

***Thai Military Power: A Culture of Strategic Accommodation.* By Gregory Vincent Raymond. Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press, 2018. Softcover: 293pp.**

How have patterns of “strategic culture” influenced the behaviour of Thai security elites and military officials? This stimulating book by Gregory Raymond, an academic who used to work for the Australian Department of Defence, addresses this question. In the Introduction, Raymond argues that strategic culture is the “sum of national strategic culture and military organizational strategic culture” (p. 19). The former involves “public symbols and narratives” related to military force under the shadow of past external vulnerabilities, while the latter comprises “beliefs, habits and assumptions” that the military uses to adapt to its environment (p. 20). The interaction between these two “cultures” has influenced Thai strategic decision-makers, who have navigated Thailand through geographic accommodation as a weak “subaltern” state to ensure the Kingdom’s survival (p. 30).

Chapter Two elaborates upon national strategic culture by explaining the influence of two narratives, which Raymond calls the “Fall of Ayutthaya” and the “Deeds of Chulalongkorn” on Thai strategic behaviour. The former narrative entrenches the need for unity because of the memory of Myanmar’s 1767 sacking of the former Thai capital since many Thais believe that the absence of unity among Thai leaders allowed for the sacking to take place (p. 32). The second solidifies King Chulalongkorn’s preferences for building alliances and military force. Each narrative undergirds “royalist-nationalist ideology which itself shapes the thinking of Thai strategic decision-makers” (pp. 58–61).

Chapter Three expounds upon military organizational culture, which was heavily influenced by royalism, the army’s dominance over the other services, military factionalism and the long-standing relationship between the Thai and US militaries. This variant of organizational culture contributed to the perseverance of Thailand’s monarchy-centric regime and reinforced military subservience under Thailand’s national strategic culture.

Chapter Four examines how Thailand’s military has been a useful tool of its diplomacy. For example, Siam sent an expeditionary force to participate on the side of the Allies during the First World War. Though Siamese troops never saw action,

their participation gained Siam accolades and a seat at the 1919 Versailles Peace Conference. At the same time, European countries also agreed to renegotiate their unfair treaties with the Kingdom (pp. 104–5).

Chapter Five scrutinizes Raymond's "Culture-Governance-Doctrine theory", which illustrates how royalism, military factionalism and civil-military relations have together weakened the military's capacity for force-on-force operations. Although the Thai military has long had an elaborate military doctrine (which Raymond examines in detail), it has proven to be incoherent (p. 143). Such incoherence stems from a lack of central state control over military doctrines as well as "the absence of central government control in...civil-military relations" (p. 129). Meanwhile, Thai military leadership has lacked unity. Both of these weaknesses have negatively impacted military organizational efficiency.

Chapter Six examines Thailand's management of a major external threat — Vietnam's 1979–89 occupation of Cambodia. Raymond contends that at the political-security level, the Ayutthaya and Chulalongkorn narratives influenced Thai elites into prioritizing coalition-building over militarization. At the military level, factionalism, tension between doctrine and resources available, and a greater military focus on protecting the Kingdom's capital (where the monarchy was centred) rather than the country's eastern boundaries all contributed to "underbalancing" or an inadequate response to the Vietnamese threat.

Chapter Seven investigates the 2008–11 Thailand–Cambodia border crisis, a minor external threat, in which each country claimed land abutting the ancient Khmer temple of Preah Vihear. While the Ayutthaya narrative influenced nationalists to view the conflict through a royalist-nationalist lens and thus their preference for a military solution, the Chulalongkorn narrative persuaded decision-makers to opt for a diplomatic solution amenable to the international community. Ultimately, the Thai military did not seek a military solution but used the incident to publicly burnish its nationalist credentials.

Chapter Eight scrutinizes Thailand's defence budget and weapons purchases, arguing that the country's national strategic culture has tended to moderate them. Raymond contends that evidence suggests that during financial and security crises, Thai national strategic culture has caused the army to enjoy only moderate levels of defence funding (p. 242). Examples include the

economic crises of 1929 and 1997 and Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia. Such moderation can be explained by the Chulalongkorn narrative which stresses "diplomacy and international security" linkages over "high levels of military capability" (p. 243). Regarding arms purchases, Raymond argues that insufficient central government control, a by-product of inept military organizational culture, produces inefficiencies in procurement. This corresponds with Raymond's culture-governance-doctrine theory, which predicts such inefficiency partly because factionalism and royalism tend to weaken state authority.

In Chapter Nine, the Conclusion, Raymond concludes that narratives of Thai strategic culture have contributed to moderating the behaviour of Thai strategic decision-makers and that Thai military organizational culture (e.g. weak control and division) has hindered military capacity. He finds that without substantial reforms, Thailand will have to continue accommodating an intrusive military. He ends by speculating that perhaps only changes in royalist culture under new King Rama X might alter civil-military relations, causing the military to accept civilian control (p. 258).

The primary strength of this book is that it cohesively draws together a cultural explanation for the evolution of Thai security and military behaviour using cases from throughout Thai history. Raymond shows readers why Thailand's military will most likely not change anytime soon. His book should be of particular interest to policymakers, academics and laypeople interested in the military, democratization and Asia.

Yet no book is without its weaknesses. First, while it prioritizes culture as a structural determinant of strategic behaviour, there is scant mention of the agency-structure debate, concentrating rather on how strategic culture allows agents to "understand the history that conditions their preferences" (p. 24). More attention should have been placed upon the actual decision-making processes of leaders such as King Chulalongkorn and General Sarit Thanarat, key agents in the shaping of Thai military strategy. Second, Raymond's culture-doctrine-governance theory does not identify changed perceptions towards the military, such as when its image became tainted after the 1992 massacre. Third, although the book focuses on external conflicts, it might have placed greater emphasis on the more violent 1965–84 communist insurgency and the Malay-Muslim insurgency in the Deep South, since each was framed by the

state as an external threat. Finally, the book does not mention the 2008 military intervention against elected civilian rule.¹ Nevertheless, as a book focusing on Thai strategic culture, Raymond's work is indispensable gaining an understanding of how it shapes Thai elite and military decision-making.

NOTE

- ¹ Pravit Rojanaphruk, "Army Comeback through Soft, Silent Coup", *Prachatai*, 24 December 2008.

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