

A Balanced Foreign Policy for Thailand? Readjusting Arms Deals between China and the USA

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From 2001 until 2019, Thai-US security relations have been in flux

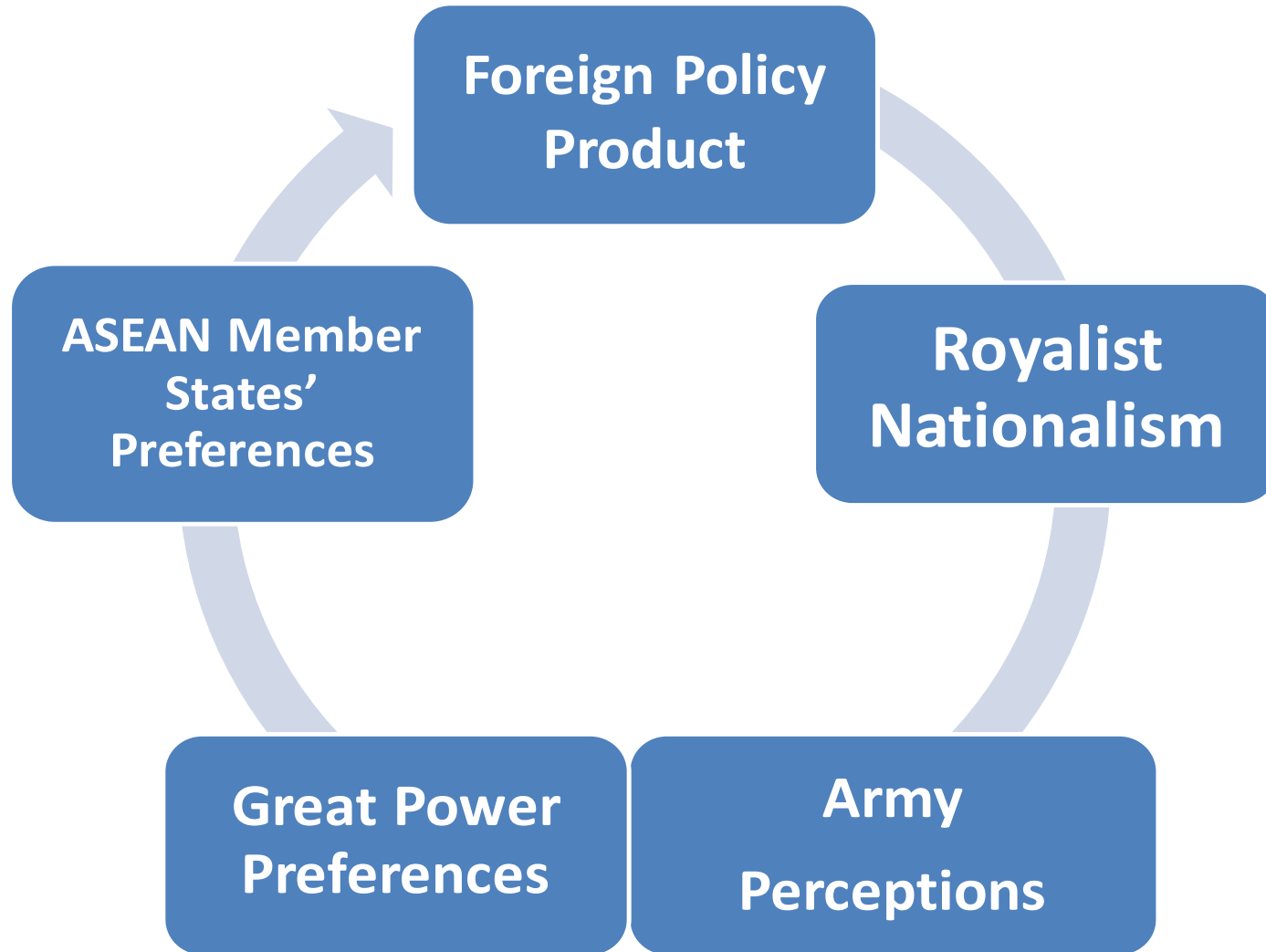
This period witnessed

- 1) Multiple changes of government in both countries
- 2) Ascent of Chinese power in Asia
- 3) Growing geopolitical rivalry of China and the US in Southeast Asia.
- 4) A sudden heightening of Thai-US frictions followed by a rapid thaw.

Questions

1. What accounts for these rollercoaster changes?
2. How has US policy on Thailand changed especially from the Obama to the Trump presidency?
3. Has this change returned Thai-American relations to their pre-2014 levels?
4. How has Thailand sought to balance security cooperation and defense capability building efforts between the US, China, and other countries?
5. What has been the US reaction to Thailand buying arms from China?
6. Under present conditions and amid great power competition, is there a prospective role for Thailand and the Thai-US alliance in regional security and stability?

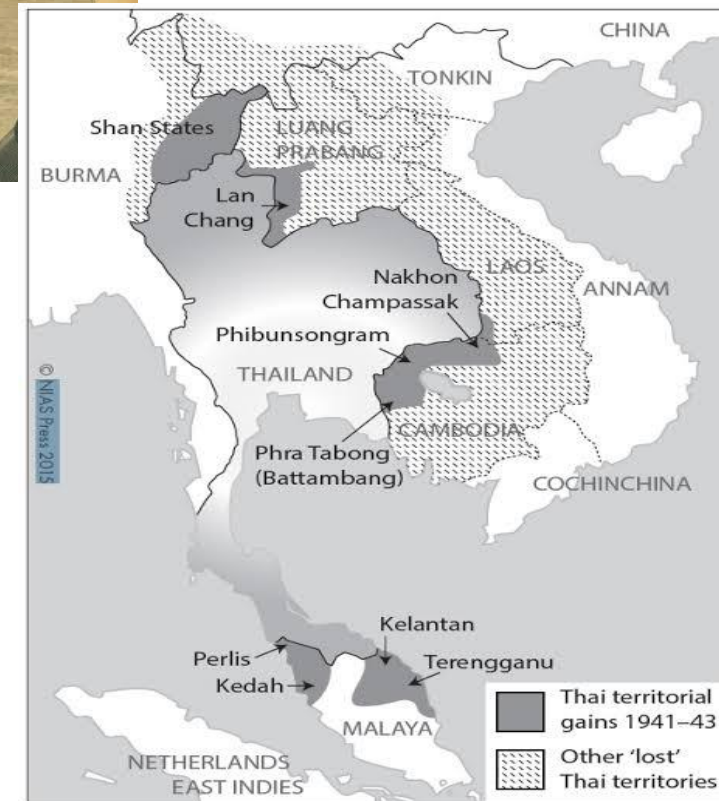
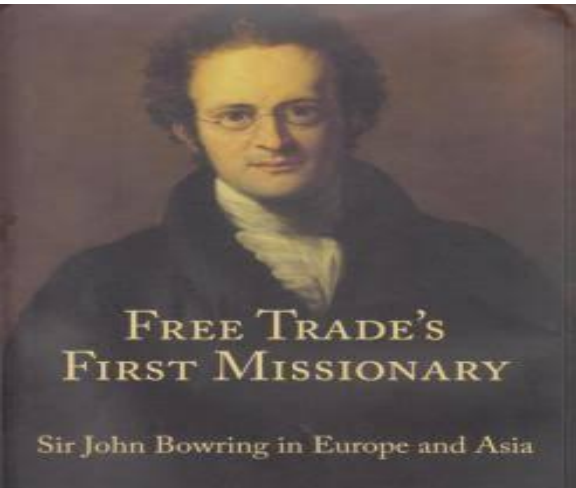
Factors Affecting Thailand's Fragmented Foreign Policy, creating parameters and opportunities



Thai foreign policy has derived from:

Bamboo Diplomacy & Build National Security	Royalism-Nationalism
Bend with the Wind	No National Humiliation
Balancing off Patrons or Draw close to Strong Patron	Nationalist balancing
Military Standpoint	Foreign Ministry Standpoint

Siam's Early Bamboo Diplomacy and National Humiliation (1855-1946)



The Evolution of Thai-US Relations

1947-1952: **Cold War allies and Security Prioritization**

1952-1955: **Thailand edges toward neutralism**

1957-1973: **Cold War allies and Security Prioritization**

1973-1980: **Omnidirectionality** (not 76-77)

1980-1992: **Cold War allies and Security Prioritization**

1992-2001: **Washington's Enlightened Disengagement and Bilateral Cooling**

2001: **Thaksin's nationalist balancing (Forward Engagement)**

2001-2006: **counter-terrorism and more cooperation**

2006-2008: **A coup creates friction and distancing**

2008-2014: **Relations mired in Thai Domestic Turbulence amid the rise of China**

2014-2017: **Another coup & Thailand tilts toward China (Complex Engagement)**

2017-Present: **Thailand tilting back toward the US: Complex Engagement remains**

1950-1992: Cold War allies and Security Prioritization



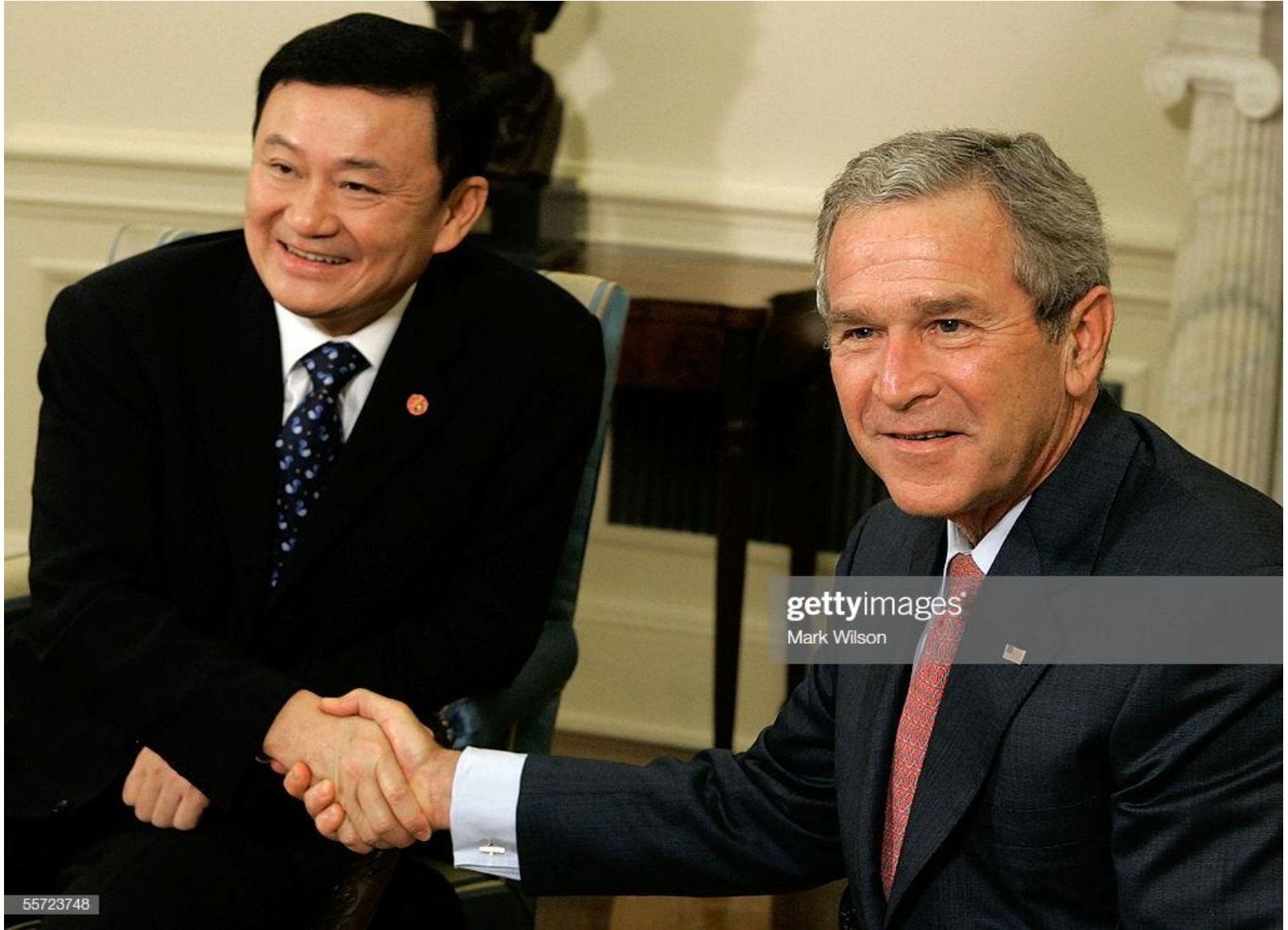
1992-2001: Washington's Enlightened Disengagement & jittery relations: The US would not offer aid to Thailand following the Asian Financial Crisis.



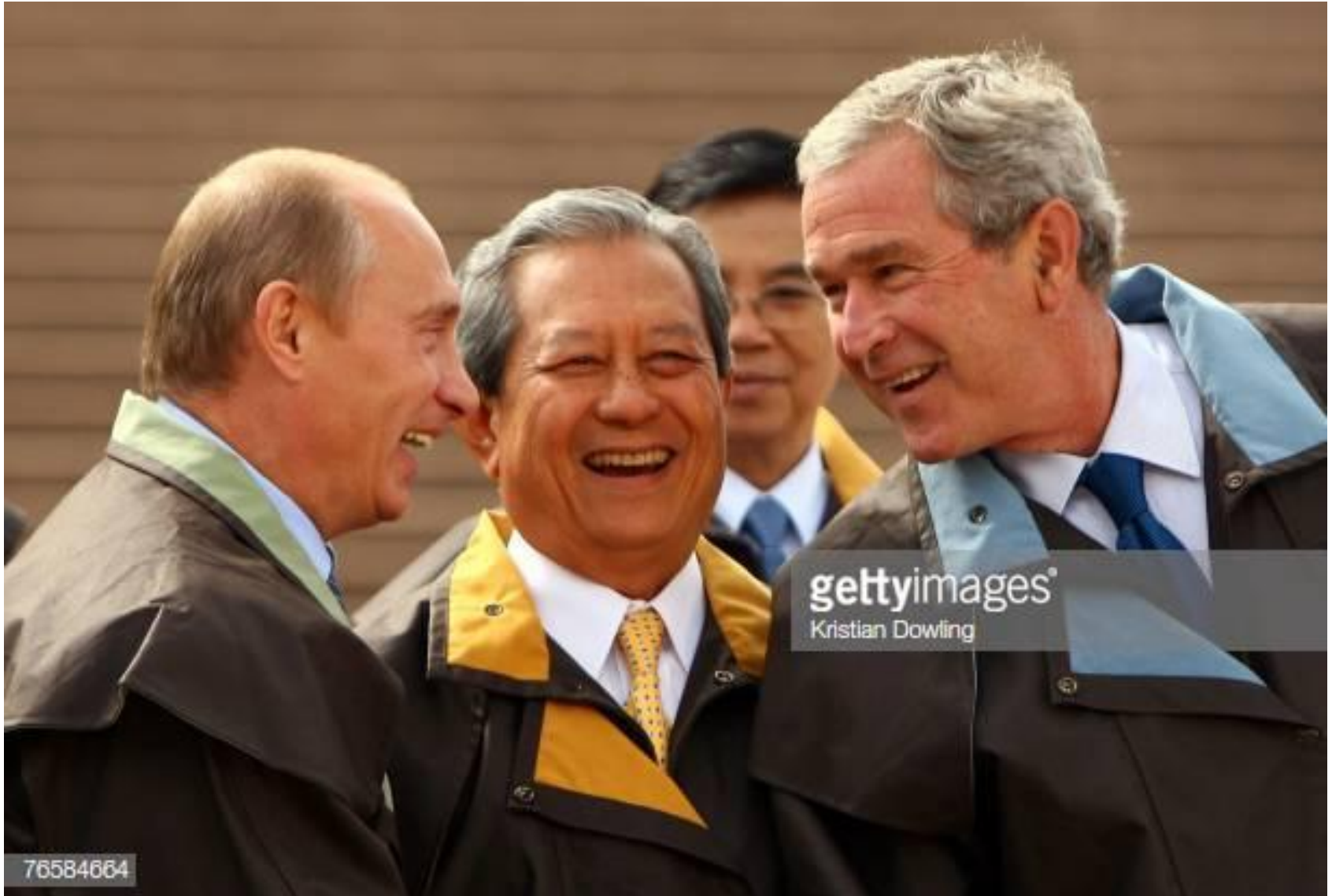
2001: Thaksin's Balancing Moment: seeking to lead Southeast Asia as a middle power



2001-2006: counter-terrorism and more cooperation



2006-2008: A coup creates friction



2008-2014: Relations mired in Thai Domestic Turbulence amid the rise of China



2014-2017: Another coup, US human rights concerns & Thailand tilts toward China



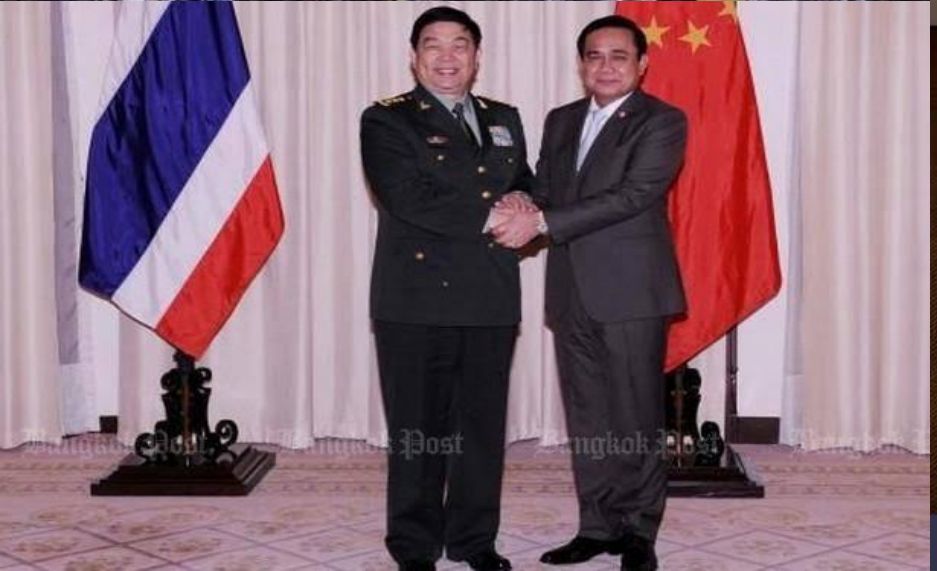
2017-Present: Thailand tilting back toward the US



Thailand's "Complex Engagement" policy



How successful is Thailand today at balancing security cooperation and defense capability building efforts between the US, China, and other countries?



Principal Arms suppliers to Thailand 2009-2019 (Royal Thai Army)

Ukraine	96 BTR tanks; 49 T84 Oplot tanks— contract cancelled in 2017
South Africa	120 Mamba APCs
China	China: 52 VT-4 tanks; 34 VN-1 APCs
United States	In 2019: 140 M-1126 Stryker infantry carrier vehicles

Principal Arms suppliers to Thailand 2009-2019 (Royal Thai Navy)

Supplier	Amounts
China	3 submarines (USD 1.026 billion) (2017-2023)
South Korea	2 frigates
United Kingdom	1 BVT-90 offshore patrol vessel

Principal Arms suppliers to Thailand 2009-2019 (Royal Thai Air Force)

Suppliers	Amounts
United States	4 AH-1F Cobra Combat helicopters; 9 S-70/UH-60L helicopters; 2 Bell-214 helicopters; 16 TH-28/480 Light helicopters; 8 AH-6I Little Bird light attack and reconnaissance helicopters
Germany	17 EC 145light helicopters
South Korea	12 T-50 Golden Eagle aircraft
Sweden	12 JAS-39A Gripen fighter jets
France	12 EC 725 Super Cougar Transport helicopters
Russia	4 military transport Mi-17V5 helicopters

Joint Military Exercises:

The US reduced the level of Cobra Gold exercises only in 2015 and 2016 and China simultaneously increased them.

Thai-China before 2014	Thai-China after 2014
7 exercises	5 exercises
Thai-US before 2014	Thai-US after 2014
52 exercises	12 exercises

Military Maintenance Centers

In 2017 Thailand prepared to establish a joint center with China to produce and maintain Chinese military equipment for the Thai army.

In 2018, the United States was rumored to be setting up a military arms maintenance center in Thailand

Both Chinese and US military ships could be at Sattahip naval facility, causing frictions.

Military Education

The US International Military Education and Training (IMET) program has been favored by Thai military officers since the end of World War II.

2014-2017: Thai soldiers were forbidden from IMET and scores studied in Chinese defense academies

With US President Trump's lifting of sanctions in 2017, Thai military officials are once again favoring studies in US defense academies. However, China is now a second important destination for military education abroad.

Conclusion

- Under present conditions and amid great power competition, there is indeed a prospective role for Thailand and the Thai-US alliance in regional security and stability.
- Since 2017, in terms of arms purchases, Thailand has begun to tilt back toward the US rather than become dependent upon China
- But Washington will have to accept that Bangkok has begun to diversify the sourcing of its security needs.
- Thailand's current security policy reaffirms its continuing adherence to **complex engagement policy**

Thank you!



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