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India–Thailand Defence Cooperation: The Untapped Potential



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India and Thailand are located in each other's extended neighbourhood and share 894 km of maritime boundary in the Andaman Sea. Seventy years of friendly relations between the countries are rooted in history, social as well as cultural interactions and extensive people to people contacts. Both the countries have a shared link of Buddhism. There is ample presence of Hindu elements in Thai architecture, arts, sculpture, dance, drama and literature. The Thai language incorporates Pali and Sanskrit influence.

Background

Thailand's National Security Policy (NSP) Paper for the period 1998–2001 emphasised to maintain and enhance good relations with the United States, China, Japan and groups of countries of high national power. However, India did not figure prominently in its priorities as India was not considered significant to Thailand's strategic vision². This outlook,

Key Points

1. India's 'Act East' Policy is complemented by the Thailand's 'Act West' Policy. The changing power and security dynamics, within Asia and the World, have driven both the nations to gradually realign policies towards each other.
2. Indian Navy and Royal Thai Navy enjoy a strong maritime relationship and have been carrying out Bi-annual Joint Maritime Patrolling (CORPAT) along the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL) since 2005. However, the Armies and Air Forces of the two countries have very limited cooperation.
3. Both India and Thailand have neither intensified defence cooperation to the desired level nor fully tapped the potential of defence diplomacy to boost ties in other dimensions. While India has laid greater emphasis on developing defence cooperation with Myanmar, Vietnam and Singapore; Thailand has been relying more on China and the United States.
4. India and Thailand can enhance defence cooperation by collaboration on various research projects, mutual exchange of workable technology in military equipment and weapons, ship building, joint development of modern weapons and equipment, repair and re-furbishment services exchange especially for equipment of Russian origin held by Thailand.
5. Both countries need to focus on understanding each other's strategic thinking and foster inter-operability among armed forces to forge strong strategic partnership.

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however, changed significantly in the NSP Paper for 2007–11, which mentioned, ‘India, Australia and Japan also aim to play a leading role in the region (Asia)’³. So finally, Thailand acknowledged India as a rising power in the region.

Royal Thai Navy (RTN), in its Maritime Strategy for the period 2012–16, emphasised on the multipolar global system in which several great powers including India compete, balance and cooperate with each other.

Close cooperation in Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), East Asia Summit (EAS) and Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and

Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Mekong–Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) is a testimony of friendly relations between the two countries. India’s ‘Act East’ Policy is complemented by Thailand’s ‘Act West’ Policy. The changing power and security dynamics within Asia and the world have driven both the nations to gradually realign policies towards each other.

Exchange of Visits

The frequency of visits by dignitaries has increased in the last few years. Some of the important visits that have taken place in the last 6 years are listed under:

Indian Dignitary / Delegation visit to Thailand	Period
Shri Ajit Doval, National Security Advisor (He called on Prime Minister General Chan-O-Cha, Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister General Prawit Wongsuwan and had a meeting with Mr Anusit Kunakorn, Secretary General of National Security Council of Thailand)	April 01–02, 2015
Visit by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi to Bangkok to pay tribute to the departed King Bhumibol Adulyadej	November 10, 2016
Thai Dignitary / Delegation visit to India	Period
Then Thai Prime Minister, Yingluck Shinawatra, Chief Guest for India’s Republic Day Parade	June 24–26, 2012
Chief of Defence Forces, Royal Thai Armed Forces (He called on Shri Arun Jaitley, then Defence and Finance Minister and met General Bikram Singh, then Chief of the Army Staff)	June 28–30, 2014
Former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs General Tanasak Patimapragorn (He met Shri Manohar Parrikar)	March 10–11, 2015
Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister General Prawit Wongsuwan (He met the Vice President, Defence Minister and National Security Advisor)	March 16–18, 2016
Thai Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha	June 2016 and January 2018

Strategic Interests

The strategic interests of India and Thailand are discussed as under:

- ‘Ensuring Secure Seas: India’s Maritime Security Strategy 2015’, acknowledges the strategic significance of Malacca and Singapore Straits as choke points⁴. Nearly 55 percent of India’s trade to and from the South China Sea and oil/gas imported

from Russia’s Sakhalin fields transits through the Strait of Malacca.

- Thailand’s Andaman Coastline rests within India’s area of influence.
- Thailand is strategically located between the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific Ocean where territorial disputes and intense power

play are making all stakeholders increasingly wary.

Current Status of Defence Cooperation

- **Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS):** Thailand along with Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore is a member of the IORA and IONS, initiated in 1997 and 2008, respectively.
- Both nations signed an agreement in 2011 to establish a high-level dialogue on defence cooperation.
- Memorandum of understanding on defence cooperation between India and Thailand was signed on January 25, 2012, during the visit of then Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra.
- Agreements were signed between the two nations in 2013 to:
 - Increase anti-piracy cooperation.
 - Promote the security of sea lanes.
 - Cooperation between coast guards.
 - Promote defence industry collaboration.

Army

Combined counter-insurgency exercise, 'Maitree,' is alternately hosted by India and Thailand since 2007. The last exercise was conducted from July 02, 2017 to July 15, 2017, at Bakloh in Chamba District of Himachal Pradesh, by Dah Division of the Indian Army. In 2016, the Maitree exercise was held at Krabi in Thailand.



Fourteen days of joint training included an understanding of each other's operational methodology, developing interoperability and joint tactical operations controlled by a Joint Command Post. The exercise concluded with a validation exercise based on counterterrorism setting.

Navy

Navies of the two countries enjoy a strong maritime relationship. Some of the details are discussed as under:

- MILAN made modest beginnings more than two decades ago when it was first held in 1995⁶. The first edition of India hosted multi-lateral exercise saw the participation of four friendly foreign littoral navies including RTN. Since then, the event has been held every 2 years except in 2001, 2005 and 2016⁷.
- Thai Naval personnel have availed the facilities at National Institute of Hydrography, Goa for training⁸.
- Indian Navy (IN) and RTN have been conducting Annual Indo-Thai Joint Working Group (JWG) meeting since 2003. In 2008, they started a Bi-lateral Navy Staff Talk for cooperation in maritime security⁹.
- Thailand Frigate HTMS Saiburi (Guided-Missile Frigate Warship) commanded by Captain Surakit Pho-Ngam, participated in International Fleet Review from February 04, 2016 to February 09, 2016¹⁰.

- In line with the recent trend of India's increasing regional inter-operability with a series of multi-lateral exercises on land and sea, in December 2016, a 12-member team of the Indian Army, from the Engineers and Service Corps, participated in the 'Cobra Gold' multi-lateral exercises hosted by Thailand, as observers. India has been invited to the exercises as an 'observer plus' country¹¹.
- IN participated in the ASEAN International Fleet Review held from November 17, 2017 to November 21, 2017. The following participated:
 - 1 × Anti-Submarine Warfare Corvette (INS Kadmatt) and 1 × Shivalik Class Frigate (INS Satpura)¹².
 - Vice Admiral Karambir Singh, Ati Vishisht Seva Medal, Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Eastern Naval Command represented India.
- IN operates regularly in the Western Pacific Ocean and carries out 'port calls' to friendly foreign countries in these areas. In the last 15 years, port calls to Thailand in 2003, 2004, 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018 have been made.
- The two navies have been carrying out bi-annual Joint Maritime Patrolling Coordinated Patrol (CORPAT) along the International Maritime Boundary Line since 2005¹³, with the aim of keeping this vital part of the Indian Ocean Region safe and secure for commercial shipping and international trade. The CORPAT has also strengthened understanding and inter-operability between the navies and facilitated institution of measures to prevent unlawful activities at sea as well as conduct search and rescue operations.
- Both navies also participate in:
 - Western Pacific Naval Symposium.
 - ASEAN Regional Forum Disaster Relief Exercise.

- Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia.
- Heads of Asian Coast Guard Agencies Meeting.

Air Force

Very limited cooperation between the two Air Forces exists as discussed under:

- Bilateral exercise named Indo-Thailand Siam Bharat 17: Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR)¹⁴, a tabletop exercise, was held between the Indian Air Force (IAF) and the Royal Thailand Air Force (RTAF) from May 22, 2017 to May 26, 2017, at Chiang Mai, Thailand. The 11 member IAF contingent was led by Group Captain Sucharu Rai, Vayusena Medal. This was the second such exercise to be conducted between the two Air Forces.
- Air Force-to-Air Force Staff talks are also held between the two countries.

Training

Training of officers at each other's institutions has been carrying on in a limited way. One Thai officer attends the course at the National Defence College and one officer attends Defence Services Staff College each year. There is immense scope to enhance cooperation in training between the two countries.

Indian Defence Stores' Export to South East Asian Countries

Requests for export of a very limited number of equipment/services to some of the South East Asian countries, including Thailand, have been received by India in the last 4 years. Some of the requests have been accepted and items exported/services rendered, while export of some other equipment is under consideration by the Indian Government. Details of some of the equipment for which export requests were received are as under:

Equipment	Department / Company	Country
L-70 Gun Upgrade	Royal Thai Army	Thailand
3D Tactical Control Radar	Royal Thai Army	Thailand
Battle Field Surveillance Radar-Short Range	Army	Myanmar
Non-Eye Safe Laser	Army	Myanmar
Multi-Function Thermal Imager	Army/ Air Force	Myanmar
Milan 2T Missile	Army	Vietnam
3D Air Surveillance Radar RAWL	Ministry of Defence	Vietnam
Aslesha Low-Level Lightweight 3D Radar	Ministry of Defence	Malaysia
Multi-function Thermal Binocular Target Locator	Theon Sensors	Indonesia
Refurbishment of 24 Turrets of V-150 Vehicles along with Integrated Logistics Support and Laser Range Finder	Armed Forces	Philippines
Submarine Sonar	Chen Cheng Technology Co	Taiwan
Akash Air Defence System	Royal Armed Forces	Brunei

Security Partnership

The security cooperation is mainly centred on combating transnational terrorism, organised crime, illicit drug and human trafficking, cyber and financial crimes. The cooperation is mainly focused on intelligence sharing and extradition agreement. In 2003, the JWG on security cooperation was established. It has served as an important bilateral mechanism for the two countries to undertake concrete action to tackle threats against national and regional security¹⁵. India has received Thai assistance in dealing with the North Eastern insurgents who take refuge and receive arms from international actors on Thai territory¹⁶.

Untapped Potential

It is evident that India and Thailand did not accord priority to defence cooperation until recently. A significant shift has been noticed since the visit of then Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, as chief guest in India's Republic Day Parade in 2012, where after the defence cooperation has positively moved forward. However, it is assessed that both India and Thailand have neither intensified the defence cooperation to the desired level nor fully tapped the potential of defence diplomacy to boost ties in other dimensions. While India has laid greater emphasis on developing defence cooperation with Myanmar,

Vietnam and Singapore, Thailand has been relying more on China and the United States.

Way Forward

The defence cooperation between India and Thailand can be taken to the next level by measures discussed below:

Collaboration

India and Thailand can collaborate on various projects as under:

- Research projects in communication, surveillance, aircraft structure and navigation systems, and so forth.
- Mutual exchange of workable technology in military equipment and weapons.
- Joint development of modern weapons and equipment.
- Repair and refurbishment services exchange, especially for the equipment of Russian origin held by Thailand.
- India can share with Thailand its experience in ship-building.

- Thailand can seek access to low-cost Indian technology and skills to develop their defence capability.
- Increase number of defence officers' visits to each other's country for enhanced military understanding.

Enhance

Concerted efforts are recommended to be made to enhance:

- Bilateral trade in weapons, military equipment, their spares and assemblies.
- Number of port calls exchanged by naval vessels of the two countries.
- Presence of Defence Attaché in each-other's embassies. Currently, India has only one IAF officer as Defence Attaché while Thailand has two Defence Attachés, one officer each from RTAF and RTN.

Training

The biggest advantage for the armed forces of the two countries is that officers of both the countries speak and understand the English language well. Thus, there is 'no language barrier' between the armed forces of the two countries. The following steps may be taken to enhance cooperation in the training of defence personnel of the two countries:

- Offer more training slots to officers and soldiers in each other's defence training establishments.
- Nominate cadets to study in each other's training academies.
- Thailand can gain from the Indian experience in:
 - Anti-terrorist operations.
 - Jungle warfare.
 - High altitude combat.
 - Hydrography.
 - Diving operations.

- Coast Guard operations and training in Indian Coast Guard Academy.

Line of Credit

India may consider extending a line of credit to Thailand for arms' purchase from India and military training/educational programmes.

Joint Exercises

Enhance the number of training and bilateral joint exercises between the armed forces. Both the countries may consider initiating joint amphibious landing exercises and joint marine commando exercises. Additional joint exercises between the Armies and Air Forces of the two countries may also be considered.

Military Observers

Currently, India is sending a small delegation that includes military observers to exercise 'Cobra Gold' conducted in Thailand. Both the countries may consider participating/inviting military observers for more such exercises conducted by each country, individually or in conjunction with other friendly countries.

Non-traditional Maritime Security

Enhanced cooperation in non-traditional maritime security to include security of coastline and antipiracy missions may be considered for mutual benefit.

Conclusion

India and Thailand need to focus on understanding each-other's strategic thinking and foster interoperability among armed forces to forge a strong strategic partnership. Alignment with India can significantly reduce Thailand's military dependence on the United States and China. Thailand can act as a facilitator for enhancing Indian influence in the Indo-Pacific region without prejudice to its own interests. Both the countries need to consider the strengthening of security partnership and maintain sustainable balance. Deliberate efforts are required to avoid getting entangled in a zero-sum game with respect to China and other countries in the region. Thailand can leverage its neutrality and assist in resolving conflicts in

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the Indo-Pacific region. Enhanced defence cooperation between India and Thailand will bring substantial mutual benefits to both the countries and contribute significantly in promoting peace in the region.

Notes

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