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# **Socio-Cultural Aspects of Thai and United States Military Relations**

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[This article is a condensation of selected sections of a thesis on Thai-United States military relations in the post September 11, 2001, era completed as part of a Master's in Arts in Regional Studies at Chiang Mai University, Thailand. The research techniques used were personal interviews of Thai and United States military, diplomatic, and academic experts; participant-observer field research at several combined exercises; and document research. This article is the sole work of the author and does not portend to express the views of the DOD, Department of State, or any other USG organization.]

## **Similarities between Thai and United States Military Sub-Cultures**

My overall observation of relations between Thai and American servicemen was that interpersonal relations and professional interoperability were good. Despite the fact that the U.S. and Thailand are located halfway around the world from each other, the two countries' cultures share several key aspects which help Americans and Thais connect on an easier level when compared to other countries.

First and foremost, both countries place a high value on freedom and independence. Both countries are known as the "land of the free." Thailand takes justified pride in being the only Southeast Asian country never to have been colonized. The United States is of course a former British colony but has for the bulk of modern history been regarded as the model for liberty, democracy, and the personal freedom of its citizens.

Both countries are also very accepting of foreigners and of other cultures. As the world's most ethnically diverse country, most Americans are comfortable around people of different backgrounds and can adjust to new customs and manners. Thailand is also very open to other cultures and customs, perhaps due in part to not having the collective psychological resentment towards foreigners that some other countries have who have been conquered by foreign powers. Also, a high percentage of Thai military leaders have studied in the United States or other western countries and so are familiar with western culture.

Thai and American cultures also share the characteristic of emphasizing friendliness. In contrast to some other cultures which are highly reserved or where individuals take a long amount of time to get to know each other before opening up, Thais and Americans are usually more outgoing and can warm up to each other quickly. I have had several experiences of working with other countries' military forces in which dealings with my counterparts were stilted and highly awkward. But in the bulk of the observations I have made on Thai and United States military exercises, the two sides seem to connect easily; and most dealings between them seem much more natural.

## **Differences between Thai and United States Military Sub-Cultures**

Despite the similarities noted above, there are some key differences between Thai and United States cultures than can cause misunderstanding and friction. I will touch on three areas: social protocol, rank and respect of seniority, and political correctness.

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## Social Protocol

American culture does not place the same value on socialization as Thai culture does. United States military culture emphasizes a hard-driving work ethic. This attitude can be taken to an extreme, where anything other than mission accomplishment is regarded as extraneous. The social aspects of our military dealings with the Thais are seen as frivolous at best, and most often as a complete waste of time. “Why can’t we just get down to business?” was the opinion of one United States officer I spoke with.

On a macro-level, this attitude can be seen in America’s poor record on high level visits and social protocol. This record is quite frankly dismal, especially when compared to other nations currently engaging the Thai military. All too often, it appears to the Thais that American leaders are more interested in other countries in the region, stopping in Thailand only infrequently. This blatant disregard of the social aspect of doing business is a major slight, since personal relationships are the key to operating in Asia.

One example of this was the attendance at the parade in December 2006 marking King Bhumibol’s 60th year on the throne. The United States sent one General to this event. China sent its Minister of Defense and over 20 Flag officers. America’s sending just one Flag officer, coming so soon on the heels of the Section 508 sanctions that had been imposed after the 2006 coup, was seen by many Thais as a deliberate lack of respect for their beloved monarch.

Visits by diplomatic personnel are also important to acknowledging key alliances. In February, 2009, when Secretary of State Clinton made her first trip through Asia, many Thais were incensed that she stopped in Indonesia but bypassed Thailand. A 16 February 2009 editorial in the *Bangkok Post* had this to say:

The decision to visit Indonesia but ignore close United States friends and allies is confusing . . . Many in Thailand, which has 175 years of rock-solid support and harmony with the United States, feel the new leadership in Washington is turning its back on an old friend. Singaporeans and Filipinos have said much the same . . . It is important to include wary countries like Indonesia in the dialogue. But it is vital not to ignore old and trusted friends.

The editorial also noted that in his only mention of Thailand in 2008’s campaign, President Obama confused the country with Taiwan.

Flag officer visits are another area where we sometimes fail to appreciate the importance of showing respect in Thai culture. An American officer I interviewed confided that it was often “like pulling teeth” when trying to persuade some senior United States officers to take the time to make such a call. To the American mind, a thirty minute social call on someone they do not really know, who may not speak very good English, can seem like an awkward waste of time, particularly since the benefits of such a visit cannot usually be seen in the short term. But to the Thai mindset, such a visit speaks volumes about respect. Even if there is little of concrete nature that is discussed at such a meeting, a visit like this will be remembered in the future and can shape opinions favorably toward future United States requests or interests. During the February 2009 exercise at Sattahip Naval Base, I witnessed firsthand the amount of goodwill and respect generated by the social call that Brigadier General Brilakis, Commanding General of III Marine Expeditionary Brigade, paid on the Commandant of the Royal Thai Marine Corps, Vice Admiral Suwit.

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It is also worth noting that in Thailand's quest to buy a new fighter jet, the King and Queen of Sweden as well as the Russian President personally made a case for their respective countries' aircraft. The lack of any comparable high level involvement on the American side was perceived by the Thais as disinterest and may have played a role in their eventual decision to buy Sweden's Gripen fighter. Under our system, such negotiations are often relegated to military representatives or perhaps the ambassador, who are empowered with the authority to make high-level decisions. However, we as Americans need to take into account Thailand's more hierarchical culture and adjust our practices accordingly.

I personally saw the American disregard for socialization culminate in an awkward and embarrassing situation during the 2009 Cobra Gold End of Exercise Ceremony at Korat Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) Base. The United States Marine Corps (USMC) squadrons, operating out of a different base, decided at the last minute not to send any representatives to the ceremony in order to focus on internal unit training the next day. This made for a very awkward situation as the RTAF and United States Air Force (USAF) Squadron Commanders exchanged plaques and mementos with each other. The other USMC liaison officer and I accepted numerous plaques and gifts on behalf of our Marine brethren but had nothing to give in return. Several Thai officers were visibly offended and asked why no USMC Commanders had seen fit to attend.

The decision not to attend the end of exercise party was a classic case of short sightedness. The long term cost of insulting seven Thai squadrons certainly outweighs the small benefit achieved by completing a few extra flights. In this case, we were so eager to achieve a short term training objective that we lost sight of the main, long term objective of training such as Cobra Gold, which is to build the Thai-United States relationship.

### **Rank and Respect of Seniority**

The Thai military is much more hierarchical than the United States Armed Forces. The main reason for this is that Thai society is itself very hierarchical, in contrast to America's more egalitarian society. Another reason is Thailand's policy of retaining personnel on active duty until age 60, which makes for a very top-heavy, high-ranking military. In an environment such as this, it becomes natural to keep leadership and authority at the highest levels.

In contrast, the American military tends to push decision-making authority and responsibility down to a lower level than Thailand does; and as such it is not uncommon to see American sergeants making decisions that a Thai lieutenant would make or American captains making decisions that in the Thai military would be made at the lieutenant colonel level. In my previous experiences as a lieutenant and captain at combined training with the Thai military, I can recall typically being paired up with Thai counterparts who were majors and lieutenant colonels. Now as a major, I normally deal with lieutenant colonels and colonels. Despite the informality of many Thai officers when dealing with foreigners, Americans working in such situations must remember they are dealing with a senior officer and treat them as such.

At the junior officer level, the high level of respect that Thais show to their seniors can be interpreted by Americans as excessive or obsequious. Junior American officers are used to being encouraged to voice their opinions and make decisions on their own. When they look at the Thai model, which generally keeps decision-making authority at the top, they may tend to see their young Thai counterparts as "Yes Men." But these officers need to understand that many junior Thai officers do have initiative and work to give their inputs to their chain of command, within the more hierarchical

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framework of Thai military sub-culture. This needs to be done much more subtly and often in a behind-the-scenes fashion rather than the more open and direct United States style.

### **Cultural Correctness**

In the past few decades, United States military culture has undergone huge changes. A specific mindset has arisen due to the rampant political correctness in American culture, combined with a well-intentioned but often unnecessary effort to protect servicemen from injury and in the name of force protection.

Speaking of Thailand specifically, I have observed an exponential increase in social rules and regulations since my first deployment to Thailand a decade ago. For example, at the 2009 Cobra Gold exercise, United States servicemen were prohibited from drinking alcohol. When Thai servicemen invited their American counterparts out for a few drinks after work, they were baffled when we responded that we could not go. It was simply inconceivable to the Thais that Americans entrusted with the lives of dozens of men and millions of dollars worth of equipment would be banned from having a cold beer or two after work during a peacetime exercise in a friendly, long-time allied country. When we explained that this prohibition was considered a force protection policy, one Thai was offended at the implication that Thailand was a dangerous country. The policy was later amended to allow social drinking at Thai-United States functions; but in practice this did not really change things, as most Americans were unsure if a casual invitation for dinner and a few drinks from their Thai counterparts constituted an “official” Thai-United States function.

Regulations also prohibited water sports. A Royal Thai Marine Corps (RTMC) associate of mine invited me and a few other Americans to go scuba diving during Cobra Gold 2009. When we declined, my friend was flabbergasted to learn that Marines, soldiers of the sea charged with carrying out amphibious operations, had been banned from the ocean.

I feel that the increasing political correctness within the United States military is severely hampering our ability to build rapport and camaraderie with the Thais. Excessive social regulations diminish opportunities for social interaction between the two sides. This hurts the long term, overall relationship. For example, consider the case of a high-ranking Thai officer 10 to 15 years from now, meeting a United States military associate he worked with years ago. Rather than reminiscing about how, as young officers, they went scuba-diving or had a few beers together, he may be more likely to remember us as a strange, awkward group who were unable to do much of anything off duty.

### **Communication Issues**

Thai and United States briefing styles vary drastically. Different basic patterns of communication between the two cultures as well as varying degrees of deference for rank and position can contribute to misunderstandings.

The American military’s communication style favors informality with ample give and take between instructor and audience in the form of frequent questions. When giving a brief, Americans will tell their listeners to feel free to ask questions at any point. They will also stop at key points and check understanding by asking questions of their audience. No brief or class is considered complete without a question and answer session afterward. Indeed, in the United States military, a lack of questions at the end is seen as evidence that the audience did not pay attention to the brief or that it was boring or inapplicable.

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The Thai style is much more formal. The instructor may make a comment encouraging questions; but in the vast majority of cases, he will end up speaking straight through from start to finish. In the Thai military, asking questions during the brief is considered insulting, implying that the material is being poorly presented and is hard to understand. Couple this with the Thai military's greater deference to rank, and one can understand the reasons behind this lack of questions.

Misunderstandings occur with mixed audiences. An American giving a brief to Thais is usually struck by the lack of questions or feedback. On one occasion, I was briefing a Close Air Support mission. I wanted to ensure that everyone understood the attack timing so that there was no danger of a midair collision or of one aircraft entering the fragmentation pattern of another jet's bombs. I interpreted the lack of questions and feedback as a failure on my part to get my message across. I spent a lot of time trying to explain the tactics and concepts in another way. Afterward, a Thai pilot told me, "You did not have to cover the timing so much. We understood it the first time."

On the other hand, I have seen other American instructors construe from the lack of questions that the audience is following the material. This can also cause problems, as the instructor then begins to speak more quickly or to gloss over points he feels have already been made, leaving his audience confused.

### **After Action and Debrief**

American culture is very direct. After a mission, every mistake will be covered in great detail in an effort to find out why things went wrong and how to fix them. Those who made mistakes are called out publicly to account for their actions, and no punches are pulled. Everyone is expected to have a thick skin and endure a little public humiliation for the sake of bringing out the lessons learned. A typical debrief comment after a Cobra Gold flight that I heard went as follows:

On this bombing run, Voodoo 21 was out of position and used non-standard communication calls. Given a cleared hot call, you pulled off without dropping your ordnance. What was your reason for the no drop?

Thai culture, on the other hand, puts more emphasis on preserving face and status of others. The Thais will usually not go into as great a detail on a mistake or mention specifically who was involved. A Thai officer debriefing a similar bombing might say only that "on this run there was a problem with Voodoo 21's attack, and no bombs were dropped." Americans are likely to see this as glossing over mistakes. In reality, the Thais will cover those things that went wrong once they are in a more private setting. It is not seen as necessary to publicly rectify all errors that occurred. If the problem involved another unit, that unit will be expected to handle it on their own as well. Unfortunately, when a problem or error involves multiple units, the Thai style of trying to handle it individually usually does not resolve the cause of the problem.

### **Liaisons and Exchanges**

The Joint United States Military Advisory Group (JUSMAG) is the largest American military activity in Thailand and the primary instrument for facilitating military-to-military engagement on the tactical and operational level. The Defense Attaché Office (DAO) comes into the picture on the more strategic, big picture level. The staffs at JUSMAG and the DAO are on permanent change of station orders assignments to Thailand, generally from two to three years in length. As such, these officers provide good continuity to the American side of the Thai-United States military partnership. Manning levels at both offices have remained fairly constant in recent years. However, the staffs of both JUSMAG and the DAO severely lack trained Southeast Asian Foreign Area Officers (FAOs)

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and Thai linguists. Another notable shortcoming is the fact that only one United States Marine officer is on the staff at JUSMAG, and no Marines are on the DAO staff. This is particularly ironic considering the fact that the USMC is often the lead agency for training within Thailand and that the USMC and RTMC have by far the closest working relationship among the Thai and United States service branch counterparts.

Another venue for exchanges and liaisons is the Personnel Exchange Program (PEP), in which Thai and American officers serve in one another's units. In the Vietnam War era, the PEP was quite large; and American personnel served in a wide variety of billets within Thai units. Nowadays, the USAF is the only service with an active PEP in Thailand, consisting of four billets: C-130 pilot, F-16 Maintenance Officer, C-130 Maintenance Officer, and Supply Officer. Thailand also sends RTAF officers to fill similar pilot and logistics billets with United States units (JUSMAG PEP figures, 2009).

Thailand is a large participant in the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program, which sends Thai officers to the United States for professional military education and technical courses. Between IMET and Thai attendance at other United States courses under the Counter-Terrorism Fellowship Program and the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies, an average of over 200 Thai military personnel a year have attended training courses in the United States since 2001 (JUSMAG IMET figures, 2009). In sharp contrast to these numbers, American attendance of Thai Professional Military Education courses is limited to just one Army officer a year, who attends the Thai Command and General Staff course.

### **Socio-Cultural “Point Men”**

In all the exercises I participated in, I observed some initial hesitancy between the Thais and the Americans. On each occasion, there were a few servicemen from each side who served to “break the ice”. I think of them as “point men” who act as representatives from their respective sides. On the Thai side, the “point man” is usually the designated liaison or action officer for the exercise, specifically tasked with the responsibility of working with the Americans to make sure the exercise goes smoothly.

The United States “point man” is most often an officer who has attended a previous planning conference or arrived with his unit's advance party. He has had a chance to get to know his Thai counterparts in a setting where there have been few other Americans around, and he has needed to interact with the Thais for training and logistics issues.

The best sort of “point man” is an American who is fluent in Thai and is trained as a Southeast Asian FAO. I saw numerous occasions where my ability to speak Thai helped to explain tactics and procedures and reduce confusion. The Thais are extremely impressed with any Americans who make the effort to learn the Thai language and can speak at a professional, knowledgeable level on military subjects.

From both sides, however, many other unofficial “point men” help to build bridges between the two militaries. Thais who have attended American military courses or who have a good command of English often pick up duties as de-facto liaison officers. Americans who have trained in Thailand before are often able to break the ice with a few phrases of Thai or the ability to eat spicy Thai food, something which always seems to amaze their Thai counterparts.

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## Recommendations

In order to improve socio-cultural factors in the context of Thai-United States military relations, I recommend that the United States take the following steps:

Make Thailand a priority in Southeast Asia—the United States needs to work to continue to foster a good military partnership with Thailand. We pay lip service to the fact that Thailand is our partner of first choice in Southeast Asia, but we often do not back up these words. We cannot continue to take close military relations with Thailand for granted, or the relationship could very well become a victim of its own success due to benign neglect on the United States side. To that end, American leaders must conduct more high level visits with their Thai counterparts. This includes both Flag officers from the military side as well as senior diplomats from the government who are routing through Asia. It is imperative that we demonstrate a strong commitment to our Thai allies since Thailand offers a pro-American society, modern logistics network, and training opportunities that cannot be matched by other nations in Southeast Asia.

Better utilize cultural “point men”—with the increased competition from other countries, the role of socio-cultural “point men” has become more important than ever. The United States is no longer the “only game in town” for the Thai military to deal with and must continue to demonstrate its commitment to a strong Thai-United States partnership. In order to do so, we need to ensure that we have personnel equipped with the regional knowledge, cultural expertise, and language skills to help the United States military understand Southeast Asia and Thai culture (both overall as well as the military sub-culture) in order to maximize the benefits from the Thai-United States military partnership. The United States military has Southeast Asian Foreign Area Officers, Regional Area Officers, and Thai linguists within its ranks, yet all too often does not make use of these assets during military-to-military engagement with the Thais. I can speak from firsthand experience that the Thai military is impressed when an American officer can brief and discuss military subjects in Thai. Not only does it demonstrate a high level of commitment to the relationship from our side, but having a military professional brief subjects rather than relying on contracted civilian translators greatly helps overall understanding. In many cases the civilian translators may speak excellent English but are unfamiliar with military terms and concepts. The role of these officers should be as liaisons rather than as mere translators or interpreters. By this I mean that their knowledge of the other country’s culture and values, as well as their knowledge of military concepts, terminology, and protocol, is just as important as their language skills. If they bring the total package of skills to the table—language, cultural, and military—they can serve as effective force multipliers between the two countries’ military forces.

Aside from these trained cultural “point men,” other personnel should also receive a short series of cultural in-briefs prior to deploying to Thailand for training. These briefs should cover the basics of Thai culture and etiquette, the Thai military rank structure, and some basic Thai phrases. Additionally, the United States should strive for more personnel continuity from year to year in exercise planning and participation so that valuable rapport that is built one year does not have to be rebuilt from scratch the next.

Have more USMC representation in liaison and exchange roles—additional Marine Corps representation is vital since the Marine Corps is often the lead service for Cobra Gold and other training events such as Marine Air-Ground Task Force Warfighting Simulations and Marine Special Operations Command combined training with Thai Special Forces units. Also the USMC and the RTMC have closer bonds in service culture, traditions, training, and doctrine than do any of the other

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United States and Thai sister services. Yet incredibly, there is only one USMC officer on the JUSMAG staff and none at the Defense Attaché Office. In addition to increased USMC representation at these two organizations, the Marine Corps should receive an annual slot to join their United States Army brethren at the Thai Command and Staff College.

Overhaul PEP billets—the current number of four PEP billets, all of which are USAF-filled slots, needs to be expanded. This expansion should place American PEP officers in a variety of Thai units: infantry, civil affairs, intelligence, the surface Navy, SEALs, and the RTMC. If budgetary or manning considerations preclude adding to the existing four billets, then these billets should be reassessed to more equitably distribute them among the United States military's branches of service and specialties. Expanding and/or broadening the PEP in Thailand will help not only to give more Thai military personnel exposure to American military ideas and expertise, but it will ensure that the United States military has a broader base of officers who are conversant with the Thai military's capabilities, operating areas, and challenges.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Improving socio-cultural awareness between the two countries will greatly help to improve the overall military partnership, which in turn has an impact on all facets of Thai-United States relations—economic, political, and social. Although overall American influence in Thailand is less now than in the past, military relations between the two countries continue to be relevant, evolving to reflect the more equal relationship between the two countries and to better address today's pertinent security issues. Close dealings between the two countries' militaries in turn build a close relationship in other aspects. Thailand can count on United States support in the global arena for help in security matters, natural disaster response, international relations, and economic support. The United States can count on a competent, pro-American security partner who offers unique training opportunities and strategic access through a key transshipment point at the hub of mainland Southeast Asia.

I feel strongly that Thailand, as the most pro-American long-term United States ally in the region, is a country deserving of greater United States military focus and engagement. This will improve the already strong Thai-United States relationship and act as a stabilizing force for security throughout the region.

### **About the Author**

John Baseel is a Marine Corps Major with fourteen years active service. His primary military occupational specialty (MOS) is as an F/A-18D Weapons Systems Officer. He recently finished a two year assignment as an Olmsted Scholar at Chiang Mai University in Chiang Mai, Thailand, where he completed a Master's of Arts in Regional Studies. Major Baseel is slated to receive an additional MOS as a Southeast Asian Foreign Area Officer.