



An LVTP-7 of the Royal Thai Marine Corps comes ashore during joint US-Thai exercises (PHOTO: US Navy)

CHALLENGES FACING THE ROYAL THAI ARMY TODAY BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE?

Richard A. Bitzinger

Few militaries - Myanmar being the only possible exception - command more far-reaching authority in Southeast Asia than Thailand's. In particular, the Royal Thai Army (RTA), founded in 1874, has a long tradition of service to the nation, helping to defend it from European colonialists and assisting the United States in its wars in Indochina during the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, the RTA has long asserted political as well as military power. Most recently, the Thai military, led by the Royal Thai Army (RTA), ousted the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in a bloodless coup in September 2006. Under the command of RTA Commander-in-Chief General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, the military junta - calling itself the Council for National Security - appointed an interim government under retired General Surayud Chulanont and promised to draft a new constitution and return the country to democratic rule by the end 2007. General Sonthi retired as the Commander-in-Chief, effective the 30th September 2007.

Yet despite its apparent success as an institution, the RTA today faces a dilemma. Given the absence of territorial or maritime disputes with China or other nations, Thailand faces no incontrovertible foreign threat. Its frontiers are stable, and it has no major territorial or maritime disputes with any of its neighboring states. In addition, Bangkok has in recent years developed good relations with China, its largest neighbor and traditionally its source of greatest external insecurity. In fact, there has

been a considerable growth in trade between the two nations, there are no apparent tensions over the treatment of Thailand's Chinese minority, and Bangkok has even purchased arms from China.

Thailand's biggest threat requiring a military response - and therefore the RTA's most immediate priority - is its armed insurgency in the south, led by the Malay-Muslim minority there. Other priorities for Thailand's defense forces include UN peacekeeping missions, humanitarian assistance, counterterrorism, disaster relief, protection against illegal smuggling, and

protecting the territorial waters and natural resources. The challenge, therefore, is whether the RTA is being properly equipped, trained, and organized to deal with these military missions. Another is whether the Army's tendency for inserting itself in domestic politics is sapping its ability to serve as a potent military force.

CHALLENGE NO. 1: THE MODERNIZATION MUDDLE

The Royal Thai Army currently comprises 190,000 troops, of which 70,000 are conscripts called up for two years' duty. The RTA is divided

into four regional headquarters: the First (headquartered in Bangkok and responsible for the capital as well as the country's western and central provinces), the Second (northeast), the Third (north and northwest), and the Fourth (southern Thailand). The Army is organized into two mechanized infantry divisions, three armored infantry division, one light infantry division, 1 armored division, two cavalry divisions (and one independent cavalry regiment), eight independent infantry battalions, two Special Forces divisions, one artillery division, and one air defense artillery (ADA) division. Major equipment includes approximately 300 main battle tanks (mostly second-hand U.S. M60A1/A3s and M48s), 500 light tanks (including 100 Stingrays, a light tank originally developed for the U.S. Army, but of which Thailand was the only customer), approximately 1,000 armored personnel carriers (a mix of U.S. M113s and Chinese YW-531Hs), and around 2,500 artillery pieces. The RTA also operates five Cobra AH-1 attack helicopters, six CH-47 heavy-lift helicopters, and around 160 utility helicopters.

Thai military modernization is

stymied by a more or less flat level of defense spending since the 1997 Asian financial crisis. The Thai defense budget fell by more than 30 percent between 1996 and 1999, according to assessments put out by the Australian Defense Intelligence Organization (DIO), and it has hovered at around US\$2 billion annually ever since (in constant 2000 US dollars). Just prior to the September 2006 coup, however, military expenditures were on the rise again. In 2006, defense spending was approximately US\$2.4 billion, and Prime Minister Thaksin had approved a long-term modernization spending plan totaling US\$6.6 billion between 2005 and 2015, along with adding approximately 20 billion baht (nearly US\$700 million) a year to the defense budget. New equipment to be procured included new fighter aircraft, transport helicopters, new main battle tanks, armored personnel carriers (APCs), self-propelled artillery, air defense systems, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), frigates, off-shore patrol vessels (OPVs), training simulators, search and rescue (SAR) aircraft, and improvements to the military's command, control, communications, computing and in-telligence (C4I)

network - in other words, nearly everything.

The military-backed regime now governing Thailand appears to support continuation of this ambitious force modernization scheme, but the ensuing chaos in governance has injected considerable uncertainty into how, when, and where these new procurement decisions may proceed. Personnel and administrative expenses still account for about 70 percent of the Thai defense budget, while only five to ten percent is likely to be invested in new defense equipment.

Two anecdotes illustrate the woolly nature of Thailand's current military modernization muddle. The Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) has been trying for years to upgrade its fleet of aging or obsolete F-16A/B and F-5E/F fighter jets. At one time during the late 1990s, the RTAF had intended to purchase the F-18 fighter, but this was cancelled in the wake of the 1997 financial crisis. Later efforts to acquire "C/D" versions of the F-16 were also abandoned in favor of buying additional (used but refurbished) F-16A/Bs, and the RTAF turned to the Israelis to upgrade its F-5s with a new avionics. More recently, the RTAF had planned on acquiring up to 40 new combat aircraft, either the Swedish Gripen or the Russian Su-30MK, and to pay for these through barter trade arrangements. In particular, Prime Minister Thaksin wanted to trade Thai chickens for Swedish or Russian fighter jet, joking that "both have wings and both can fly." So far, however, nothing has come of these efforts.

Second, the Army has repeatedly failed to come up with a workable plan to acquire new main battle tanks and armored personnel carriers. The RTA had planned to buy 170 second-hand Pz68 tanks from Switzerland, along with 200 M113 APCs, for a rock-bottom price of US\$50 million, but this plan eventually came to naught. More recently, before the coup, the RTA agreed to buy 97 Chinese-made WMZ-551B 6x6 wheeled APCs, and to pay for them with dried longan fruit. In addition, the Chinese have offered



The RTA is hoping to procure more than 90 BTR-3Es from the Ukraine (PHOTO: Gordon Arthur).

to sell Thailand its Type-96T tank, a variant of the Type-85III developed with Pakistan.

The problem here, however, is that Thailand has had very bad experiences with Chinese military equipment in the past. In the early 1990s, the RTA acquired over a hundred Type-69II tanks and 450 YW-531H tracked APCs from Beijing, but the equipment turned out to be so poor that they were assigned to training units or just put into storage. The Chinese systems currently being offered may be of a much higher quality, but it would be understandable if the RTA was reluctant to accept more Chinese equipment into its inventories. Currently there are rumours that more than 90 BTR-3' may be procured from the Ukraine and more APCs from South Africa.

CHALLENGE NO. 2: DEALING WITH THE SOUTHERN INSURGENCY

Security in the RTA's Fourth Army Region, headquartered in Nakhon Si Thammarat and responsible for the southern part of Thailand, has become particularly vital in recent years. Thailand's four southern-most provinces are mostly ethnic Muslim-Malay, in a majority Thai-Buddhist country, and Muslim-led insurgencies have been growing in the region, led by two separatist groups, the Pattani United Liberation Organization and the Barisan Revolusi Nasional. From January 2004 to the middle of 2007, more than 6,000 acts of violence are estimated to have taken place in the south, resulting in more than 2,300 deaths and 6,000 injured. The insurgents have relied mainly on roadside attacks on security forces, bombing civilian targets, such as banks and shopping areas, and random drive-by assassination attempts on police and local government officials - tactics similar to those utilized by Al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiya, sparking rumors that these transnational terrorist organizations are actively supporting local insurgent groups.

Under Thaksin, the response to the South Thailand insurgency



Thai soldiers are generally well equipped and well disciplined by regional standards. (PHOTO: Gordon Arthur).

was decidedly confrontational. In early 2005, for example, the RTA reactivated the 15th Infantry Division and deployed it to the Fourth Army in order to bolster the only other combat division in the region, the 5th Infantry Division. In addition, the Thaksin government declared much of the southern region of the country an emergency zone, and empowered security forces to conduct warrantless wiretaps, searches and arrests, ban public gatherings, censor news, impose curfews, and expel foreign nationals. The crackdown appeared to have little impact, however, and after the 2006 coup the junta took a more softly-softly approach aimed at winning the "hearts and minds" of the local population through such efforts

as development projects, offering medical services, and de-escalating tensions between the armed forces and local civilians. These efforts have also failed to check rising violence, however, and the current military-led government appears to be at a loss as to its next steps.

The failure to adequately address the South Thai insurgency underscores the RTA's deficiencies when it comes to strategy and tactics. For several years, the emphasis within the Thai armed forces has been on expanding conventional military power - for example, through the acquisition of modern fighter aircraft, new frigates, and even a "pocket" aircraft carrier (the Chakri Nareubet, which is outfitted with AV-8A Harrier jump jets).



Much in evidence during the September 2006 coup, RTA is thought to retain over 100 elderly M-41s. (PHOTO: Gordon Arthur).

Consequently, the RTA appears to be wrongly equipped and inadequately trained for counterinsurgency operations, exacerbated by a poor understanding of local culture.

CHALLENGE NO. 3: GOVERNANCE AND CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

Militaries may be politicized, but they are not supposed to be politicians. The People's Liberation Army (PLA), for example, is as much an arm of the Chinese Communist Party as it is the defender of China, and it wields considerable influence in policymaking in Beijing, but at the same time civilian control over the PLA is well-established. The Thai armed forces, on the other hand, are, like many militaries in the developing world, prone to actively involve themselves in domestic governance.

Within the developing world, national armed forces are often the most "modern" of all domestic institutions. They are generally more technocratic and meritocratic than civil society, professional, well-organized, unitary, and hierarchical. In countries that are divided along ethnic or regional lines, the military is generally the most unified establishment in the nation. And since they are charged

with defending the nation as a whole, militaries are often the most patriotic and "national-minded" of all local institutions, imbued with the sense that they are above petty politics and that they know what is best for the country as a whole.

Thai politics have long been dominated by the armed forces. The Thai military has intervened three times in domestic politics in recent years, in 1976, 1992, and most recently in 2006. Generally, these juntas have replaced weak or corrupt civilian governments, but most military rulers have subsequently found that running a country is much harder than running an army, and the result is often incompetence and corruption in governance, economic uncertainty, social unrest, and political repression - in short, many of the problems that sparked the coup in the first place. As a result, the military's image of competency and professionalism is tarnished, and the armed forces are distracted from their primary task of defending the nation from violent threats.

This is largely what has happening now. The new military-backed interim government, under former General Surayud, has squandered much of the



The RTA maintains a viable parachute operations capability, though lack of airlift is the major constraint. (PHOTO: Gordon Arthur).

strong popular support it enjoyed in the immediate aftermath of the coup. The junta has lost some of its semblance of nonpartisanship in its efforts to give the Internal Security Operations Command, an army-run organization, far-ranging police powers, and also after rumors began to arise that Gen. Sonthi may enter politics after he retires. Allegations that leading military officers have found plum positions for themselves on the boards on state-run corporations and that they have pressured these businesses to make donations to army funds have only further stained the military's aura of incorruptibility.

Michael Montesano, in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2007* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), has perhaps put it best:

Dismal in its own right, the Thai military's recourse to a coup in the first decade of the twenty-first century also reflected a long-term failure to confine soldiers to matters of

national defense....Thailand's latest coup made clear that, endless reports of increasingly military professionalism in the post-1992 period notwithstanding, the upper echelons of the Thai army continued to view themselves as guardians of the nation's well-being. The basis of that vision in chauvinistic conceptions of that well-being and in unrivalled coercive power undermines efforts to institutionalize accountable representative government in Thailand.

CONCLUSIONS: A HARD ROW TO HOE

To be fair, the challenges facing the Royal Thai Army are not atypical of armed forces throughout the developing and newly industrializing world. Militaries are often starved of funds, and there is often an equipment-requirement mismatch: many militaries tend to buy major, "status-seeking" weapons systems, rather than the bread-and-butter items necessary for the most likely roles and missions - in the case of Thailand,

counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, piracy, natural disaster relief, and protecting maritime economic assets (exclusive economic zones, or EEZs, in the adjoining waters around the country). In addition, many internal insurgencies often require a political solution as much as a military one. On the other hand, the proclivity of the RTA - of the entire Thai armed forces, in fact - to constantly involve itself in internal politics is ultimately neither beneficial to the professionalization of the Thai military nor to the political culture of the nation. If the RTA is to be a truly professional army, confining itself strictly to "matters of national defense" and concentrating on internal construction for the defense of the country, then its institutional and cultural ethos must evolve considerably. Given the future likely security requirements of the 21st century, the RTA and the rest of the Thai military are facing an uphill battle.