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## **Thailand’s Military Relations with China: Moving from Strength to Strength**

*Ian Storey\**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- As the US scaled back defence cooperation with Thailand after the 2014 coup, Thailand’s military relations with China strengthened considerably.
- China has become an important source of arms imports for Thailand. While Chinese military equipment is not as technologically advanced as US weapons systems, it is cheaper and sufficient in quality to meet Thailand’s defence requirements in a low-threat environment.
- Thai-China military exercises have expanded in scope and frequency but still lack the scale and complexity of US-Thai drills such as Cobra Gold.
- The number of Thai officers studying in China has increased since Washington terminated funding for Thai military personnel to study in the US after 2014.

*\*Ian Storey is Senior Fellow and Editor of Contemporary Southeast Asia at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.*

## INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-1980s, among all the countries in Southeast Asia, Thailand has developed the closest defence relationship with China. Over the past three decades, the intensity of that relationship has fluctuated: from very strong in the 1980s—when the two countries forged a de facto strategic alliance to contain Vietnamese expansionism in mainland Southeast Asia—to tepid in the 1990s, and moderately strong from the early 2000s under Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and after the 2006 military coup which deposed him.<sup>1</sup>

Since the 2014 military coup, Thai-China military ties have moved from strength to strength. Four reasons account for this. First, and most importantly, was America's negative response to the coup. The US cut US\$3.5 million in Foreign Military Financing (for the acquisition of US defence equipment, services and training), terminated US\$1.3 million in annual funding for Thailand under the International Military Education and Training (IMET) programme (which sponsors Thai military officers to attend US military educational institutions) and cancelled or downsized US-Thai combined military exercises.<sup>2</sup> As the US reduced its defence engagement activities with Thailand, the junta pro-actively approached China to deepen existing military cooperation. Sensing an opportunity to increase its influence in the Kingdom, and undermine the US-Thai alliance, China responded positively to the junta's overtures. The second reason has been the upsurge in China's global military defence diplomacy activities since President Xi Jinping took office in 2012.<sup>3</sup> A third factor is China's elevated role in Thailand's foreign relations—China is now the country's largest trade partner and second-largest source of foreign direct investment—and the absence of territorial or maritime boundary disputes between the two countries. A fourth reason has been the increase in Thailand's defence budget since 2014 which has made more money available for military hardware.<sup>4</sup>

Several developments highlight the extent to which Thai-China defence ties have strengthened since 2014. First, China has become an important source of arms imports for Thailand. China has agreed to supply Thailand with three diesel-electric submarines for US\$1.03 billion (the biggest defence deal in the Kingdom's history) and 48 main battle tanks. China's state-owned defence companies have been able to undercut their international competitors on price and offer the Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTARF) equipment that is more than adequate to meet the country's defence needs in a low-threat security environment. In addition, the two countries have agreed to establish in Thailand a joint maintenance facility to service Chinese-made military vehicles and a joint armaments production facility. Second, the scope and frequency of Thai-China military exercises has increased, and the RTARF now exercises with the Chinese army, navy and air force on an annual basis. Third, following the termination of IMET funding, more RTARF officers and cadets are attending courses at PLA-affiliated military educational institutions. Fourth, China has upgraded its defence attaché to Thailand from a one-star to a two-star general—its highest-ranked military attaché in Southeast Asia.<sup>5</sup>

Despite long-standing problems in US-Thai relations, Thailand remains committed to its alliance with America so as to keep its relations with America and China in balance.<sup>6</sup> And although the US downsized its defence engagement activities with Thailand between 2014 and 2017, US-Thai military relations are still much more substantive than those between Thailand and China. Furthermore, since President Donald Trump took office in January 2017, US-Thai relations have been almost fully normalized and look set to improve further

following Thailand’s elections on 24 March 2019, including the restoration of IMET funding. In 2017, the US arms sales ban on Thailand was lifted and the RTARF has since ordered four Blackhawk helicopters and 60 Stryker armoured vehicles from the US.<sup>7</sup> Prime Minister General (retired) Prayuth Chan-ocha’s meeting with President Trump at the White House in October 2017 was widely perceived in Thailand as a major positive turning point in the post-coup relationship.

Nevertheless, despite these improvements, bilateral relations have not “snapped back” to where they were before the 2014—or even the 2006—coup. While the US has pledged to re-energize its alliance with Thailand, Bangkok is uneasy with the Trump administration’s identification of China as a strategic competitor and the implications of increased US-China rivalry for Southeast Asia.<sup>8</sup> Despite the lifting of the arms sales ban, Thailand views US weapons systems as too expensive and at risk of future US arms embargoes should political relations deteriorate again. Meanwhile, China has made significant gains in its defence relations with Thailand since 2014, and cooperation is set to continue on an upward trajectory under the new pro-military government which is likely to be formed following the March elections.

This article examines how Thailand’s defence ties with China have improved in three areas since 2014: defence acquisitions; combined military exercises; and military educational exchanges.<sup>9</sup>

## CHINESE DEFENCE SALES TO THAILAND

Thailand’s defence acquisitions from China can be divided into four phases. Phase one was in the 1980s when China transferred tanks, armoured personnel carriers and rocket launchers to Thailand at “friendship prices” (at or below cost) to bolster the Royal Thai Army (RTA) in its confrontation with Vietnam which had occupied neighbouring Cambodia. Phase two was in the 1990s when Thailand took delivery of six Chinese-made frigates which were subsequently outfitted with Western communications and weapons systems. In the 2000s, during phase three, Bangkok ordered two Thai-designed offshore patrol boats from China and multiple rocket launch systems (see Table 1).

Table 1  
**Chinese Defence Sales to Thailand (1987-2017)**

Year Ordered	Year Delivered	Weapon System	RTARF Service	No. of Units	Cost
1987	1988-89	T-69 main battle tank	Army	53	“Friendship prices”
1987	1987-88	Type-85 armoured personnel carrier	Army	410	“Friendship prices”
1987	1988-89	T-81/83/85 multiple rocket launcher	Army	60	“Friendship prices”
1988	1988	HN-5A portable surface-to-air missile launcher	Army	650	“Friendship prices”
1988	1991-95	<i>Jianghu</i> -class and <i>Naresuan</i> -class frigates	Navy	6	US\$272 million

1988	1991	C-801 anti-ship missile	Navy	50	US\$40 million
2001	2001	Rocket-propelled grenade launcher	Army	N/A	N/A
2002	2005-06	<i>Pattani</i> -class off-shore patrol vessel	Navy	2	US\$66-99 million
2007	2009-14	C-802 anti-ship missile	Navy	60	US\$49 million
2008	2008	QW-18 man portable air defence system	Army	13	N/A
2008	2011-18	WS-1B self-propelled multiple rocket launch system	Army	15	N/A
2015	2016	BL904A artillery locating radar	Army	2	N/A
2016	2016	KS-1C medium-range surface-to-air missile battery	Air Force	1	N/A
2016-17	2017	VT-4 main battle tanks	Army	48	US\$280 million
2017	[scheduled 2023]	S-26T diesel electric submarine	Navy	3	US\$1.03 billion
2017	2018	ZBL-09 armoured personnel carrier	Army	34	US\$58 million

Source: Various media reports 1987-2019; SIPRI Arms Transfer Database, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>

The 2014 coup marked the beginning of the fourth phase when the US arms embargo forced Thailand to look for alternatives. But the arms ban was not the only reason Thailand turned to China and other countries. While the RTARF regards US equipment as the best that is available on the market, it is also quite expensive. In addition, spare parts and munitions could be curtailed in the event of future US sanctions (since another military coup in Thailand cannot be ruled out). China's state-owned arms industries, on the other hand, can offer subsidized weapons systems that are much cheaper than their US equivalents. The Thai government also perceives Chinese arms as having "no strings attached" i.e. sales are not tied to political developments in Thailand. Moreover, apart from the 15-year-old insurgency in the country's southern provinces, Thailand enjoys a relatively low-threat security environment that does not require the acquisition of high-end equipment. In short, in terms of price, quality and fit, Chinese military equipment represents a good buy for Thailand.

#### *S-26T Submarines: Buy Two, Get One Free*

Thailand's 2015 decision to acquire three diesel-electric submarines from China for US\$1.03 billion was the most expensive and significant defence procurement decision in the country's history. Although Thailand is not the only Asian country to order Chinese submarines,<sup>10</sup> it was the first Southeast Asian country to do so.

The Royal Thai Navy's (RTN) quest to acquire a fleet of submarines dates back to the early 1990s. Although the Navy has long argued that it needs submarines to defend the country's sovereignty and maritime resources, the primary rationale is to match the subsurface capabilities of Thailand's neighbours.<sup>11</sup> In 2017, Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister General (retired) Prawit Wongsuwan admitted as much when he stated that "The Thai Navy requires submarines to maintain a military balance in the region because neighbouring countries already have them. It will help protect our sovereignty, as well as our abundant marine resources, notably in the Andaman Sea."<sup>12</sup>

In 2008, China had offered to sell the RTN two refurbished *Song*-class submarines, but the offer was rejected on the grounds that they were not as advanced as the submarines being acquired by Thailand's neighbours. Thailand looked at other options, including Russia, Germany and South Korea, but rejected them all as too expensive. The US was not an option as it does not manufacture diesel-electric submarines.

After the 2014 coup, Thailand's submarine acquisition plans were stepped up. In 2015, the junta invited foreign companies to bid for the supply of two submarines within a budget of US\$1.03 billion. China offered a package deal that no other country could match: three brand-new S-26T submarines (the export variant of the 039A *Yuan*-class with an air-independent propulsion system which allows the vessels to stay submerged for extended periods) for the price of two, including combat systems, crew training and a ten-year repayment period. However, the deal came under domestic criticism for its lack of transparency, excessive cost and strategic rationale, forcing the RTA to justify the decision.<sup>13</sup> It was not until May 2017 that the RTN made a down payment of US\$410 million to the state-run China Shipbuilding Industry Corporation.<sup>14</sup> In September 2018, the keel for the first submarine was laid down at the Wuchang Shipyard in Wuhan, with delivery expected in 2023.<sup>15</sup> The payment, construction and delivery schedule for the other two submarines has not yet been announced. Indeed some observers have questioned whether the acquisition of the second and third submarines will actually go ahead as a future, less pro-military, government might cancel the order.

In addition to the criticisms mentioned above, other issues have been raised over Thailand's decision to buy Chinese submarines. First, given the complexity and high costs of operating submarines, it is possible that they will become under-utilized prestige systems, much like Thailand's helicopter carrier HTMS *Chakri Naruebet*, which was delivered in 1997 but has rarely left port since, save for the occasional military exercise and disaster relief operation. Second, integrating the RTN's surface ships and aircraft with the submarines may be problematic as the former are equipped with Western-supplied command and control systems. To get around this problem, Sweden has been awarded a contract to better integrate the communication systems between the RTARF's air and naval platforms, and it has been reported that the second and third submarines could be outfitted with Western equipment.<sup>16</sup> Third, the RTN plans to homeport two submarines at Sattahip Naval Base on the east coast and the third near Phuket on the west coast. If China wins the contract to build the submarine base at Sattahip, this could create problems with Washington as US Navy ships are frequent visitors to the port and the proximity to Chinese personnel raises security concerns.

### *VT-4 Tanks and Other Equipment*

As tanks supplied to the RTA by China and the US in the 1980s reached the end of their service life in the 2000s, the army began to look for replacements. In 2011, while still under US sanctions, the Thai government placed a US\$240 million order with a Ukrainian company for 49 T-84 Oplot tanks.<sup>17</sup> Although the last batch of tanks was finally delivered in 2018, production delays caused by the conflict in eastern Ukraine after Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014 led Thailand to seek alternative vendors for future orders.

There were two main contenders: Russia's T-90MS main battle tank and China's VT-4. Due to its lower pricing, Thailand accepted the Chinese offer and in May 2016 ordered 28 VT-4s. In 2017-18, the Thai government ordered an additional 20 VT-4s, bringing the total to 48 tanks for US\$280 million. The first tanks were delivered in October 2017. In January 2018, the RTA publicly showcased its VT-4s and praised them for their price, manoeuvrability and firepower. Thailand may exercise an option to purchase an additional 50 VT-4s.<sup>18</sup> Thailand is the first foreign country to operate the VT-4.

Chinese defence equipment has long suffered from a poor reputation for quality and after-sales service. To address this concern, a joint Thai-China maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) facility will be established in Nakhon Ratchasima Province in northeast Thailand. It is envisaged that this facility will also be used to service other military vehicles purchased by the RTA, and possibly even Chinese equipment operated by other Southeast Asian militaries. However, details of the MRO facility remain unclear.

In addition to VT-4 tanks, since 2014 the Thai military has procured a range of other military equipment from China, including 34 armoured personnel carriers, artillery locating radar and surface-to-air missiles (see Table 1).

### *Joint Production Facility*

As with other Southeast Asian countries, Thailand plans to establish a domestic arms industry for export purposes and to reduce reliance on foreign arms manufacturers. Since 2007, Bangkok and Beijing have been in discussions to set-up a joint armaments production facility with technology transfers from China. Progress has been slow. In 2012, agreement was reportedly reached to jointly manufacture multiple rocket launch systems (MRLS).<sup>19</sup> However, in 2014, Thailand ordered several batteries of the WS-1B MRLS from China, suggesting that joint production had not yet begun. The two sides continue to discuss joint defence technology production.

## **THAI-CHINA MILITARY EXERCISES**

Thailand has participated in more combined military exercises with China than any other Southeast Asian country. Since 2005, the RTARF has participated in 13 bilateral (see Table 2) and 14 multilateral exercises with the PLA.<sup>20</sup>

Table 2  
**Thai-China Combined Military Exercises (2005-19)**

Date	Codename	Type of Exercise	Service	Number of Personnel/Assets	Duration	Location
Sept.-Nov. 2005	Unnamed	Landmine clearance	Army	N/A	3 months	Thai-Cambodia border
December 2005	China-Thailand Friendship-2005	Humanitarian assistance	Navy	Thailand: 1 warship China: 2 warships	3 hours 20 minutes	Gulf of Thailand
July 2007	Strike-2007	Counter-terrorism	Army Special Forces	Thailand: 15 personnel China: 15 personnel	14 days	Guangdong Province, China
July 2008	Strike-2008	Counter-terrorism	Army Special Forces	Thailand: 24 personnel China: 24 personnel	20 days	Chiang Mai, Thailand
October 2010	Strike-2010	Counter-terrorism	Army Special Forces	Thailand: 60 personnel China: 60 personnel	15 days	Guilin, China
Oct.-Nov. 2010	Blue Strike-2010	Counter-terrorism	Marine Corps	Thailand: 135 personnel China: 135 personnel	20 days	Sattahip Naval Base, Chonburi Province
May 2012	Blue Strike-2012	Counter-terrorism	Marine Corps	Thailand: 126 personnel China: 372 personnel	20 days	Guangdong Province, China
November 2015	Falcon Strike-2015	Air	Air Force	Thailand: 5 Gripen fighter jets China: 6 J-11 fighter jets	11 days	Korat Royal Thai Air Force Base, Nakhon Ratchasima Province
May-June 2016	Blue Strike-2016	Counter-terrorism	Marine Corps	Thailand: 295 personnel China: 228 personnel	17 days	Sattahip Naval Base, Chonburi Province
August 2017	Falcon Strike-2017	Air	Air Force	Thailand: 8 Gripen fighter jets China: 6 J-10 fighter jets	18 days	Udon Royal Thai Air Force Base, Udon Thani Province
September 2018	Falcon Strike-2018	Air	Air Force	Thailand: 6 Gripen fighter jets China: 6 J-10 fighter jets	18 days	Udon Royal Thai Air Force Base, Udon Thani Province
January 2019	Strike-2019	Counter-terrorism	Army Special Forces	Thailand: 100 personnel China: 60 personnel	13 days	Bangkok International Center for Counter-

						terrorism Action
May 2019	Blue Strike-2019	Maritime exercise	Navy	Thailand: 2 warships China: 5 warships	7 days	Zhenjiang, Guangdong Province

Source: Various media reports 2005-19

The bilateral exercises have included a number of “firsts”: in 2005, only three years after the PLA’s first combined exercise, Thailand became the first ASEAN country to hold military drills with China; in 2007, RTA Special Forces became the first foreign military to exercise with their Chinese counterparts; in 2010, the Thai Marines were the first foreign military service to conduct manoeuvres with the PLA-Navy Marines; and in 2015, the Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) became the first Southeast Asian air force to train alongside the People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF).

Thai and Chinese Special Forces have conducted four exercises under the codename “Strike”: in 2007, 2008 and 2010, followed by a gap of eight years until 2019. Thai and Chinese naval personnel (including Marines) have exercised four times using the codename “Blue Strike”: in 2010, 2012, 2016 and 2019. The RTAF and PLAAF have exercised three times under the codename “Falcon Strike”: in 2016, 2017 and 2018. To avoid arousing concern in neighbouring countries, Thai-China exercises have focused on addressing non-traditional security threats (such as counter-terrorism), humanitarian and disaster relief (HA/DR) and maritime search and rescue.

Although the frequency of Thai-China exercises has increased since 2014, this is also true of PLA exercises with other countries.<sup>21</sup> According to sources in Bangkok, the two sides have agreed to hold three single-service exercises every year starting in 2019. In the first half of 2019, Thailand and China held two exercises: “Strike 2019” and “Strike Blue-2019”. A “Falcon Strike” exercise is scheduled to be held in the second half of the year.

Despite the increasing frequency of Thai-China military exercises, Western defence attachés based in Thailand consider these drills to be relatively unsophisticated and simply scripted—what one observer termed as “photo op” exercises. Several reasons may account for this. First, with the exception of combat-focused exercises between the PLA and its Russian counterpart, China’s military diplomacy tends to emphasize form over substance.<sup>22</sup> Second, interoperability poses a problem because the Thai and Chinese armed forces use different equipment and are reliant on interpreters. Third, both sides have adopted a relatively cautious approach to the drills so as not to reveal their full combat capabilities and operational tactics. This is particularly important for the RTAF which operates American-manufactured equipment and uses US doctrine and tactics. Accordingly, during the Falcon Strike exercises, the RTAF has chosen to use its Swedish-built Gripens rather than its US-supplied F-16 fighter jets, while the PLAAF has deployed its domestically built J-11 and J-10 combat aircraft instead of its more advanced Russian-made SU-30s and SU-35s.

The annual Cobra Gold exercise—which has been hosted by the US and Thailand since 1982—remains the “gold standard” for the RTAF. Although US participation has fluctuated over time depending on the state of US-Thai relations and US military commitments overseas,<sup>23</sup> Cobra Gold is a much larger and more complex operation than any of the Thai-China exercises to date. Since the end of the Cold War, Cobra Gold has

moved from being a US-Thai bilateral drill to a multilateral exercise composed of three phases: a field training exercise (involving live-fire and amphibious assault exercises); a command post exercise; and a humanitarian civic assistance segment to help the local population. Twenty-nine countries participated in the 2019 edition of Cobra Gold.

China became an observer to Cobra Gold in 2002, and in 2014—at Thailand’s invitation—the PLA took part in the humanitarian civic assistance component for the first time by sending 17 personnel. The PLA’s contribution had risen to 44 troops by 2019. According to sources in Bangkok, China has asked to participate in the field training phase of Cobra Gold, but the US has expressed reluctance as it does not want to conduct combined exercises with the PLA that would improve its combat capabilities.

## **MILITARY EDUCATIONAL EXCHANGES**

Many countries encourage (and often finance) foreign military officers to undertake educational courses at their defence academies. Military educational exchanges are designed to help foreign officers understand the defence and foreign policies of the host country, improve their technical, professional and linguistic skills, and in the case of democracies, instil democratic values and respect for human rights. Above all, however, they are aimed at strengthening defence relations with, and influence in, the armed forces of foreign countries.

Following the termination of IMET funding, China increased the number of places available for RTARF officers and cadets to study at PLA-affiliated military educational institutions. These include universities (especially the National Defense University in Beijing), single-service command and staff colleges, technical and language schools, and various other military academies. China has also offered the RTARF slots on its United Nations Staff Officers Course at its Peacekeeping Training Centre in Beijing.

Since the coup, the number of RTARF officers enrolled in military courses in China increased to approximately 30 to 50 per year. This is about half the number of Thai military personnel who study in the United States on non-IMET funded courses. US military academies remain the favoured destination for Thai officers due to their prestige and the career advancement prospects they offer. The number of Thai officers studying in the US is likely to rise once IMET funding is restored. PLA officers also attend courses at Thai military educational institutions, though the numbers are much lower than RTARF personnel in China (less than ten every year).

## **CONCLUSION**

Despite the strengthening of Thai-China military ties since 2014, the United States remains Thailand’s most important security partner. Nevertheless, in a relatively short space of time, China has greatly increased its military cooperation with Thailand and emerged as a serious competitor to the US as a defence cooperation partner. As regular exercises between the two countries’ militaries increase in size, frequency and sophistication, Chinese-manufactured military equipment becomes integrated into the RTARF, and increasing numbers of Thai

military officers return from educational courses in China, Beijing's influence in Thailand's armed forces will grow.

<sup>1</sup> For more background, see Ian Storey, *Thailand's Post-Coup Relations with China and America: More Beijing, Less Washington*, Trends Paper #20 (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> A combined exercise is conducted by the armed forces of two or more countries. A joint exercise involves two or more services from the same country i.e. army, navy or air force.

<sup>3</sup> See Kenneth Allen, Philip C. Saunders and John Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003-2016: Trends and Implications* (Washington D.C.: National Defence University Press, July 2017), <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/ChinaPerspectives-11.pdf?ver=2017-07-17-153301-093>

<sup>4</sup> Thailand's defence budget has risen from US\$6 billion to US\$7 billion since 2014. "Thai junta shoots down proposal to slash defence spending", *Straits Times*, 18 February 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/thai-junta-shoots-down-proposal-to-slash-defence-spending>

<sup>5</sup> China posts two-star defence attachés in the US, Russia, UK, France and India.

<sup>6</sup> See *The Future of Thai-U.S. Relations: Views of Thai and American Leaders on the Bilateral Relationship and Ways Forward* (San Francisco, California: The Asia Foundation, August 2018), <https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/The-Future-of-Thai-U.S.-Relations.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> "U.S. plans to sell Black Hawk helicopters to Thailand", Reuters, 29 June 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-thailand/u-s-plans-to-sell-black-hawk-helicopters-to-thailand-idUSKBN19K193>; "Army seals deal to buy US armour", *Bangkok Post*, 14 May 2019, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/news/general/1676940/army-seals-deal-to-buy-us-armour>

<sup>8</sup> *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington D.C.: The White House, December 2017), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Unless otherwise referenced in an endnote, the insights and information contained in this article were provided to the author by active and retired RTARF officers, Thai academics and Western defence attaches during a visit to Bangkok in February 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Bangladesh and Pakistan have ordered two and eight Chinese submarines respectively.

<sup>11</sup> Vietnam operates six Russian-made Kilo-class submarines; Malaysia two French-built Scorpenes; Singapore two refurbished Swedish submarines and has ordered four new vessels from Germany; Indonesia has taken delivery of one South Korean-built Chang Bogo-class submarines and has five more on order.

<sup>12</sup> "NLA approves Bt13 billion for first submarine, Prawit confirms", *The Nation*, 25 January 2017.

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Wasamon Audjarint, "BT36 billion procurement?", *The Nation*, 4 July 2015 and Supalak Ganjanakhundee, "Submarines for what? We face no major threats", *The Nation*, 8 July 2015.

<sup>14</sup> "Chinese submarine deal signed", *Bangkok Post*, 5 May 2017.

<sup>15</sup> "China cuts steel for Thailand's first S26T submarine", *Jane's 360*, 4 September 2018, <https://www.janes.com/article/82745/china-cuts-steel-for-thailand-s-first-s26t-submarine>

<sup>16</sup> "Thailand's military is working to further link major weapon systems", *Defense News*, 11 December 2018; "Thailand's future submarines to have a mix of Chinese, western weapons", *Jane's Navy International*, 2 February 2018.

<sup>17</sup> [Olli Suorsa Koh Swee Lean Collin](https://www.nationalinterest.org/feature/thailand-takes-advantage-chinas-arms-market-32647), "Thailand Takes Advantage of China's Arms Market", *National Interest*, 4 October 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/thailand-takes-advantage-chinas-arms-market-32647>

<sup>18</sup> "Thailand praises capabilities of new tanks imported from China", *Global Times*, 29 January 2018, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2018/0130/c90000-9421263.html>

<sup>19</sup> "Top brass China visit secures joint missile deal", *Bangkok Post*, 28 April 2012.

<sup>20</sup> Thai and Chinese military personnel have exercised together in six US-Thai Cobra Gold exercises (2014-19), the US-led 2016 Rim of the Pacific exercise, the 2018 Peace and Friendship maritime exercise with Malaysia in the Straits of Malacca, the ASEAN-China Maritime exercise in August and October 2018, an unnamed China-Southeast Asia exercise off Qingdao in May 2019, and three ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus exercises in 2013, 2016 and 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Allen, Saunders and Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy*, op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> In 2002, 14,000 US military personnel took part in Cobra Gold. A year after the 2006 coup, US participation had dropped to 3,600 before rising to 9,500 in 2013. Between 2014 and 2017, the US contributed 3,600 personnel every year, rising to 6,800 in 2018 but falling to 4,500 in 2019.

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