

# **Has the Balance Tipped? The Thai Military and its Security Perceptions in an Era of Asia-Pacific Great Power Competition**

**Joseph Deavenport<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Since 2017, the most significant change in Asia-Pacific regional affairs has been the rise of Great Power competition between the United States and China. This paper examines how the external securitization of the region, coupled with Thailand's shifting internal dynamics, affected the security perceptions of military leaders within the Royal Thai Armed Forces. Using a comprehensive approach that includes documentary research, surveys of Thai military officers, and interviews, this research focuses on the Royal Thai Armed Forces as a perception forming entity and explores how external and internal security developments have influenced the Thai military's perceptions. This research presents three key findings. First, Thai military leaders perceive Great Power states as much less threatening to Thai security than they did just a few years ago. Second, the Thai military continues to prioritize domestic security issues, reflecting a persistent focus on internal stability and national sovereignty over external threats. Third, the lack of cross-border conflicts in Southeast Asia during this period contributed to a decreased threat perception toward neighboring states, underscoring a preference for stability and non-alignment in the face of Great Power rivalry. This research contributes to a nuanced understanding of Thai security perceptions in a rapidly changing geopolitical environment. It highlights the complexities faced by Thailand as it navigates its strategic position between two great powers, seeking to balance relationships while maintaining its national security and autonomy. The findings offer valuable insights for policymakers and scholars interested in Southeast Asian security dynamics and the broader implications of Sino-American competition in the Indo-Pacific.

**Keywords** Royal Thai Armed Forces, Threat Perception, Great Power Competition, Asia-Pacific, Thai Military

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<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok 10330. E-mail: [jd.deavenport@gmail.com](mailto:jd.deavenport@gmail.com)

## 1. Introduction

The preponderance of research conducted on the Thai security establishment in the last ten years paints the picture of an institution at a crossroads (Prasirtsuk, 2017). Against the backdrop of Great Power Competition between the United States and China, many have concluded that Thailand's preferred role is that of "bamboo in the wind," ebbing and flowing with the externalities of Great Power Competition to maintain strategic nonalignment, balance the interests of hegemonic powers, and safeguard its sovereignty (Busbarat, 2016). Indeed, Thailand maintained its status as the only Asian state to preserve its essential sovereignty during the 19th century by balancing competing colonial powers against one another (Medeiros et al., 2008). As the argument goes, Thailand is pursuing this same strategy today to balance American and Chinese interests in its periphery.

There is some credibility to this assertion, as recent survey data indicates that Thai respondents are largely split regarding their preferences towards the United States and China. A recent study conducted at Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (Seah et al., 2024) found that 47% of Thai respondents agree that ASEAN should align itself to the United States, while 52% argued for alignment with China. Similarly, only 46% and 33% of respondents expressed confidence that the United States and China, respectively, will "do the right thing" to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance. This body of research assesses broad perceptions among academic researchers, private sector representatives, civil society, government officials, and regional organizations, so it offers useful insight into the split preferences that Thais hold regarding the two Great Powers.

However, a notable gap in the body of existing literature is that little research has been done to evaluate the Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTArF) and its organizational perceptions about the nation's security. Thailand's security sector is spearheaded by the RTArF, which acts as a formal, though ornamental umbrella above the Royal Thai Army, Royal Thai Navy, and the Royal Thai Air Force (Chambers, 2021). Amidst this research gap, Greg Raymond (2017) arguably presented the most complete assessment on this issue with his study of RTArF elites and their views regarding the United States, China, and the shifting geopolitical landscape in the Asia-Pacific. His groundbreaking study surveyed more than 1,800 Thai military officials and raised such issues as threat perceptions, views towards regional institutions and international partners, and even preferences for military procurement. The conclusions drawn from this research not only give insight into the perceptions held by the Thai military establishment during the period from 2016-2017, but also provide a useful understanding of the factors that shape those perceptions.

Notably, a core conclusion of Raymond's (2017) research was that "China's influence has caught up and eclipsed that of the United States." Among other things, his survey data showed that Thai military officials saw the military threat from the United States as greater than any other Great Power, including China, and they expected that China's influence on Thai national security would continue to grow and surpass that of the United States. In summary, the Thai military view has "tipped" in favor of a strategic relationship with China (Raymond, 2017).

These results are surprising, given China's growing military assertiveness in the region and the historically strong security relationship between the United States and Thailand. Has the balance in the Thai military's security perceptions really tipped toward China, or were the results of that research a temporary deviation from a historic baseline of balanced relationships?

The answer to this question is particularly relevant for Thailand's future security outlook because of the central role that the Thai military plays in the governance of the state. The existing literature highlights that Thai military commanders manage a "broad portfolio of security, political, economic, cultural, and strategic interests" (Farrelly, 2017). If the RTArF's security preferences do tip towards one state or another, the resulting shifts in military training, procurement, doctrine, and security outcomes would have significant implications for neighboring states (Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam), regional organizations (ASEAN), and Thailand's bilateral relationships (the United States and China). Thai military leaders see little value in zero-sum mentalities because they limit opportunities, strategic flexibility, and political autonomy. This research adds value in assessing whether that mindset has changed due to the pressure of Great Power Competition.

This study uses a combination of document research, survey analysis, and interviews to assess the structural conditions (international environment) and internal conditions (Thai strategic culture) that shaped the Thai military's threat perceptions in the last decade. Coupled with the author's own survey data, this study will present an updated understanding of the Thai military's security perceptions in an era of Asia-Pacific Great Power Competition.

This paper is divided into five sections. First is the introduction of the research, which contains the background, statement of the problem, and significance of the research on the Thai military's security perceptions. Second is the results of Raymond's (2017) research on the Thai military and how they can be applied in this context. Third is a review of the relevant literature in the context of Thai military organizational behavior and perceptions. Fourth is an assessment of the internal and external changes in Thailand's security environment that necessitate an updated assessment of security perceptions. Fifth is an analysis of the author's recent survey data, which will highlight

current themes in Thai military respondents' attitudes towards the United States, China, and the concept of national security. The last section is the conclusion.

## **2. The Balance in Southeast Asia**

The years leading up to the publication of Raymond's (2017) research were full of significant events with security implications across the Asia-Pacific. Both the United States and China were heavily invested in influencing future outcomes in Asia. Washington was in the process of reassessing its alliance with Thailand in the wake of the 2014 military coup that put General Prayuth Chan-ocha in power in Bangkok. At the same time, Beijing unveiled its Belt and Road Initiative, completed the construction of three large and controversial military outposts in the South China Sea, and "rejected an international court's judgment on maritime zones in the same vicinity" (Raymond, 2017).

It is also noteworthy that Raymond's (2017) research was published at a pivotal juncture in Thailand's history, particularly as it relates to the country's relationships with external powers. On 13 October 2016, His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej died at Siriraj Hospital in Bangkok. The late King Bhumibol reigned for more than 70 years, making him the longest ruling monarch in Thai history, as well as the longest native ruler of any Asian sovereign. He was also the first Thai sovereign to rule under a system of constitutional monarch, which Thailand adopted in 1932.

Arguably the greatest legacy that King Bhumibol left behind, however, was his hugely influential role in Thai politics. According to Zawacki (2017), "Thai royalism manifested itself in a pro-American foreign policy at the end of World War II and at the start of King Bhumibol's reign a year later." Born in Cambridge, Massachusetts and deeply opposed to communism, the late King became America's most steadfast ally in Southeast Asia since World War II. Following his death, it was unclear how his son and successor, His Majesty King Maha Vajiralongkorn, would influence Thailand's internal relationship between the monarch and the military, as well as Thailand's external relationships with the Great Powers.

It is on the heels of these developments that Raymond (2017) evaluated Thai security elites' perceptions, beliefs, and expectations regarding security, international relations, and Thailand's position relative to the United States and China. There are five findings worth emphasizing.

### ***2.1 Perceptions of Influence on Thai National Security Policy***

When asked about historical periods, the respondents identified the United States as having greater influence than China on Thailand's national security policy in the mid-20th century, during the Cold War, and during the post-Cold War period. This makes sense, given the United States' outsized

influence in helping Thailand establish diplomatic relations after World War II, as well as helping to prevent a communist invasion during the Cold War period.

However, perceptions of U.S. influence in Thailand decreased dramatically at the turn of the 20th century. In the period from the global financial crisis through the end of the survey data collection (roughly 2008-2017), the respondents indicated that the United States's influence on Thai national security retained equal standing with China. In the future, the respondents expected China's influence to continue to grow and eventually surpass the influence of the United States in the coming decade.

## ***2.2 Unease about China's Growing Military Power***

Even as China's influence on Thai national security was found to be increasing relative to that of the United States, Thai military officers expressed a high degree of unease about China's growing military power. Ever since Mao Tse-Tung's 1949 victory on mainland China, Thai leaders have harbored reservations about Chinese communism, the large population of ethnic Chinese living in Thailand, and China's military power in the region (Zawacki, 2017).

From Raymond's (2017) data alone, it is not immediately clear what factors drove this perception of unease about China's military power in 2016-2017. Perhaps this perception was linked to China's construction of military outposts on artificial islands in the South China Sea (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024), or the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea arbitration regarding sovereignty disputes between the Philippines and China. Alternatively, it's possible that this concern is linked to China's dam building and control of water resources on the Mekong River, as well as its downstream effects on the states of continental Southeast Asia, all of whom rely on the river for hydropower production, agriculture, fisheries, and transportation. While the source of this unease was not clearly identified in the research, it did capture a statistically significant concern relative to China's growing military power.

## ***2.3 Perceptions of Threat from the Great Powers***

Despite the concern about China's growing military power, respondents identified the military threat from the United States as greater than any other Great Power, including China, India, Japan, and Russia. In Raymond's (2017) words, "and there is also a curious puzzle – despite this unease about China's growing military capabilities, and a view that the U.S. security guarantee is still important for Thailand, there is significant ambivalence to the United States." Given the decidedly pro-American tilt among Thailand's military in the latter half of the 20th century, this result is particularly surprising. For many, the institution most readily associated with U.S.-Thai relations is the U.S. military. Why then, did Thai military elites see the United States as the largest threat to Thailand among the Great Power states?

Raymond (2017) offered two hypotheses in support of this question. The first is that a fear of the U.S. interference in Thailand's domestic politics is a driving factor in how respondents considered this question. It is possible that U.S. criticism of Thailand following military-led coups in 2006 and 2014 shaped a perception that the United States is a threat to Thailand's domestic politics. While the George W. Bush administration's response to the 2006 coup was mild (minimal economic sanctions, including suspension of the Pentagon's International Military Education and Training (IMET) program), the Barack Obama administration's reaction in 2014 was relatively harsh, resulting in the "worsening of ties in all facets, including military-to-military relations" (Pongsudhirak, 2020). By comparison, China's response was muted, reflecting a deliberate effort in Beijing to not interfere in the domestic affairs of other states.

The second hypothesis relates to a "historic amnesia" among Thai respondents regarding U.S. support to Thailand during the Cold War (Raymond, 2017). In the period from 1946-1966, the United States spent roughly one billion USD on economic and military aid to Thailand. The alliance was formalized by the 1954 Manila Pact and, later, the Thanat-Rusk communiqué, both of which were designed to prevent the spread of communism in Thailand and its periphery (Prasirtsuk, 2017). However, Raymond's (2017) research showed that the memory of robust U.S.-Thai security cooperation is less advantageous for today's relationship that might be expected. Rather, some of the respondents expressed a sense of regret about their country's role in regional conflicts, and even blamed the United States for having influenced Thailand's leadership.

In marked contrast, many respondents reported a favorable view of the Sino-Thai relationship over the last forty years, despite China's support to the Communist Party of Thailand between 1950 and 1979. In fact, many Thai military officers reported seeing China as a source of protection against external military threats today.

#### ***2.4 Perceptions of External Military Threats***

As highlighted above, Raymond's (2017) research showed that Thai respondents tended to perceive the greatest threat from external powers in terms of their capability and tendency to interfere in Thailand's domestic politics. Correspondingly, Thai military officers held a relatively benign view regarding state-based military threats. In fact, the respondents did not identify any external military threats as imminent threats to Thailand.

When asked to compare the significance of different threats to Thailand's security, the respondents rated non-state threats as the most significant, followed by external threats from Great Powers, and external threats from neighboring countries. Contrary to a typical Western view of security which is primarily oriented towards external threats from Great Powers, the Thai respondents expressed more concern

about issues related to Thailand's southern insurgency, climate change, and the cross-border movement of drugs, illegal immigration, and disease.

### ***2.5 Reliance on Great Powers for Security***

Even though Thai security elites identified external military threats as less significant than non-state threats, contemporary neo-realists would nevertheless argue that concerns about balance of power and anarchy are still defining characteristics of the international system of states. The evidence suggests that Thai security elites are not particularly concerned about external threats, and therefore do little in terms of policy and strategic behavior to mitigate these threats. Rather, Thai security elites indicated that they rely on Great Powers for protection if external threats become problematic for the Thai state (Raymond, 2017). The respondents expressed a strong reliance on both China and the United States for protection against external military threats, with no statistically significant deviation in the values assigned to the two countries.

## **3. Literature Review**

The existing body of literature on Thai security preferences is substantial, though very few of them explicitly discuss the RTArF as an entity with its own security perceptions and influences on the strategic direction of the Thai government. The prevailing theme among literature in the last 25 years is that of balance in Thailand's security preferences.

Kislenko (2002) was among the first to use the phrase "bending with the wind" to describe Thailand's foreign policy and security preferences, likening the state to bamboo that is "flexible enough to bend whichever way the wind blows in order to survive." Though Thailand's historical empires – Ayutthaya and Thonburi – pursued military relations with several foreign powers, it emphasized diplomacy to maintain its security from external influence. This strategy is thematic throughout Thailand's history to the present. As Kislenko (2002) noted more than 20 years ago, Thailand's developing friendship with China may cause the relationship with the United States to go through significant changes.

Busbarat (2016) built on the same theme of "bamboo swirling in the wind" in his assessment of Thailand's foreign policy imbalance between the United States and China. Notably, he found that Thailand's security ties with the United States and strong economic ties with China, which he called "the China factor," make it more difficult for Thailand to balance its position between Washington and Beijing. He offers three observations. First, Thailand generally holds the view that America's military presence is vital to regional stability. Second, and paradoxically, Thailand's "accommodation vis-à-vis America is watered down, delayed, or abandoned if it is likely to negatively affect relations with other powers or pose a threat to political stability." Third, Bangkok tends to cooperate more with China than the United States in terms of economic relations.

The pieces above offer insight into broad patterns of strategic thinking among Thailand's security establishment, but the following pieces of research directly consider the RTArF's central role in this process. Prasirtsuk (2017) identified several promising factors for the U.S.-Thailand alliance, including a history of military cooperation and interoperability, the success of the IMET program, and shared interests in both regional stability and non-traditional security issues.

Farrelly (2017) focused more narrowly on the Thai military's outsized role in governance and the idea that the Royal Thai Army's senior leaders, including those long retired from active command positions, can still exert "influence deep into the armed forces and the bureaucracy." Though the Thai military has surrendered its power after resetting political arrangements in the past, the most recent constitution provides plenty of opportunity for the military to retain control over significant aspects of Thai society. Most notably, the Thai military sees its role as "guarding against instability." This research doesn't directly identify the Thai military's security preferences, but it implies a clear focus on preserving Thailand's conservative institutions, maintaining internal stability through domestic politics, and resolving the conflict in the southern provinces.

In his book on Thailand's strategic culture, Raymond (2018) argued that three components – Army dominance, royalism, and factionalism – form the basis of the RTArF's military organizational culture. The military's royalist sentiments are the most distinctive feature of its organizational culture because the military was tasked with securing the monarchy from the beginning of its existence as a professional force. More than 100 years after King Chulalongkorn decided to establish the Royal Thai Army as the dominant military service, it is widely understood that the Chief of the Royal Thai Army is the most powerful figure in the RTArF. It is telling that since 1932, sixteen out of Thailand's twenty-nine Prime Ministers have been Army leaders, including Prayuth Chan-ocha. Finally, Thai military factionalism, coupled with an increased politicization of the military, "has reinforced tendencies toward political involvement because it creates a cycle of winners and losers" (Raymond, 2018).

Finally, Pongsudhirak (2020) summarized the challenges that face the Thai military as a political actor in modern Thailand. He highlights that the "trinity of military, monarchy and bureaucracy" will still be lead the political process, though they will likely come under increased pressure from an electorate that wants to resolve Thailand's structural weaknesses, unstable political environment, and lagging economic growth (Pongsudhirak, 2020). He concludes by arguing that Bangkok will tilt towards Beijing if it remains under "authoritarian shadows," particularly if it cannot find acceptance and support from its treaty ally in Washington.

All these works offer invaluable insight into the historical security preferences, the royal-military nexus, and propensity for coups that define the

RTArF and its leadership. However, none of these works evaluate the perceptions of this influential group against the backdrop of both Sino-U.S. Great Power Competition and the internal security challenges that Thailand is managing. This research fills the gap in the existing research by directly evaluating those external and internal changes and then assessing how those changes affect RTArF security perceptions and preferences.

## **4. Changes in the External Security Environment**

### ***4.1 Sino-American Great Power Competition***

Since 2017, the most significant change in Asia-Pacific regional affairs has been the rise of Great Power competition between the United States and China. During the period from 2017-2023, the United States put two new Presidents in office, both of whom maintained a policy of strategic competition with China to safeguard the Western liberal system of norms and values. This policy was expressed in President Donald Trump's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy and President Joe Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy, both of which identify China as an aggressive, coercive, and revisionist power that threatens peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. It is worth noting here that the term "Indo-Pacific" is deliberately used to connect the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean into one theater of operations. These policies were further reinforced through security mechanisms like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (informally, the Quad) and the Australia, United Kingdom, United States (AUKUS) alliance. Poonkham (2022) described the United States' strategic ambition during this period as a "double strategic goal to maintain its hegemonic power and prestige in the region as well as to constrain China's assertive rise."

At the same time, China continued to subvert long-standing arrangements in the international system, propose new arrangements under Chinese leadership, and shape a new role for itself as an ordering power (Yeo & Jones, 2022) in the pursuit of national rejuvenation. President Xi Jinping effectively consolidated his power during this period, after winning re-election as the General Secretary in 2017 and then again in 2022, at which point he secured an unprecedented third term as China's top leader. In many ways, China's methods are at odds with the liberal values set forth by the United States and enshrined in international laws and norms – China's oppression of its ethnic Uighur population; suppression of domestic political dissent and individual liberties; territorial disputes over Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the East China; support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine; and consistent opposition to the idea of liberal democracy – all undermine existing pillars of the international system. To safeguard China's rejuvenation, President Xi has actively sought to securitize nearly every aspect of the country using various national security initiatives.

Despite their differences, both Great Powers see Bangkok as an ally. The United States' partnership with Thailand is strengthened by a martial tradition of security cooperation, which is more than a century old and continues today. The annual military training exercise Cobra Gold – a combined exercise hosted by Thailand and the United States since 1982 – remains the “gold standard” for the Thai military (Storey, 2019). However, Washington's relationship with Bangkok can be best described as episodic. After Thailand's 2014 military coup, the United States cut nearly \$3.5 million USD in Foreign Military Financing, terminated the annual funding to support the IMET program, and downsized U.S.-Thai military exercises. The United States' negative response to Thailand's domestic politics inevitably pushed Bangkok closer to Beijing.

In fact, the modern Sino-Thai relationship began in a void of U.S. engagement, marking the beginning of a pattern that has persisted for much of the last fifty years. When the United States withdrew its troops from continental Southeast Asia in the late 1970s, Thailand turned to China as a security partner against Vietnamese incursions on Thailand's eastern border. Beijing responded by sending support to the anti-Vietnam Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and cutting assistance to the underground Thai Communist Party (Prasirtsuk, 2017). The Chinese government also offered Thailand arms sales at ‘friendship prices,’ including armored vehicles, artillery, and missiles. This series of events in the late 1970s formed the basis of Sino-Thai alliance, which continues today. Using the naming conventions Strike, Blue Strike, and Falcon Strike, the Thai military has conducted combined exercises with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) for more than twenty years. In 2015, Thailand decided to purchase three diesel-electric submarines from China for the equivalent of \$1.03 billion USD, marking the most expensive and significant defense procurement in Thailand's history (Storey, 2019).

However, China's engagement with Thailand runs much deeper than just security cooperation. China remains Thailand's largest export market and, in 2012, China replaced Japan as Thailand's top trade partner (Prasirtsuk, 2017). Additionally, Thailand's cultural links to China are much stronger than those with the United States. As in neighboring Cambodia and Laos, economic connections have encouraged a glow of Chinese tourists, expats, investors, and students to emigrate to Thailand. An estimated 10-14% of Thai nationals have some Chinese ethnicity, and tourists from mainland China represent the number one source of tourism in Thailand. Sino-Thais are prominent in both business and politics in Thai society; aside from Prayuth Chan-ocha, who left office in 2023, nearly every Thai Prime Minister in the last fifty years has had Chinese ancestry (Strangio, 2022).

It is worth understanding how Thailand fits into Sino-U.S. competition today. Considered broadly, the main flash points of the Sino-U.S. competition since 2017 can be classified as the “3Ts” (Poonkham, 2022) – trade, technology,

and territorial/maritime disputes. The process of balancing two Great Powers puts pressure on states like Thailand to take sides, which then raises questions about security, sovereignty, and the formation of perceptions that occurs within this process. One traditional parable says, “when two big elephants fight, it is the small grass that suffers” (Poonkham, 2022). Do Thailand’s security elites see themselves as the small grass in the era of Great Power Competition?

Given the size, power, and influence of both China and the United States, the Great Power Competition between the two has emerged as a focal point of 21st century international relations. Lee Kuan Yew, the founder of modern Singapore and perhaps the world’s premier China analyst until his death in 2015, addressed this issue pointedly: “The size of China’s displacement of the world balance is such that the world must find a new balance. It is not possible to pretend that this is just another big player. This is the biggest player in the history of the world” (Allison, 2017).

#### ***4.2 Chinese Securitization of the Region***

Against the backdrop of competition with the United States, China is pursuing multiple activities that contribute to the securitization of the Asia-Pacific region. The most notable of these activities is China’s increased military activity around Taiwan (Maizland, 2024). Since Taiwan’s Democratic Progressive Party rose to power in 2016 in a move which signaled a growing pro-independence outlook, there have been significant developments in China’s military drills around Taiwan. In May 2024, days after the inauguration of Taiwan’s new president William Lai Ching-te, China’s PLA carried out military drills named Joint Sword 2024A, which involved the army, navy, air force, and rocket force (Jash, 2024). Drills of this manner ostensibly serve as both a punishment for Taiwan’s independence movement and a warning against any interference by external actors.

At the same time, the China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea has steadily increased, particularly in the context of sovereignty disputes and heightened tensions with the Philippines. While China is constructing military installations on artificial islands in the Spratly and Paracel Islands, the PLA Navy is using aggressive tactics against the Philippine Coast Guard in the vicinity of contested features, to include boat collisions.

The PLA’s military activity has also expanded into areas where it has not operated in the past. Following rumors that Cambodia’s Ream Naval Base, which was built with Chinese funding, could serve as a new outpost for the PLA Navy on the Gulf of Thailand, two PLA Navy corvettes remained docked there for several months (Cheang & Rising, 2024). Given the base’s proximity to the South China Sea, the Chinese presence raised concerns about a possible Chinese-Cambodian agreement.

China's non-military actions in the region can also threaten the security of other countries in its periphery. A study from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute found that China has a "stunning lead" in 37 out of 44 critical and emerging technologies (Needham, 2023), at least partially because of intellectual property theft and illegal technology transfers with "Five Eyes" countries (United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand). However, China's non-military flashpoints are perhaps best exemplified by China's water management projects along the Mekong River. Since 1993, China's construction of hydropower dams along the Upper Mekong River have intensified droughts for downstream areas, contributed to lower food production, and disrupted ecosystems (Thongnoi, 2023). Though initiatives like the 2016 Lancang-Mekong Cooperation attempted to respond to the Mekong issues, it has done little to increase transparency and reduce Chinese control of downstream water levels.

### ***4.3 American Securitization of the Region***

For its part, the United States also contributed to the securitization of the region through its increased military presence and security frameworks. President Donald Trump's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, followed a few years later by President Joe Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States, both identified China as the primary threat to security in the region. While the United States maintained an overt policy of cooperation with Taiwan, it also maintained an enormous and expensive military presence in the Asia-Pacific region, including bases and troop deployments in Japan, Korea, Guam, the Philippines, and Australia (APRN, 2023) with the stated intent to compete with China's hegemonic and revisionist agenda.

Nested within these strategies are new security frameworks with partners in the region, most notably the Quad and AUKUS. The Quad is a group of four countries – the United States, Australia, India, and Japan. The Quad is not a formal alliance, but the group does cooperate on a broad agenda that includes various forms of traditional and non-traditional security, economic, and health issues. As Smith (2021) writes, as of 2021, "leaders in all four countries have become more aligned in their shared concerns about China's increasingly assertive behavior in the region and are more willing to define a constructive agenda of cooperation." While not a formal military alliance, the Quad provides an effective forum for the democracies of the Asia-Pacific to balance China's power.

In September of 2021, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States announced the AUKUS trilateral security pact that will provide Australia with nuclear-powered submarines and support the joint development of other technologies in the coming decades (The White House, 2021). The fact that AUKUS shifts some regional security dynamics does pose some risk. The security cooperation that it emphasizes, coupled with the procurement of nuclear-powered submarines, may be interpreted as an effort to encircle China and be met with an

escalatory response (Hutagalung, 2024). In spite of the risks, both security frameworks have been justified as necessary responses to China's increasing assertiveness in the region, particularly in the South China Sea and the broader Asia-Pacific.

## **5. Changes in the Internal Security Environment**

Concurrent with developments in the external security environment, Thailand has undergone several domestic changes in terms of law, policy, and military reform. Though Thailand does have a well-documented national ideology (Murashima, 1988), pattern of diplomacy (Kesboonchoo, 1973), and organizational culture of strategic accommodation (Raymond, 2018), this research is more interested in deviations to the enduring organizational culture and ideology of the RTArF that would impact perceptions of security. In the years since Raymond's (2017) research was published, there were significant changes to Thailand's constitution, national security policy, and military that have meaningful effects on the security perceptions of Thai military leaders.

### ***5.1 The 2017 Constitution***

Following the 2014 military coup led by Royal Thai Army General Prayuth Chan-ocha, the new government under the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) attempted to address some of the country's internal security issues with the promulgation of a new constitution. When it was passed in April 2017, the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, B.E. 2560 (hereafter, the 2017 Constitution), became Thailand's twentieth constitution since Thailand's democratic transformation in 1932. According to at least one critic, the 2017 Constitution was the "Thai military junta's masterpiece (Pookaman, 2018).

Among other things, the 2017 Constitution fundamentally restructured the electoral system into a modified proportional method. To choose the 500 members of the lower house of parliament, Thais vote for one of 350 constituency candidates and the votes are totaled to determine which of the remaining 150 party list seats go to which party (Head, 2017). The system not-so-subtly favors small and medium-sized political parties, while reducing the seats held by large, anti-establishment parties.

Additionally, the 2017 Constitution stipulates that an unelected, 250-seat upper house will be appointed by the NCPO and will give the military a built-in advantage before voting even begins. If the election results are still unfavorable to the military balance of power, the conservative elites can turn to the Constitutional Court, the Election Commission, and the National Anti-Corruption Commission for extra-parliamentary assistance in a manner that influences the outcome. Taken together, the 2017 Constitution gives the military-appointed upper house significant control over the formation of future governments, which would need

to win a full three quarters of the seats in the lower house to establish a simple majority in both houses.

The results of these changes were evident in Thailand's 2019 general election. Although the leading opposition Pheu Thai Party won 136 seats and formed a coalition with other pro-democracy parties, they were still unable to establish a majority over the pro-military delegates. Instead, the election yielded a controversial parliament and a fractious coalition government, headed by the incumbent Prime Minister, Prayuth Chan-ocha. As noted by Pongsudhirak (2020), the 2017 Constitution achieved its pro-military aim of keeping political parties fractious in favor of small parties, resulting in a weak parliament. Rather than orienting on threats external to the state, the Thai military is increasingly preoccupied with the country's domestic political stability and its role in that process.

### ***5.2 The 2019 National Security Policy***

In 2019, the Thai government's Office of the National Security Council published its new National Security Policy and Plan 2019-2022. This document offers tremendous explanatory power in understanding Thailand's national security priorities. As Kiba (2021) notes, the National Security Plan sets forth three overarching goals: 1) maintaining the monarchy, national sovereignty, and independence; 2) national security; and 3) the preservation of the public order.

The document then provides a prioritized list of fifteen national security policy measures. Only two of the policies on this list (numbers thirteen and fifteen) directly pertain to the state's security relative to external threats. The remaining thirteen measures are linked to internal security concerns, including political threats to the monarchy, cross-border crime, insurgency in the southern provinces, illegal immigration, and corruption. Compared to many Western national security strategies, which generally identify external state and non-state threats as the priority challenges, Thailand's 2019 National Security Policy departs from the norm through its focus on internal security issues.

A few of these issues are worth emphasizing. First is the rise of anti-government protests in Thailand that focus on not only the government, the military, or corruption, but also Thailand's royal institution. In July 2020, a fresh round of anti-government protests erupted in Bangkok, fueled by frustration with the government's strict COVID-19 lockdowns and anger with the Thai military's outsized role in Thai politics. The anti-government sentiment was not out of the ordinary. What was abnormal, however, was the "direct and public challenge to the Thai monarchy," a political phenomenon not seen in Thailand in decades (Kurlantzick, 2020). The protests mostly faded by the summer of 2021, but the potential for future unrest and civil instability in this context remains high.

The second issue is the ethno-religious conflict in Thailand's southern border provinces, including Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and Songkla. The armed

conflict is centered around a clash between the Buddhist Thai nation-state and a minority of Malay-Muslims, who have since 2004 conducted sabotage, assassinations, improvised explosive device attacks, and ambushes on Thai security forces in the provinces. No Thai government has yet been effective in fully pacifying the insurgency, which means that this issue will likely remain a security concern for the Thai government for the foreseeable future (Chambers et al., 2019).

The third issue is Thailand's porous border, which serves as a known facilitation route for narcotics, human trafficking, and illegal migration. The Asia-Pacific drug trade is estimated to be worth an annual \$61.4 billion USD, with more than 90 percent of the tablets and pills seized in Asia originating from four countries – Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia (Arcado, 2022). The Thai government has implemented stricter border controls and additional patrols, but the sheer size of its land borders with neighboring states and the lack of interagency collaboration between states make effective enforcement difficult. The ongoing violence and economic challenges in neighboring countries, Myanmar in particular, make illegal immigration into Thailand more appealing, as undocumented refugees and workers seek better opportunities for living and working. As criminal networks and immigration flows grow more complex, the Thai government is forced to prioritize and resource the security of its borders.

### ***5.3 Military Reform***

Within the RTArF, the Royal Thai Army is the strongest part of the security sector and it receives by far the highest proportion of the defense budget (Chambers, 2021). The Royal Thai Air Force and the Royal Thai Navy are considerably smaller services, and they are often at odds with the Army. Varying degrees of human rights abuses, lack of transparency and accountability, corruption, insulation from elected civilian control, and inefficiency have long been issues for each of the security services.

In the late 1990s, Army Commander General Surayud Chulanond led the RTArF in security sector reform initiatives, to include building a smaller, more credible, professional, efficient, and transparent military over the following ten years. However, subsequent military coups in 2006 and 2014 halted any efforts at security sector reform.

Following General Prayuth Chan-ocha's seizure of power in 2014, the junta established the NCPO to formalize its military, economic, and political control over Thailand (Chambers, 2021). Under the NCPO, the Thai military was used to arrest and detain potential enemies of the new regime, military courts became the most powerful judiciary in Thailand, and the military took control over all state-owned enterprises. These reforms to the security sector entrenched military control over Thailand, and particularly its domestic political governance.

Thailand's 2014 military coup and the implementation of structures to embed long-term military influence in government all suggested that the 2014-2019 junta and the post-2019 electoral regime would block any attempts at meaningful military reform, especially efforts to restore transparency or civilian control of the military. However, in 2017, the Thai Ministry of Defense adopted Modernization Plan: Vision 2026, a ten-year modernization plan for the Thai military that focused on defense procurement issues.

Defense procurement in Thailand has long been prone to controversy and corruption, and many experts argue that Thailand's procurement decisions are fundamentally at odds with the military's operational requirements. An often-cited example is Thailand's 2015 decision to purchase three diesel-electric submarines from China, as the submarines are too large to be used in littoral and coastal sea areas where Thailand is located (Sirivunnabood, 2021). In fact, since 2015, Transparency International's Government Defense Anti-Corruption Index has ranked Thailand in the lowest category, indicating a high risk for corruption in the defense acquisitions sector. Unsurprisingly, the modernization plans have thus far had a muted effect on the RTArF.

In the period since Raymond's (2017) research was published, proposals for military reform, including the elimination of conscription, addressing soldiers' welfare, reducing military land ownership, and promotion greater civilian control and oversight of the defense establishment, have been made with no meaningful progress. With almost no civilian oversight of the Thai military, it is unlikely that this trend will change in the near-term. For the future, Thailand's bloated, divided, and politicized military looks likely to endure.

## **6. Has the Balance Tipped?**

As discussed in the previous sections, Raymond's (2017) research painted the picture of a transitory period in Thai security perceptions, in which the country's military elites held preferences that increasingly tilted away from the United States and towards China. Since that work was published, the level of Sino-U.S. competition in the region intensified amidst the backdrop of competing securitization initiatives. Concurrently, the Thai government under junta leadership pursued broad security sector reforms through a new constitution, national security policy, and a codified role for the RTArF in Thai governance. Considered together, how have these changes manifested themselves in the security perceptions of RTArF leaders today?

The previous sections described the changes to Thailand's structural (external) and organizational (internal) security environment that occurred in the period since 2017. The final section of this research will provide an updated assessment of prevailing security perceptions among RTArF officers.

In 2023, the author administered a survey to an audience of fifty-four Thai military officers and defense civilians, with the target group being officers currently attending Thailand's military academies or service-level schools. The survey was administered entirely in the Thai language, participation in the survey was voluntary, and no personally identifying information was collected about any of the respondents. The survey consisted of thirty-four questions, with the first eight questions oriented on the respondents' backgrounds and demographic information, and the remaining twenty-six questions oriented on the respondents' opinions towards various internal and external security issues. To accurately duplicate Raymond's (2017) survey methodology, this survey used ten-point Likert scale ratings to help the author achieve a high degree of nuance in the respondents' answers. Almost all the survey respondents were active-duty military officers (94.5%), with a small minority of respondents (5.5%) being civilians in the Thai Ministry of Defense. The researcher made initial contact with a handful of Thai officers in these schools through U.S. military colleagues who were attending these schools concurrently, and the survey link was shared with the entire class via the Line messaging application.

Once the survey responses were collected, the researcher began a period of data analysis to compare the responses to Raymond's (2017) findings. These comparisons focused on specific preference areas, including assessments of the United States and China's role in Thailand's military training, procurement, and doctrine; perceptions of security regarding external powers; perceptions of security regarding internal threats; perceptions of security regarding neighboring states; and opinions about specific elements of Sino-U.S. Great Power Competition. The researcher derived the median values from each of the Likert scale responses to compare against the previous values reported by Raymond (2017). This research used the median, as opposed to mean/average, to build a set of data that could be meaningfully compared to existing research and because the median is more effective in capturing the central location of a distribution of data when there are outliers present. For this research, there were outlier responses and asymmetrical response distributions for almost every question in the survey, so the median was selected to accurately show the typical response for each question.

The data collection and analysis period marked the end of the quantitative portion of the research and marked the transition to qualitative review of the response through phone interviews. It is worth noting that many of these issues are potentially sensitive discussion points for Thai military officers, who may fear repercussions for candidly discussing issues of Thai security in this context. Therefore, out of an abundance of respect for Thai culture and caution for the interview participants, the researcher refrained from asking any questions related to Thailand's royal institution.

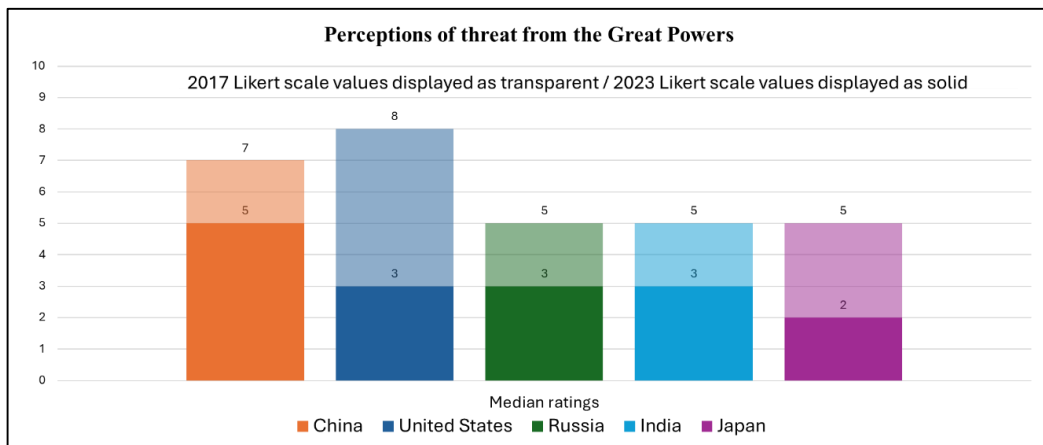
This research set out to evaluate three hypotheses. First, the increased securitization of the Asia-Pacific since 2017 will result in an increased threat

perception towards Great Power states among RTArF leaders. Second, despite the increase in threat perception towards Great Power states, RTArF leaders will still hold domestic security concerns as their top priority. Third, the lack of cross-border conflicts in Southeast Asia during this period will result in a decreased threat perception towards neighboring states among RTArF leaders. The findings of this research are presented below.

### 6.1 Threat Perceptions towards Great Power States

Contrary to the first hypothesis, the survey data suggests that RTArF leaders hold a comparatively benign view of Great Power states than they held just a few years ago. During the 2023 survey, respondents rated China as the greatest military threat to Thailand, followed by the United States, Russia, India, and Japan. Perhaps most interesting is the fact that the threat perceptions of every Great Power decreased when compared to the median values of the same question from Raymond's (2017) research. The decreases were not insignificant – the median ratings for China dropped from 7 to 5, while the same ratings for the United States dropped from 8 to 3, where 10 indicated a significant threat and 0 indicated no threat. Across the five Great Power states that were rated, the overall threat perception decreased from an average median rating of 6 in 2017 to just 3.6 in 2023, as shown in Figure 2 below.

**Figure 1: Local Resource Capability**



**Source:** Author

My interviews offered some context as to why threat perceptions towards Great Powers may have decreased, even as Sino-American competition and securitization in the region increased. As previously detailed in this paper, the 2014 coup resulted in the military junta's rise to power under General Prayuth Chan-ocha. The international condemnation of the military coup, particularly

from the United States, was swift and vocal. However, the events that followed enabled a period of relative stability in Thailand's domestic politics that helped to soothe relations with external states.

In 2017, Thailand's new constitution secured a permanent role for the military in the Thai government. Though it was contentious and broadly unpopular among Thailand's progressive factions, this move provided a legal basis for the hierarchy and harmony that Thai conservatives are particularly fond of. Thailand's 2019 elections, which were nominally free and fair under the guise of a truly democratic election, formally installed coup leader Prayuth Chan-ocha as the nation's prime minister. Because the country had successfully established a new elected government, Thailand's relationships with external powers suddenly became less about condemnation of the military-led government and suppression of individual liberties, and more about opportunities for cooperation. Given this period of relative domestic stability and cooperative relations with the Great Powers, and the United States in particular, it follows that Thailand's threat perceptions of those countries decreased since 2017.

It is also plausible that other types of threats, like domestic security concerns or the threat posed by neighboring countries, became relatively more prominent over the past several years. This sort of re-prioritization of threats may have helped Thai military leaders perceive themselves as more secure from external threats than they did in the past. This possibility will be addressed in the following sections.

The author's interviews also illuminated some factors that may have influenced RTArF leaders' specific perceptions about China in the last six years, which may explain why it is now perceived to be the greatest threat to Thai security among the Great Powers. First and foremost is the growing concern among continental Southeast Asian states, Thailand included, about Chinese influence activities along the Mekong River. As this research highlighted in previous sections, the five states sitting along the Lower Mekong River Basin have expressed concern about China's increased control in this region, as well as the implications for local communities who have long survived off the river and its natural resources. Correspondingly, a recent survey report from the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (Seah et al., 2023) found that 33.3% of ASEAN member states agreed that their relationship with China could deteriorate based on "China's strong-arm tactics in Taiwan, the South China Sea and the Mekong."

Interviewees also raised concerns about China's militarization in the region, although this concern was oriented not on Taiwan or the South China Sea, but on the Gulf of Thailand. Specifically, interviewees cited a growing concern about the PLA Navy's operations at Ream Naval Base in Cambodia. Beginning in 2019, media outlets circulated reporting about a possible Chinese-Cambodian secret agreement related to the use of a new Chinese funded pier at Ream Naval

Base. As of 2024, two PLA Navy corvettes were berthed at the pier for a period of more than four months (AMTI, 2024).

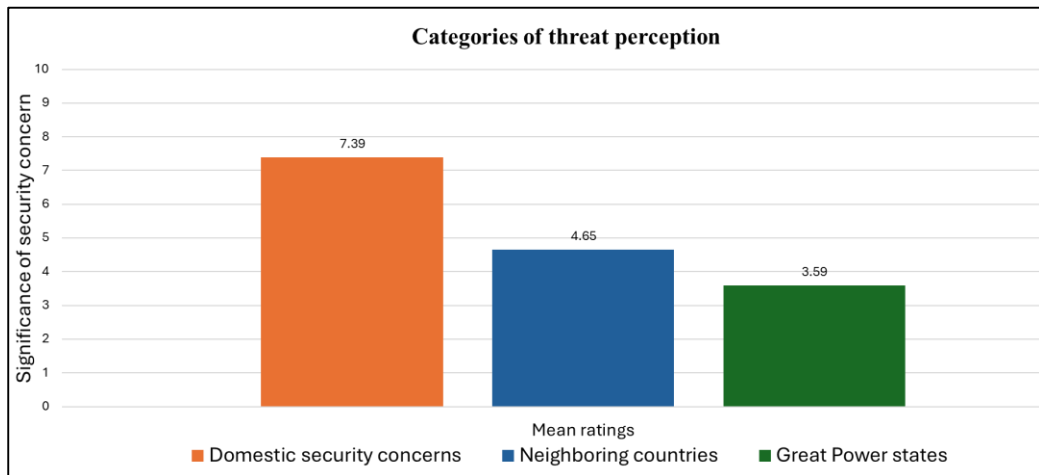
Regardless of which Great Power is perceived to be the greatest military threat to Thailand, the survey data shows that the overall perception of external military threats among RTArF leadership is relatively low. This response generally mirrors the results from Raymond's (2017) research, suggesting that the threat perception among Thai military officers is oriented not on external Great Power states, but elsewhere.

As the reader will soon see, the other findings presented in this research do not deviate significantly from the body of existing literature. However, the idea that Thai military leaders find Great Power states relatively less threatening than they did five years is noteworthy and warrants investigation in future research. In the years preceding this research, Russia launched an invasion and sustained an ongoing war in Ukraine, China pursued more aggressive tactical actions in asserting its territorial claims in the South China Sea, and the United States organized security frameworks with states like Japan, the Philippines, Australia, and the United Kingdom to build a credible military deterrent against Chinese actions. It follows that a state in Thailand's geographic, diplomatic, and economic position would feel threatened by the collective actions of these Great Powers.

However, this research suggests that the opposite is true. Considered broadly, the perceived decrease in threat perception towards Great Powers could be tied to several factors. One option that this research considers in the next section is a re-prioritization of security concerns from external threats to internal threats. Other options include an increased confidence in regional and/or international institutions, like ASEAN, to provide security to Thailand; a reframing of security perceptions to align more closely with non-traditional security concerns, including pandemic security, food security, and climate security; or the information campaigns of Great Power states are effective in shaping perceptions of cooperation, mutual interests, and shared development priorities.

## ***6.2 Prioritization of Domestic Security Concerns***

Consistent with the second hypothesis, RTArF leaders are decisively oriented on domestic security concerns as the greatest perceived threat to Thai security. When asked to rate their perceptions of threat across three broad categories – Great Power states, domestic security concerns, and neighboring countries – respondents decisively rated domestic security concerns as the most significant, as shown in Figure 3 below. Domestic security concerns had a mean value of 7.39, followed by neighboring countries at 4.65, and Great Power states at 3.59, where 10 was a very significant security concern and 0 was not a security concern.

**Figure 2: Categories of threat perception**

**Source:** Author

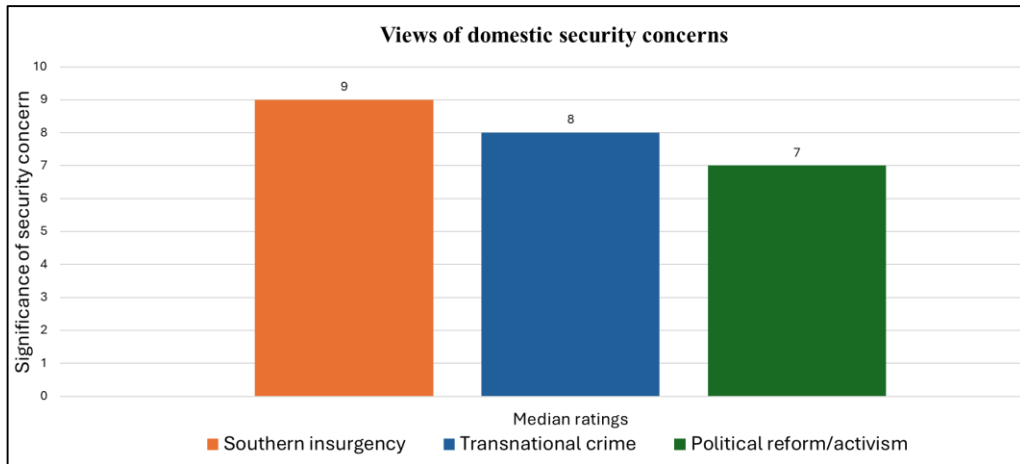
As Kiba (2021) argued, Thailand's 2019 National Security Plan set forth national strategic guidance for the state's security that prioritized domestic issues over external security concerns. Domestic security priorities included strengthening the national institutions with the King as the head of state, resolving violence in the southern border provinces, and strengthening the border control system to mitigate cross-border issues, cross-border threats, and illegal immigration.

This could also offer a partial explanation for the declining threat perception of Great Powers since Raymond's (2017) research was published. If RTArF leaders adhere closely to national strategic guidance, then it follows that their perception of threats prioritizes domestic security issues ahead of external conflicts. Interviewees noted that Thai military officers with less than ten years of experience typically do not read or discuss national security documents at their level, as that type of guidance is generally written for consumption and implementation by senior military officers. That being said, it is still plausible that the guidance has a 'trickle-down' effect, which permeates the RTArF officer corps through the guidance of senior military leaders.

When asked about the significance of domestic threats, respondents rated the insurgency in the southern border provinces as the most significant threat with a median rating of 9. As shown in Figure 4 below, that threat was followed closely by transnational crime, which includes illegal narcotics and migration, with a median value of 8. Finally, domestic political reform, which can be construed as threats to Thailand's conservative establishment, had a median value of 7. Particularly when compared to the threat perceptions of Great Power states, these domestic issues are a higher priority. This data also lends credibility

to the idea that Thailand's 2019 National Security Plan was effective in shaping the perceptions of its military leadership.

**Figure 3: Perceptions of domestic security issues**



**Source:** Author

### ***6.3 Threat Perceptions towards Neighboring Countries***

The third and final hypothesis was that the lack of cross-border conflicts in Southeast Asia in the preceding years will result in decreased threat perceptions towards neighboring states among RTArF leadership. The survey results and subsequent interviews largely supported this hypothesis, with some caveats.

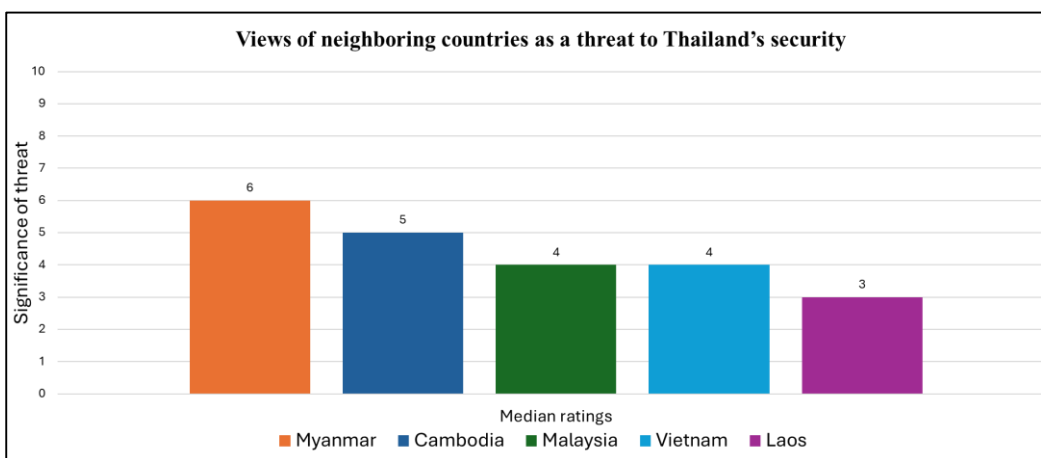
When asked to rate the significance of the threat posed by neighboring countries, respondents ranked Myanmar the highest with a median value of 6, followed by Cambodia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Laos. Since Myanmar's military led a violent coup d'état in 2021, it has increased offensive operations against ethnic groups on multiple fronts, many of whom are concentrated along the rural border areas with Thailand. Combat action is taking place so closely to the border that, in July 2022, the Royal Thai Air Force scrambled F-16 fighter jets after a Myanmar Air Force MiG-29 violated Thai airspace near Tak province (Chotisut et al., 2022). Aside from Myanmar, the threat perceptions associated with the other neighboring countries were mostly neutral, despite the history of armed conflict with both Cambodia and Vietnam.

Interviewees noted two relevant factors in this discussion. First, RTArF leaders see Myanmar as an increasingly unstable place, and its instability leaks into Thai borders in the form of arms sales, illegal border crossings, and drug flows. The border area is too large for Thailand's border patrol forces to interdict everything coming into the country. Therefore, the threat perception is not so

much associated with a military threat from Myanmar's government, as much as it is a concern about instability crossing the porous border into Thailand.

The second factor, as highlighted in previous sections, is China's growing influence and control over the Lower Mekong River Basin. Interviewees noted that this issue may have pushed states like Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam closer together as they work to address a mutual threat against a critical shared resource. This could explain why threat perceptions of Thailand's neighboring states (excepting Myanmar) are relatively low, despite a history of armed conflict with some of those states in the late 20th century and early 21st century.

**Figure 4: Perceptions of neighboring countries**



Source: Author

## 7. Conclusion

This paper provides an updated assessment of the Royal Thai Armed Forces' security perceptions under the status quo and some of the factors that shaped those perceptions, based on structural conditions, internal conditions, and current perceptions of various threat categories. The analysis of this paper revealed three key findings. First, Thai military leaders perceive Great Power states as much less threatening to Thai security than they did just a few years ago. Second, the Thai military continues to prioritize domestic security issues over external security concerns, reflecting a persistent focus on internal stability and national sovereignty. Third, the lack of cross-border conflicts in Southeast Asia in the last decade contributed to a decreased threat perception toward neighboring states, underscoring a preference for stability and non-alignment in the face of Great Power rivalry.

It is worth highlighting here the limitations of this research. First, the sample size of 54 survey respondents was sufficient for basic data analysis in this context, but it could have been larger to achieve a higher degree of confidence in the data set. Slovin's Formula is a well-known method to calculate an appropriate sample size from a target population, based on desired confidence levels. The population under analysis for this research was the Royal Thai Armed Forces, which has an active-duty population ( $n$ ) of approximately 690,000 personnel. According to Slovin's Formula, this research requires a minimum sample size of 272 respondents to achieve a 90% confidence level, assuming a  $z$  score ( $z$ ) of 1.65, a standard deviation ( $\sigma$ ) of 0.5, and a margin of error ( $e$ ) of 0.05. Given this research's relatively small sample size of 54 respondents, it is likely that confidence value in this data is less than 80%, which means that you if were to repeat this survey 100 times, you would get the same mean results fewer than 80 times. Updated research on this subject with a larger sample size would provide more valuable insight.

Another fault in this research design is the risk of inherent biases in the respondents who chose to take this survey because the researcher is an active-duty American military officer. During the data collection period, the researcher was assigned to the Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group Thailand (JUSMAGTHAI), a security assistance organization that is subordinate to the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok. Though the researcher made every effort to 'cast a wide net' in disseminating the survey link, there is a possibility that Thai military officers with pro-American leanings were more likely to take the time to answer my questions. If this did occur, it would have the unintended consequence of skewing the data toward favorable perceptions of the United States. Future researchers should continue to exercise caution in the sample populations that they survey and should be extra careful to ensure that any affiliations they have are not featured as a basis for the research project.

Raymond's (2017) research presented a case for a Thai military in which preferences were tipping towards China. Several years later, this research offers a counterargument in which the Thai military's security preferences are somewhat benign when considering external actors, with a few exceptions for China's assertive actions in the region. However, these security preferences are much more intense when evaluated against Thailand's domestic security issues, which suggests a military orientation on such issues as resolving violence in Thailand's southern border provinces, securing porous national borders, and preserving national institutions with the King as the head of state.

This research contributes to a nuanced understanding of Thai security perceptions in a rapidly changing geopolitical environment. It highlights the complexities faced by Thai security elites as they navigate strategic relationships with two Great Powers, seeking to derive benefits from both while maintaining Thailand's national security priorities and strategic autonomy. The findings offer

valuable insights for policy makers and scholars interested in Southeast Asian security dynamics and the broader implications of the Sino-American competition in the Asia-Pacific.

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All views expressed in this research are the author's own.

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