



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on March 3, 2023

Thailand Stages War Games With U.S. Military Personnel

SINGAPORE — On February 28, Thailand launched an international military exercise, with the largest U.S. attendance in ten years. The exercise, known as the Cobra Gold military drill, is slated to run in Thailand through March 10.

The largest joint military exercise in mainland Asia, entailing 30 countries, the exercise has been running for more than 40 years. This year, it reverted to full-scale drills after the Covid-19 outbreak. Over 6,000 U.S. military personnel will be participating in the war games — the biggest showing in 10 years.



AP Images

U.S. Admiral John Aquilino, the top commander for the Indo-Pacific region, is involved this time around as a reflection of renewed U.S.-Thai security ties, stated the U.S. envoy to Thailand, Robert Godec.

“Cobra Gold helps build interoperability, advances our common interests, and serves as a demonstration of our dedication to our allies and partners in ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific region,” Godec said at the opening ceremony of the games in Rayong province, east of Bangkok.

The military exercise is a barometer on the strength of U.S.-Thai relations in recent years, with Washington’s denunciation of the Thai coup in 2014 by army general-turned-premier Prayut Chan-o-cha leading to a muted presence at subsequent joint drills.

A greater U.S. presence in the joint war games is regarded as a key development in Washington’s “dance” to balance its values and geopolitical interests amid China’s rise, said Dr. Paul Chambers, a lecturer at Thailand’s Naresuan University. The United States is hoping to enhance ties with Thailand, a key security partner, in the wake of the escalating geopolitical rivalry with Beijing.

“By increasing the number of US troops back into Cobra Gold, this recalibrates US-Thai relations more on a par with China,” Chambers said. “So there is more of a hedging policy for Thailand in terms of trying to create balance between the two great powers that matter most to Thailand.”

Under Prayut, who remained as head of a civilian government after an election in 2019, Thailand has been inching closer to China in terms of trade. At present, China is the largest source of yearly foreign investment in Thailand, and Chinese tourists are vital to the country’s tourism industry and economic growth.

Besides U.S. military personnel, this year’s Cobra Gold exercises will be attended by over 7,000 personnel from countries including Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Japan, and South Korea. Chinese army personnel are also slated to participate in some of the exercises.

According to the U.S. Department of State, as of October last year Thailand was the United States’ only treaty partner in mainland Southeast Asia, and has been a treaty ally since 1954. Furthermore, Thailand has been a key non-NATO ally for the U.S. since 2003.



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The Royal Thai Armed Forces have boosted their interoperability with U.S. forces by making key purchases of American-origin defense articles. The United States previously approved the permanent export of over \$605,899,499 in defense articles to Thailand via Direct Commercial Sales (DCS). The top categories of DCS to Thailand were Fire Control, Laser, Imaging, and Guidance Equipment (\$12.74 million); Firearms (\$320,000); and Military Electronics (\$260,000).

U.S.-Thai security ties go beyond transfers of defense articles and services, and are especially backed by professional military education, military exercises, and regular troop engagements.

As the Thai military greatly values an American military education, it deployed personnel to 244 U.S.-sponsored training and education courses in 2022. Of these courses, attendance at U.S. military service academies stood out as particularly significant. In turn, the U.S. has sent military personnel to Thai mid-career military staff colleges.

To boot, the United States and Thailand have the following defense-related treaties, namely: the 1950 Agreement Respecting Military Assistance, the Mutual Security Act of 1951, the Agreement Regarding Grants under the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) of 1983, the Communications Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA), and the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreements (ACSA) of 2014. Before the outbreak of Covid-19, the United States had staged over 400 military-to-military engagements and exercises with Thailand yearly, all of which were authorized by the Royal Thai Government.

Apart from Thailand, America has also been engaging countries such as the Philippines in maritime Southeast Asia. The latter staged the largest-ever joint military drills in its history with the U.S. in March 2022, showcasing closer defense ties as fresh tensions erupted in the disputed South China Sea.

The Philippines, then under President Rodrigo Duterte, had hitherto threatened to cancel exercises and ditch a key military deal with the U.S. as Duterte warmed up towards China. Duterte said in February 2020 that he planned to abandon the Visiting Forces Agreement, which is the legal framework for the United States to hold joint military exercises and operations in the Philippines. However, Duterte experienced pushback from the Philippine public and military due to China's territorial ambitions.

Nearly 9,000 Filipino and American soldiers participated in the 12-day training event across the main island of Luzon, which entailed maritime security, amphibious operation, live-fire training, counterterrorism, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

Philippine military chief Andres Centino declared at the opening ceremony in Manila that the largest round of the Balikatan war games reflected the "deepening alliance" between the two countries. U.S. Major General Jay Barger said that the "friendship and trust" between their respective armed forces would permit them to "succeed together across the entire spectrum of military operations."

Trillions of dollars in trade pass through the disputed South China Sea, and the waters are believed to contain rich petroleum deposits.

China dismissed a 2016 ruling by The Hague-based Permanent Court of Arbitration that its historical claims in the disputed waters were without basis, and instead reiterated its position by constructing artificial islands over some contested reefs and installing weapons on them.



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