises, training, and preparedness planning. Royalism also played into the civil-military relations of the period, encouraging the military's involvement in politics and diminishing the authority of the central government and its capacity to control the various arms of the military. The military's royalism may have also contributed to a focus on protection of the capital and the relative neglect of Thailand's eastern border regions.

The combination of adroit politico-military maneuvering and mediocre operational performance suggests that Thailand's response to the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia is best termed an "accommodative" response. The accommodative character can be seen in reliance on the politico-military strategy of coalition building, acceptance of the limitations of the Thai military's poor operational performance, and tolerance of the erosion of national sovereignty in the form of Vietnamese encroachments and infringements on Thai frontier territories. Perhaps the accommodative response is best characterized by Kramol Tongdhamchart's 1983 study of Thai elite opinion. The study states, "Thailand [was] going about facing the question of uncertain national security by 'muddling through,' indulging in the comfort that such

a 'strategy,' combined with strokes of fortune, has been adequate in meeting challenges, past and present, to its survival.<sup>165</sup>

In the end, although factionalism and political involvement impeded effective doctrinal development and operational-level planning, they did not prevent the Thai military from achieving strategic success. The military commenced a relationship with China that was instrumental in pinning down Vietnamese forces in counterinsurgency warfare. Close military ties were also maintained with the United States. Despite the Thai military's poor command and preparation, these factors decreased Vietnam's appetite for attacking Thailand.

This article's primary aim has been to increase understanding of an important moment in Thailand's Cold War history, as well as to illuminate more enduring aspects of the Thai state's approach to the use of force in its external security. The analysis also has theoretical value, demonstrating that strategic culture, when combined eclectically with other variables such as civil-military relations, can offer powerful explanations. The article indicates that subaltern strategic cultures, shaped by the experience of being a vulnerable state in an international environment dominated by colonial and great powers, can be enduring and influential decades later, even in a substantially different context such as the Cold War.

Does this culturally based explanation offer insights beyond that which neorealist theory might provide? At the politico-military level, strategic culture offers an explanation largely parallel to neorealist theory. The balance-of-power theory predicts that when states are faced with military threats, they balance—either by forming coalitions or by mobilizing their own resources to build military capability, or by some combination of the two.<sup>166</sup> Neorealist theorists would argue that Thailand *balanced* against Vietnam's threat by seeking a new quasi-alliance with China and strengthening its alliance with the United States. The neorealist theory might also describe Thailand's reliance on its alliances and strategic partners as "buck-passing" because it enabled security without high levels of defense spending.<sup>167</sup> But strategic culture offers an alternative to neorealism in explaining why Thailand preferred to meet Vietnam's threat with diplomacy and alliance formation rather than with increases in military capability. Thailand's strategic culture had long emphasized the

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165. Kramol et al., *Thai Elite's National Security Perspectives*, p. 3.

166. Posen, *Sources of Military Doctrine*, p. 61. See also Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

167. See, for example, John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.H. Norton, 2001), p. 157.

**Table 2.** Neorealism versus strategic culture: Thai strategic behavior 1979–1989

Theoretical construct	Level of Strategic Behavior	Can It Explain Thai Strategic Behavior 1979–1989?
Neorealism	Politico-military	Yes—predicts external and internal balancing to manage threat
Strategic culture (politico-military narratives)	Politico-military	Yes—predicts emphasis on diplomacy to manage threat and emphasis on internal unity
Neorealism	Military operational	No—predicts efficient mobilization of resources to mitigate the threat
Strategic culture and military organizational culture in concert with Thai civil-military relations and generic organizational factors (analytically eclectic account)	Military operational	Yes—explains why Thai military doctrine and command insufficiently developed to optimize preparedness and capability

importance of diplomacy to negate security risk while holding military force as a last-resort option. Thailand's case suggests that strategic culture could be useful for explaining why some states incline toward external balancing and others emphasize internal balancing. Strategic culture could potentially explain, for example, why pre-World War I Germany met its security concerns primarily through building military capability rather than through forging alliances.<sup>168</sup>

Table 2 compares neorealist accounts and the analytically eclectic, culturally based explanation presented here. At the military operational level, classic neorealist theory would not have anticipated Thailand's response to Vietnam's invasion and occupation. Kenneth Waltz predicts that states will generally choose the most efficient military practices: "Contending states imitate the military innovations contrived by the country of greatest capability and

168. Christopher Clark comments, "the habit of seeking autonomy and security through the maximization of strength was a deeply established feature of German policy from Bismarck to Bulow to Bethmann Hollweg." See Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), p. 358.

ingenuity.”<sup>169</sup> Posen predicts that civilian intervention into military planning increases when there are growing threats.<sup>170</sup> However, my analysis shows that military planning and preparedness in Thailand improved little in the 1980s and that Thai central governments did little to address this. The dysfunctional aspects of Thai military planning can be better explained by the analytically eclectic combination of civil-military relations, generic organizational factors, and, ultimately, the military’s organizational culture.

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169. Kenneth N. Waltz, “Anarchic Orders and Balances of Power,” in Robert O. Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 128.

170. Posen, *Sources of Military Doctrine*, p. 76.