

China-Thailand Military Exercise Launched Against Backdrop of US-China Confrontation

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China and Thailand launched the Blue Sky 2016 joint military exercise on Saturday. The opening ceremony for the drill was held at the Sattahip Naval Base in Chon Buri, Thailand. It was presided over by Royal Thai Navy Fleet Commander Naris Prathumsuwan and Wang Hai, deputy commander of Chinese Navy. The Blue Sky 2016 exercise was launched against the backdrop of the development of closer bilateral relations and a cohort of domestic, regional and geopolitical challenges.

The Blue Sky 2016 exercise involves joint training at sea and on land, evacuation of people from conflict-affected areas, disaster-stricken areas, as well as counter-terrorism operations with focus on relief for the population.

 Deputy commander of Chinese Navy, Wang Hai said the drill manifests the perseverance and ability of marine corps from both countries in counter-terrorism and maintaining peace in the region.

Royal Thai Navy Fleet Commander Naris Prathumsuwan for his part, said the Blue Skye 2016 exercise would help boost the long-standing relationship between Thailand and China and the exercise was aimed at increasing cooperation between the two forces by sharing practical knowledge and experiences.

Blue Sky 2016 is the third of its kind, following the Blue Strike 2010 and the Blue Strike 2012 joint exercises. The Sattahip Naval Base, where the headquarters of Royal Thai Marine corps is located, is the biggest naval base in Thailand.

Thailand Reorients Itself After 2014 Military Takeover – Need for Constitutional Reform Remains



Image: The New York Times

Bilateral relations between China and Thailand have been expanded and consolidated since 2014, after the Thai military intervened and took power after months of protests against the government of Yingluck Shinawatra by protesters who demanded that the Pheu Thai party government abides by the constitution. In late 2013 protesters from the popular PDRC movement began a wave of protests demanding reform before elections.

Early 2014 the movement also gained the support from many of Thailand's rice farmers. Protests were about to bring the country to a stand-still. The Shinawatra regime and armed

militant “Red Shirts” and Black Shirts” linked to the Pheu Thai party, on the other hand, carried out a wave of terrorist attacks against protesters before the military intervened to prevent that the country spirals out of control.

The ousted PM Yingluck Shinawatra and the Pheu Thai party overtly admitted that Yingluck governed the country as a proxy for her fugitive brother Thaksin Shinawatra who maintains close ties to U.S. and British think tanks and high-finance. Thaksin is wanted on several charges, including corruption and involvement in crackdowns that led to several deaths. He openly admitted to the New York Times that power in Thailand comes via Skype.



Click on image to enlarge.

Thailand has been through several circles of “Democracy” and military takeovers. Constitutional reform advocates stress that Thailand’s constitution invariably leads to the concentration of power in the hands of small financial and party elites, regardless of which party it is that is in power. The problem is in other words “systemic”.

Professor Dr. Amorn Chandarasomboon, a former Secretary-General of Thailand’s State Council, outlined the systemic problems, stating a truly democratic system means:

- There must be elections.
- Elected representatives must have the ability to perform their duties independently according to their conscience, free of external control.
- Thailand’s Constitution allows capitalist autocracy operating under a parliamentary system because of these three provisions.
 - 1) A Member of Parliament (MP) must be a member of a political party.
 - 2) A political party can expel a member for disobeying a party resolution.
 - 3) The Prime Minister must be a Member of Parliament.

Amorn stressed that such a political system allows those with money to obtain absolute power to run the country like a privately owned business and leads to corruption. The administration of General Prayuth Chan-ocha and Thailand as a nation still have to address this need for constitutional reform.

Many analysts believe that the question whether or not the above mentioned constitutional and systemic problems will be addressed will determine whether or not Thailand escapes its circle of democracy, corruption and nepotism, protests and military interventions. Especially the U.S. and British governments have touted the military intervention as a coup while western media generally describe the government as a “military junta”.

Polls do, however, suggest that the majority of Thai citizens regard the military as an important, independent national institution that functions as an important stabilizing factor. The 2014 military intervention was welcomed by the PDRC and other pro-reform advocates, by the Royal household, by the majority of Thailand’s population, by the important Thai [Chamber of Commerce](#) , the [Board of Trade](#), as well as by both Thai Buddhist and [Roman Catholic](#) dignitaries. Polls also suggest that the majority of the population prefers a longer period of transition to consolidate the country rather than a rushed return to a dysfunctional democratic system.

With western governments being increasingly hostile towards Thailand, [Bangkok has encouraged its business community and finance sector](#) to make use of the opportunities that have been opened up by the opening of [China's economy](#). Thailand is, however, maintaining a balanced position, making the best of its ties to China and ASEAN.

Bangkok has also initiated projects that aim at closer cooperation with [Russia, Belarus and the relatively newly founded Eurasian Economic Union \(EEU\)](#). The Thai strategy aims at balance, friendly relations with all who are genuinely interested, and in maintaining national sovereignty. Earlier this year, for example, Bangkok turned down the Chinese – Thai High-Speed Rail project and went solo with building parts of the planned railway infrastructure. Bangkok stressed that it [could not agree with Chinese demands about exclusive land-development rights along the railway](#).

Common Denominators With Regard to Terrorism




Aftermath of the bombing at the Erawan Shrine in Bangkok

China and Thailand are facing similar and in part overlapping security challenges with regard to terrorism. Even though there were not made any official, explicit comments by Royal Thai Navy Fleet Commander Naris Prathumsuwan and Wang Hai, deputy commander of Chinese Navy it is safe to assume that the Blue Sky 2016 exercise is in part addressing these challenges.

More specifically: China is struggling with armed Turkmen – Uighur insurgents in its Xinjiang province. In 2015 Thailand expelled some 100 Uighur for alleged involvement in human trafficking. Uighur networks have also been [implicated in the 2015 bombing at the Erawan Shrine](#) that killed 20 and injured another 120 appeared in court in Thailand's capital Bangkok.

Uighur militants in China's Xinjiang province are known for ties to Turkish "Grey Wolves", as well as Turkish and NATO intelligence services. Uighur NGOs in China are also supported by well-known CIA fronts including The National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

 Thailand has traditionally been very tolerant of other than Theravada Buddhist religions and religious communities. Thailand is, however, plagued by Islamist terrorism in [regions with a high percentage of Muslims along](#) the West and East Coasts of the Peninsula across Trang, Krabi, Phuket, Ranong, Nakkon Si Thammarat, and Surat Thani.

Chinese and Thai security analysts and security services, including the military, must be acutely aware of the threat that is being posed by the increased involvement of Islamists in Xinjiang, China and in southwestern Thailand. That is, "Islamists" not to be confused with "Muslims". Especially precarious links are those between Islamists with ties to Turkish "Grey Wolves", and Muslim Brotherhood affiliated networks.

Likewise, the increased involvement of fundamentalist, Saudi Arabia supported Wahhabi and networks to remnants of Al-Qaeda networks have the potential of posing threats to Thailand, Myanmar, as well as to China.

[It is worth noting that displaced Rohingya from Bangladesh and Rohingya refugee camps in Myanmar](#) have been infiltrated by the Bangladeshi Al-Qaeda Franchise Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islam (HuJI). Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islam, for its part, is known for being infiltrated by, and in part run by intelligence services of Bangladesh, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and other's who used the Al-Qaeda "*Mujahedeen*" in the fight against Soviet troops in Afghanistan.

Finally, the joint Chinese – Thai Blue Sky 2016 military exercise must also be viewed within the context of growing tensions over territorial disputes in the South China Sea. While it is unlikely that open warfare would erupt between China and the USA, or between China and one of the United States' Asian – Pacific allies, the risk of 4th generation, asymmetric warfare by terrorist proxy is very real and potentially implicates Thailand and Thailand's neighbors, including Malaysia, Philippines as well as Indonesia.

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