

# 1

## **INTRODUCTION: TWO MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIAN MILITARIES IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE**

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In 1959, Aguedo F. Agbayani of Pangasinan introduced to the Philippine Congress a bill “designed to prevent the growth of the power and influence of the military in this country, in order to spare our country from the tragic experiences of our Asian neighbors, recently in Burma and Thailand, where military dictatorship has marred their beautiful history” (Republic of the Philippines, House Bill 2220 [1959], quoted in Berlin 2008, p. 97).

Congressman Agbayani evidently had the keen sense of connections between the Philippines and the rest of Asia not uncommon among his countrymen in the post-war period. His reference to Burma, today’s Myanmar, concerned the military’s non-violent assumption of power in the country in October of the preceding year and to Chief of the General Staff Ne Win’s consequent service as premier at the head of a “caretaker government” (Nakanishi 2013, pp. 84–88). In Thailand, Field

Marshal Sarit Thanarat had staged *coups d'état* in September 1957 and again in October 1958 (Thak 2007, pp. 78–80). Of course, Agbayani could not know that, following elections in early 1960, Ne Win would return power to a civilian government in Rangoon, only to mount a coup of his own in March 1962 and thus to initiate long-term military control of Burma, or that military rule in Bangkok was destined to last another fourteen years, until October 1973. These developments and their legacies account for the publication of the present volume, treating the same two states whose examples troubled Aguedo Agbayani sixty years ago.

The late Donald Berlin called attention to the congressman's 1959 bill in his landmark study of civil-military relations in the Philippines during the decades preceding President Ferdinand E. Marcos's declaration of martial law in September 1972 (Berlin 2008).<sup>1</sup> It was the contention of that study that—contrary to received wisdom, despite the absence of direct military control of the government in Manila, but very much as in other Southeast Asian states and societies—“military influence in Philippine state and society historically ha[d] been substantial” (Berlin 2008, p. 140). At the same time, the specific forms of that influence during the 1946–72 period proved varied. They depended on the circumstances and nature of successive administrations, and the backgrounds and networks of the presidents who led them.

While Berlin explicitly argued for continuities in the political influence of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, continuities that students of Myanmar and Thailand would find familiar, his equally strong emphasis on variation in the patterns of that influence also merits attention. Ukrist Pathmanand and Michael Connors suggest a way to think systematically about such variation (Ukrist and Connors 2019).<sup>2</sup> Seeking to understand the political role of the Thai military between 1992 and 2014, they ground their approach in Samuel P. Huntington's observation, “Military explanations do not explain military interventions” (Huntington 1968, p. 194). Rather, one must understand praetorianism in the context of societies marked by the politicization of a range of social forces, and not just of their militaries (Huntington 1968, p. 195). Huntington wrote with reference to “underdeveloped societies” that were “out-of-joint” (Huntington 1968, p. 194). Ukrist and Connors opt for less judgemental terminology. They propose the idea of the “ambivalent state”, marked by unresolved

competition among “actors who may seek in the long run to fully direct state apparatuses and to transform the state in accord with their respective ideological orientations and the interests of the broadly defined social bases that they serve” (Ukrist and Connors 2019, pp. 7–8).

Ukrist and Connors view the competing actors in this scenario as would-be “regime framers” (Ukrist and Connors 2019, pp. 7–8). The ongoing competition among them, not least insofar as they include militaries, constitutes the ambivalence of states to which this analysis might apply—in Berlin’s account, the Philippines between 1946 and the last of Colonel Gregorio “Gringo” Honasan’s and the Reform the Armed Forces Movement’s coup attempts in 1990; in Ukrist’s and Connors’s analysis, Thailand between “Black May” of 1992 and the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) *putsch* of the same month twenty-two years later; and Myanmar in the wake of the Tatmadaw’s post-2008 or post-2010–11 initiation of *abertura*.

The contending actors—would-be regime framers—in an ambivalent state seek “to advance their differential hegemonic projects and to bring to the state a coherent dominating line” (Ukrist and Connors 2019, p. 8). Some of those actors will advance their projects from positions that Ukrist and Connors label “partial regimes”—marked by “partial control over ... apparatuses of the state” (Ukrist and Connors 2019, p. 8).<sup>3</sup> To be sure, that control may also extend beyond state apparatuses. It may reach into domains like business, finance, the media, education, associational life, culture and society. Each of these domains figures in the contention to replace ambivalence with hegemony. In the context of an ambivalent state, both the measure of control of official apparatuses and the stake in some of these domains enjoyed by a contending actor like the military constitutes that actor’s occupation of a partial regime.<sup>4</sup>

The four studies in the present volume address the ideological, organizational, and economic dimensions of the partial regimes that the militaries of Myanmar and Thailand have occupied. While their focus is above all on the most recent decades, the reality that ambivalence has marked the Thai state, where its armed forces are concerned, for at least nine decades means that the studies on Thailand take a somewhat more historical approach than do those on Myanmar.

The conception of this volume dates from a time just a few years ago when observers, above all in Thailand, often remarked with gallows humour that civil-military relations in Thailand and Myanmar seemed

to be going in opposite, and ostensibly unfamiliar, directions. Many Thais had long viewed their neighbours to the west as the victims of isolation and poverty rooted in persistent military dictatorship. Now, however, Thais witnessed, and even partook of, the optimism engendered by the changes in Myanmar embodied by the national elections of November 2010, the accession to power in Naypyidaw of the apparently reformist government of President Thein Sein early the following year, the stunning re-entry into electoral politics of the National League for Democracy (NLD) under the leadership of the then still iconic Aung San Suu Kyi in by-elections held the year after that, and her party's landslide victory in elections held in November 2015. Thais recalled the now dashed hopes of the 1990s not only for political reform in their own far more prosperous country, but also for the relegation of its soldiers to life in the barracks. And they contrasted the optimism blanketing Myanmar with the Thai military's crude political manipulation in installing Abhisit Vejjajiva into the premiership in December 2008 (Stent 2012, p. 33), and above all with the coup mounted by General Prayut Chan-ocha and his confederates in May 2014 and the political repression that followed.<sup>5</sup>

Thai voters went to the polls in March 2019. But parliament's vote, after a delay of more than two months, to retain Prayut as prime minister has as of the time of writing convinced many in Thailand that their country effectively remains under military rule and may well do so for the foreseeable future. Events have thus done little to relieve the gloomy outlook for civil-military relations of several years ago. It is, in contrast, Myanmar that has betrayed the expectations of that earlier moment. In 2017, attacks spearheaded by its military precipitated the flight of some 700,000 Rohingya people from Myanmar's Rakhine State to neighbouring Bangladesh. These attacks left the Myanmar armed forces directly implicated in one of the gravest and saddest humanitarian crises of our times. To deepen international outrage, the country's authorities subsequently arrested, and its courts then convicted, two Myanmar journalists working for Reuters after their exposure of atrocities committed during the course of the security forces' operations in Rakhine State.<sup>6</sup> In the face of these assaults on helpless civilians and on committed reporters, the NLD government under Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership abandoned all semblance of commitment to principle; it failed to call out the country's military for its actions or to defend

the Reuters journalists' effort to do their jobs. These developments and others like them have taken the shine off the Myanmar story.

That that story has proved less simple, happy and straightforward than the innocent readings of not long ago suggested only underlines the continued importance of efforts on the part of scholars to understand the Myanmar military, and above all the nature and dynamics of civil-military relations in post-2011 Myanmar. This imperative joins a parallel need to deepen the ongoing revival of a tradition of scholarship on the Thai military that the events of the past decade and a half have occasioned (Ukrist and Connors 2019, p. 6).<sup>7</sup> In responding in a modest way to each of these imperatives, the present volume also seeks to cultivate an at least tentative comparative perspective.

## **The Myanmar Tatmadaw: Transformation and Economic Interests**

Burma's and, since 1989, Myanmar's armed forces, the Tatmadaw,<sup>8</sup> have stood at the centre of the country's affairs for fully six decades. General Ne Win's March 1962 coup led to the inauguration of a single-party socialist regime. In the event, Nakanishi Yoshihiro has argued persuasively, Ne Win's "revolution was a failure in terms of achieving socialism, but a success in creating an institutional basis for a robust military regime" (Nakanishi 2013, p. 25). The nominally ruling Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) "could not grow out of its condition of being 'the tatmadaw's party'" (Nakanishi 2013, p. 278). The implication of Nakanishi's broad argument about Burma during the 1962–88 period is that its armed forces did not face competing actors or have to occupy only a partial regime.

Tensions resulting from the Ne Win/BSPP/Tatmadaw regime's removal from circulation of several denominations of bank notes in late 1987 led to student protests starting in March of 1988. After the effective failure of a brutal crackdown on mass protests in August of that year, the officers who had by that time risen to the top of the Tatmadaw abolished the socialist regime. They seized power in September. The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) junta, rechristened the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997, imposed on the country direct military rule that would last for nearly a quarter-century, until 2011.

Following the junta's annulment of elections in 1990 in which the NLD scored a dramatic triumph, this period of military rule saw the Tatmadaw control Myanmar society through the use of force, draconian laws, and severe restrictions on civil liberties and freedom of expression. Scholars and other observers of the country came to view Myanmar politics as a prototype of long-lasting military authoritarianism, though the country's continued isolation perhaps led them to overlook what would prove the significant social and economic implications of the demise of the more than just officially socialist regime and the onset of naked military rule from the end of the 1980s.<sup>9</sup>

Since 2010–11, Myanmar has undergone a period of political liberalization under a Tatmadaw-designed constitution adopted in 2008. The period has seen general elections in 2010 and 2015 and a range of other political reforms. Nevertheless, in a context of transitional democracy, of continuing warfare among groups aiming to represent various ethnic nationalities, and of mounting Islamophobia among segments of the country's Buddhist majority, Myanmar's armed forces remain a powerful political force. They control a quarter of all seats in both houses of the national parliament,<sup>10</sup> thus retain veto power over constitutional amendments, and have the right to name the ministers of defence, home affairs, and border affairs. The persistence of institutionalized military influence and the Tatmadaw's expansive, if changing, role in Myanmar's politics, society, and economy point to its status during the past decade as the occupant of a rather well-defined partial regime. That persistence and that role are also the foci of the studies in this volume by Nay Yan Oo and Maung Aung Myoe.

Nay Yan Oo provides a comprehensive and effectively elaborated analysis of changes affecting the Tatmadaw since 2011. His study focuses on the Tatmadaw as a defence institution, rather than as a political or economic actor. It argues that, despite their progress toward becoming "a new Tatmadaw", Myanmar's armed forces have held fast to their old repressive traits. They have continued to suppress ethnic nationalities, to violate the human rights of civilians, and to enforce media censorship. Real transformation has not yet occurred.

Observing that three generations of officers have led Myanmar's defence institution since its creation during the Second World War, Nay Yan Oo considers the character of the country's armed forces as that character developed after the 1962 coup. Under General Ne

Win, a member of the first generation of those officers, Tatmadaw leaders perceived themselves as both the defenders of the nation and the administrators of the country. The suspicion toward non-Bamar ethnic groups and foreign powers fundamental to the mentality of all generations of Myanmar military leaders was already significant. Indeed, the recent experience of facing Western sanctions has joined historical experience in leaving subsequent generations of Tatmadaw officers paranoid about the influence of external powers in their country's domestic affairs. To understand the Tatmadaw's role in Myanmar, according to Nay Yan Oo's analysis, one needs to understand the three "National Causes" introduced by the second-generation officers of the SLORC/SPDC and still upheld by the armed forces. These causes are "non-disintegration of the Union, non-disintegration of national solidarity, and perpetuation of the Union's sovereignty". Both internal and external threats to these National Causes ensure a strong response on the part of the armed forces.

Nay Yan Oo explains that Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and the rest of the current, third-generation leadership of the Tatmadaw seek to transform it into a "Standard Army" through a tripartite focus on modernizing the armed forces, building the capacity of military personnel, and pursuing active military diplomacy. This leadership has thus recommitted the institution to defence functions rather than governance. At the same time, and crucially, the Standard Army now envisioned by the Tatmadaw's leadership is not the same as the professional militaries of democratic states, which accept civilian supremacy and are scrupulous in staying out of politics. Even though the "new" Tatmadaw assigns priority to its roles in national security and in the military domain and no longer involves itself in the day-to-day affairs of the government, Nay Yan Oo reports, its leaders continue to believe that they have a significant role to play in the newly-developed democracy to which Myanmar's reform process has given rise. Indeed, the 2008 constitution, drafted under the SPDC junta, mandated the armed forces to build a "discipline-flourishing democracy" in the country.

Nay Yan Oo's study takes a positive view of recent developments concerning the Myanmar armed forces *as armed forces*. Despite mounting Western criticism of the Tatmadaw over the appalling situation in Rakhine State and persistent violations of human rights more generally, he believes that the military has no intention to annul Myanmar's

democratic reforms of the past decade. How to square the failure of its current leadership to appreciate the gravity of its conduct in Rakhine State in 2017, and indeed long before that, with its vision of a Standard Army remains an open question; one is justified in fearing that that leadership sees no contradiction between that conduct and that vision. But Nay Yan Oo contends that the evolving Tatmadaw can, not least with the affirmation of the West, have a place in the country's progress toward a successful democratic order. Only time will tell whether the new characteristics of a "strong, capable and modern patriotic" Tatmadaw are compatible with such an order.

Like Nay Yan Oo's study, Maung Aung Myoe's contribution to this volume—the second on the Tatmadaw here—is exceptionally well informed. And, while Aung Myoe joins Nay Yan Oo in closely scrutinizing Myanmar's recent history of arms procurement, he turns that scrutiny to a different purpose. It serves in his study as one foundation of a broad investigation into the economic and financial resources enjoyed, and even generated, by the Tatmadaw. Aung Myoe thus has two foci. His study addresses not only the budgetary allocations to and the defence expenditures of Myanmar's armed forces but also their commercial interests. Drawing extensively on both official sources and data available through other channels, and compiling this range of data in a thoughtful and systematic way, the study's author provides a clear picture of the Tatmadaw's economic means and its business interests.

Aung Myoe points out that the Myanmar armed forces rely on two main sources of financial support—allocations from the government budget and revenue from commercial activity. Since the country's independence in 1948, its defence expenditures have varied with the political climate and with military policy. Burma's defence budget was high during the first decade after independence, as the country found itself in a state of civil war and embarked upon the expansion of military units. Later, defence spending as a share of GDP would hover around 4.0 per cent in 1980–81, 3.0 per cent in 1987–88, 3.5 per cent in the early 1990s and 2.0 per cent in the late 2000s.

Aung Myoe notes that, for most of the past decade, defence spending has been about 14 per cent of Union Government Expenditure. Officially, the Tatmadaw requested a 2017–18 defence budget of 2,905.195 billion kyat, intended to further its leadership's project to build the capable,



strong and modern Standard Army discussed in Nay Yan Oo's study. Nevertheless, Aung Myoe believes that there is reason to doubt that this figure reflects reality, as Myanmar's armed forces have since the early 1990s been on a spending spree for military hardware and facilities. Aung Myoe's study describes this spree in invaluable, eye-opening detail.

Besides the annual state budget, the heavy involvement of the Tatmadaw in business activities, dating in the first instance to the early 1950s, also makes a vital contribution to the resources available to it. In practical terms, revenue from business operations helps compensate for the Myanmar armed forces' budgetary constraints. Ideologically, too, the Tatmadaw views its economic activities as contributions to nation-building and economic development.

In independent Burma, military involvement in business began with the provision of consumer goods to members of the armed forces, before expanding to include activities ranging from banking, manufacturing, shipping and trading to publishing, retail business and others. By the late 1950s, the business enterprises of the military had, taken together, become the largest commercial undertaking in the country.

Circumstances changed significantly during the 1962–88 period, when the military had to refrain from commercial activities and support the country's socialist economic programme. But the Myanmar military revived its involvement in business activities after 1988. The Tatmadaw penetrated deeply into the economy and monopolized several business sectors through two military-owned firms—Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd. (UMEHL) and the Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC). These firms enjoyed state protection and, until 2016, tax exemption. The two military conglomerates have also become vehicles for patronage.

To the degree that UMEHL and the MEC appear to exemplify the Tatmadaw's lack of accountability, it is easy to associate them with that institution's half-century-long domination of Myanmar politics. That they are in fact creatures of the post-1988 era underlines the need to appreciate the dynamic relationship among military, polity, society and economy in the country. Likewise, attention to the military conglomerates—actors in the economic domain—allows for a sharper recognition of the Tatmadaw's institutional interests than does continued hand-wringing over its persistent political role.

Along with direct ownership of firms active in many sectors of the economy, the Tatmadaw engages in lucrative business deals with the “cronies” whose rise—like that of UMEHL and the MEC—was a defining phenomenon of the country’s post-1990 political economy (Jones 2014, pp. 148 ff). As Aung Myoe’s study details, the Tatmadaw was also a notorious land-grabber during the SLORC/SPDC era. It utilized confiscated lands both for military facilities and for income generation. While this issue has, in its undeniable complexity, been the subject of investigation, resolution is nowhere in sight. Tatmadaw land-grabbing remains a source of extreme bitterness among many segments of rural society in Myanmar.

Aung Myoe takes the view that the Tatmadaw’s broad but unstated policy of aiming for self-sufficiency—as if in scripted pursuit of a secure partial regime—makes the expectation that it will withdraw from economic activities unrealistic. He observes, intriguingly, that such a withdrawal might come at the risk of pushing soldiers into criminal activities, as they sought to make up for lost income. Constructively, then, he calls for the cultivation of transparency and improved public relations on the part of the military conglomerates. This call signals both the clear-headedness of Aung Myoe’s analysis and its alignment with a continuing determination to see Myanmar’s ongoing transition succeed.

Taken together, Aung Myoe’s study in this volume and that of Nay Yan Oo offer a sharply drawn picture of the recent development and the fundamental characteristics of Myanmar’s armed forces. Political reform and democratic transition since 2010–11 have been the outcome of the military’s changing political strategy. They have left the Tatmadaw, for the first time in decades, the occupier of a partial regime. They have had an impact on its operation as a defence institution and, most recently, even seen it give up oversight of the General Administration Department—“Myanmar’s paramount government agency, acting as the backbone of public administration” (Arnold 2019).<sup>11</sup> The Myanmar armed forces’ current leadership speaks publicly of its ambition to modernize and transform the institution.

In embracing the goal of becoming a “Standard Army”, the Tatmadaw does not signal acceptance of the idea, common in Western liberal democracies, of a professional army that steers clear of politics and accepts the principle of civilian supremacy over the military, and

for that matter over all state institutions. If then, Myanmar has in the past decade witnessed a transition from military dictatorship to ambivalent state, the military architects of that transition have, to a striking degree, ensured that its armed forces would occupy, with almost unquestioned security, a partial regime. The long record of deep Tatmadaw involvement in political and economic affairs certainly matters, particularly as it shapes Myanmar people's understanding of their society. At the same time, the two studies on that institution in this volume argue for a rigorous understanding of the contemporary relationship between Myanmar's military on the one hand and its polity and society on the other.

### **“The Royal Thai Army”: Political Ideology and Economic Interests**

Surachart Bamrungsuk—the most eminent active student of the Thai Army, its politics, and its political role<sup>12</sup>—observes that, “[s]ince its break with the palace in 1932 and through its extended record of political intervention in subsequent decades, the Thai officer corps has held an undisputed role as a leading political actor in the country” (Surachart 2019, p. 171). Today, he asserts, “the Thai military's support is a basic prerequisite for the emergence of democratic rule” (ibid.). While not using such terminology, Surachart's observations describe the influential, perhaps singularly influential, occupant of a partial regime in a chronically ambivalent state.

Those observations characterize a position markedly different from—and less dominant than—that enjoyed by the Tatmadaw in the five decades after 1962. Put simply, the state in Thailand has a longer record of uninterrupted ambivalence than does the state in Myanmar. It is in that context that one must understand Surachart's observations, as they testify to the prominence of the Thai armed forces as a political actor for a period of at least ninety years. They suggest that what Congressman Agbayani decried as a regrettable and recent turn of events in fact exemplified a reality that many in Thailand, and many observers of Thailand, have taken essentially for granted.

But such easy acceptance of the expansive role of the Thai Army merits interrogation. How, one must ask, did the military and its officers attain lasting prominence as political actors in Thailand?

A second question, the basic one with which Robert Taylor opens the epilogue to this volume, is also instructive. “To whom or what does an army ... owe its loyalty?” Taylor argues that the answer to this question varies. It depends on the roles—whether perceived or conceived by soldiers themselves, or assigned to the military institution as a component part of the political regime—that armed forces play on the national landscape.

Taylor’s argument highlights the implications of the two studies on Thailand’s military in this volume. Those studies suggest that the genius of the country’s Army is that it owes its loyalty not to one specific institution, ideal, community, or political group, but rather to any one of these or to some combination of them—depending on circumstances and need. It may at any given moment purport to be loyal to the Thai monarchy, to the principle of democracy, to the cause of national economic development, to the Thai people, or to all of these at the same time. The long-term ambivalence of the Thai state, dating at least to 1932, has both demanded this versatility and given the advantage to actors capable of demonstrating it. More than any other actor or institution in the country, the Thai Army has met the consequent challenge and seized the resultant opportunity. Its place of lasting prominence in the country’s politics has been due to its ability to navigate the shoals of time and ideology by successfully claiming always to have the nation’s interests at heart. Even as the Army has suffered fractious internal politics, nakedly pursued its own economic interests, and repeatedly used violence against Thai citizens, both its ability effortlessly to slip the jersey of national interests over its shoulders and the public’s acquiescence have defined its long-term political relevance. That relevance embodies, in turn, the Thai Army’s occupation of a partial regime.

Paul Chambers provides an invaluable chronology of the changing relationship of the Thai armed forces with the country’s perpetually ambivalent state. His consideration of that relationship begins even before the end of Siam’s absolute monarchy. He frames this relationship with reference to military ideology.

Chambers’s analysis begins with the establishment of standing land and naval forces in the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868–1910). It notes the significance of what Walter Vella termed the “nationalistic militarism” promoted during the reign of King Vajiravudh (1910–25)

(Vella 1978, pp. 87 ff.). But the real turning point was 1932. A group of soldiers and civilian officials replaced absolute monarchy with a constitutional regime, and the military's putative *raison d'être* first shifted from protection of the monarchy to defence of the nation. It was perhaps from that moment on that the Thai armed forces' continuing occupation of a partial regime within the Bangkok polity became an unmistakable reality in the life of that polity.

As the substance of that occupation evolved, Chambers notes another significant change in the Thai Army's ideological orientation during the 1950s, when it encountered a new and apparently formidable opponent—communism. With this new enemy came a new ally, the Americans, and the Army absorbed doctrines, modes of education and training, and equipment from that ally. This same era saw national security become the central plank in the military's ideology. Initially, that emphasis further eclipsed monarchism among members of the Thai officer corps. Strong anti-communist fervour was useful for congealing the relationship between the armed forces, including the police, and their American patrons. Nevertheless, and without sacrificing that patronage, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat's seizure of power in 1957 heralded the arrival of developmentalism and, even more so, of monarchism as core elements of Army ideology.<sup>13</sup> A direct line connects the 1957–63 Sarit era with the Army's continuing role as what Chambers terms "the junior elite partner of the monarchy". This status crystallized, at the latest, in the aftermath of royal intervention to help end violence on the streets of central Bangkok in October 1973. The staunch royalism of former Army commander-in-chief General Prem Tinsulanonda during his 1980–88 premiership and his service as member and then chairman of the Privy Council until his death in 2019 only reinforced the partnership.

In 1992, during a time of rapid economic growth and unprecedented prosperity in which the threat of communism was but the faintest memory to most members of Thai society, the Army's image suffered a major blow. The bloody and sinister "Black May" crackdown of that year came after weeks of demonstrations and strikes in Bangkok. The protests arose in opposition to the attempt, following elections, of an Army faction—centred on the fifth cohort of the Chulachomkhalao Royal Military Academy to follow the academy's American-style curriculum—to hold onto the power that it had seized in its coup of February 1991.

The failed crackdown marked a low point in the armed forces' recent history. It gave rise to a spirit of reformism that resulted in the 1997 constitution. This charter, Chambers argues, enshrined an unprecedented "civilian orientation towards the armed forces".

The 2001–6 period, between the dramatic rise of Thaksin Shinawatra to the Thai premiership—and to a position of apparent political mastery in the country—and his equally dramatic fall following an Army *coup d'état*, saw an attempt to bring the military under the control of the government. The case of Thaksin may exemplify more than any other Thai elections' habit of bringing to power politicians whose interests, visions and, notionally, probity do not match those of the military. This habit has meant that electoral outcomes and some of the alleged traits of Thailand's political class help account for the military's renewed emphasis on the importance of defending the monarchy. That emphasis depends on a view of that class that assumes its thoroughgoing corruption, selfishness and irresponsibility—characteristics that stand in putative contrast to those of the country's royal and military institutions. In consequence, Chambers asserts, grasping the factors that triggered the September 2006 coup against Thaksin requires an understanding of the armed forces' belief that "developmental militarism could trump the inefficiencies of democracy". That belief was equally relevant in 2014, when the military accused elected politicians of populism, corruption and immorality and thus deemed yet another coup and the establishment of the NCPO junta necessary.

Kanda Naknoi's study of material underpinnings of the military's outsize long-term role in Thai life—and of the partial regime that it has occupied—complements Chambers's attention to the ideological dimensions of that role. Chambers in fact notes in his study the origins during the 1938–44 premiership of Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram of the Army's direct participation in the Thai economy. And, like his study, Kanda's also underlines the importance as a factor in recent Thai history of the Army's continuing pursuit of its institutional or corporate interests. Her contribution to this volume also serves to make her influential writing on the economic roles of the Thai military more widely available in English.<sup>14</sup>

Kanda premises her engrossing analysis of the military's evolving interests in various economic sectors on the elegantly drawn observation that it is both a consumer and producer of goods and services. She

points out that many of the goods and services in question have essentially no relation to national security. Working entirely from publicly available data, she examines military involvement in banking and asset management, in radio and television, in real estate, and in several other sectors. Whether through a presence on boards of directors, major ownership stakes, or both, the Thai Army has long been able to ensure that the activities undertaken and decisions taken by a number of major Thai business concerns have secured and advanced its economic interests. The financial stakes involved have, as Kanda makes clear, been enormous, and it is impossible to understand either the resources available to, or the status of, the country's armed forces without taking those stakes into account.

Kanda's examination of military involvement in radio and television is particularly eye-opening. During the era of the Cold War, the Thai armed forces used the radio channels that they controlled for purposes relating to national security. The 1990s brought change, as these channels began to feature more commercial programming—offered through concessions to private companies, especially those in the music industry. In the even more important realm of television, 1957 saw establishment of the Royal Thai Army Television Station. Kanda tracks the growth and diversification of the Army's television business, each stage of which saw it maintain an important position in a sector whose dynamism one hardly associates with state-owned concerns. Successive changes in the policy regime governing television in Thailand have, to be sure, benefitted that business.

Indeed, it is perhaps the most significant contention of Kanda's study that the Thai military—and above all the Army—has functioned in areas unrelated to security both as service provider and as policymaker simultaneously. While scholars have paid scant attention to these twin roles, their significance and their complementarity demand that one understand the partial regime occupied by Thailand's armed forces with an eye to political economy, and not just to politics as narrowly defined.

Kanda's scrutiny of the Thai Army's roles as service provider and policymaker leads her to conclude that rules introduced by the military governments that have taken power following coups have worked to the advantage of military concerns operating in various significant sectors, above all banking and broadcasting. One of the functions,

and perhaps one of the purposes, of such rules or regulations has been the restriction of new concerns' entry into these sectors. Army-affiliated firms have thus been able to operate in less competitive business environments than would have been the case in the absence of those rules and regulations. Kanda's findings lead her to posit "the possibility of a commercial logic to coups in Thailand". Her study calls for explicit and systematic attention to the political economy of military intervention in Thai politics, and of the opportunities for policymaking to which that intervention may lead. One expects, too, that this call has relevance to political interventions on the part of the armed forces that fall short of *coups d'état*.

Paul Chambers's and Kanda Naknoi's studies work together to frame a robust understanding of the persistent influence of the Thai Army, and of its position as the occupier of a partial regime. Central to that understanding is an ability to adapt to successive administrations and changing political, economic and even technological currents, many of them washing over Thailand from far beyond its borders.

## Comparative Perspectives

In expressing his concern that undue military influence on Philippine politics could prove "tragic", and noting that military intervention had tarnished the "beautiful histories" of Burma and Thailand, Congressman Aguedo Agbayani explicitly adopted a comparative perspective. Donald Berlin's study of the involvement of the Armed Forces of the Philippines in politics benefitted from greater hindsight than was possible when the congressman introduced his bill to check such involvement in 1959. Developments in Myanmar and Thailand in the decades after 1960 certainly informed the assertion in the concluding passage of Berlin's study that "military influence in Philippine state and society historically has been substantial and thus constitutes additional evidence of this nation's Southeast Asian character" (Berlin 2008, p. 140).

Berlin extended that assertion to call for the cultivation of a comparative perspective in scholarship on "civil-military developments" in Southeast Asia (Berlin 2008, p. 140). Cultivating that perspective ranks among the goals of the present volume. But, just as Berlin did in scrutinizing the Philippines alone, the volume seeks to move beyond both generalizations about the Southeast Asian region and the all too



common stylized treatments of the political roles of the Tatmadaw and the Thai Army in which journalists and even political scientists—the vast majority illiterate in the Myanmar and Thai languages—have often engaged.

In the opening lines of his epilogue to this volume, Robert Taylor characterizes the military as a nation's "sole legitimate yielder of violence". This trait means that armed forces' political roles are ultimately functions of their ability to threaten or practise the use of force against domestic opponents or potential opponents with less ability, let alone willingness, to use force. This reality obtains both in states under military control, like Burma and then Myanmar in 1962–2011 or Thailand most recently in 2014–19, and in those marked by the ambivalence that has marked Myanmar since 2011 and Thailand for—as Taylor notes—most of its post-1932 history. Ideological posturing on the part of soldiers as defenders of the nation or of its most important institutions, or as members of an organization uniquely capable of fostering development or modernization, cannot obscure importance of violence and the potential to use force as the bases of military influence in a country's political, economic and social affairs.

A corollary of this reality is that that influence goes hand in hand with illiberal urges or environments. It is the enemy of the open society. Comparative insight suggested by the studies presented in this volume reflects the deeply rooted, necessary antagonism between military roles outside the narrow sphere of national defence on the one side and the possibility of robust and secure liberal political orders on the other.

One must then, for example, understand the assumption of significant economic roles on the part of the Tatmadaw and the Thai Army with reference to political context. Both the UMEHL and the MEC are creatures of the repressive SLORC/SPDC era in Myanmar. Thai military involvement in business dates to the Phibun era. Field Marshal Phin Chanhawan's role in building the commercial empire of the War Veterans Organization of the Ministry of Defense was closely linked to his leadership of the coup of November 1947 that restored post-war Army domination of the government in Bangkok (Suehiro 1989, p. 136). Similarly, the Thai Army's activities in the fields of banking and television broadcasting took off during the authoritarian rule of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat and his successor Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachon, the latter in power during 1963–73.

Taylor also affirms the importance of militaries' institutional interests. One learns from Kanda's and Aung Myoe's studies, and from the comparison of the Myanmar and Thai cases that they make possible, that the breadth of those interests depends not least on the political environments that militaries themselves shape.

Another valuable point of comparison between Myanmar's and Thailand's armed forces lies in the realm of historical legacies. What Nakanishi observes for Burma and then Myanmar and for outright military regimes more generally proves equally relevant to Thailand and to military occupants of merely partial regimes: durability must be the object of explanatory effort (Nakanishi 2013, pp. 3–4, 283 ff.). But the legacies that undergird the persistent roles of the Tatmadaw and of the Thai Army in areas beyond the realm of national defence present contrasts that belie what cultural similarity and geographical proximity might lead one to expect.

Among those contrasting legacies, origins are case in point. The Tatmadaw traces its origins to Burma's or Myanmar's "first national army", established in 1941; it "fought for the freedom of the nation" against foreign powers, first the British Empire and then Imperial Japan (Nakanishi 2013, pp. 285, 292). On the other hand, and as Benedict Anderson persuasively argued, Thailand's modern armed forces originated at a time in the late nineteenth century when the British and French Empires guaranteed Siam's external security (Anderson 1978, p. 202). The most important initial functions of those forces were "*internal* royalist consolidation" and service as "an emblem of modernity for the outside world" (Anderson 1978, pp. 203–4). Chambers's study in this volume notes the subsequent formative influence of what was at the very least a quasi-empire, that of the United States, on those armed forces.

American influence on the Thai military came during what Douglas Blaufarb labelled "the counterinsurgency era" (Blaufarb 1977). And, indeed, the role of counterinsurgency in shaping both the Tatmadaw and the Thai Army figures as a second crucial pair of legacies.

The former force has confronted rival militaries operating within Burmese and Myanmar national territory, not least what one today calls "ethnic armed groups", since the months directly following independence from Britain in 1948.<sup>15</sup> Nakanishi notes pointedly that three decades of counterinsurgent warfare had forged the generation of officers who took

control of the state in 1988 (Nakanishi 2013, p. 281).<sup>16</sup> The emphasis here must be on warfare, rather than on political approaches. The Tatmadaw did not adopt strategies of counterinsurgency grounded in “civic action”, organicist conceptions of state-society relations, or what Mary Callahan calls “institutional reforms allowing more inclusionary politics” (Callahan 2004, p. 5). Instead, the 1960s saw it introduce an approach centred on “four cuts”, on denying insurgents access to sources of “food, funds, intelligence, recruits” (International Crisis Group 2016, p. 7). Both as practice and as doctrine, violence and coercion would remain the Tatmadaw’s enduring and unleavened mode of counterinsurgency (International Crisis Group 2016, p. 7; Abrahamian 2017).

Awareness of the choices that the Tatmadaw made in its approach to counterinsurgent operations serves understanding of the tragic ordeal of Rakhine State in recent years.<sup>17</sup> It also, Thant Myint-U argues, informs understanding of Myanmar’s difficulty in coping with the cataclysmic impact of Cyclone Nargis in May 2008. Despite being “by far the best-equipped institution in the country”, he writes, the Tatmadaw “was essentially a counterinsurgency force, with no experience or training in disaster relief” (Thant Myint-U 2020, p. 88).

During the recent era of state ambivalence, many observers have contended that battles with ethnic armed groups provide the Tatmadaw with a justification for its claims on government resources, and for its continued political role. The years ahead will clarify the implications of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing’s vision of a Standard Army for any adjustment to the deeply rooted counterinsurgency orientation of Myanmar’s armed forces.

Callahan contends that Myanmar’s history of “war-induced state-building has solidified ... the ‘command relationship’ between state and society” in that country (Callahan 2004, p. 221).<sup>18</sup> Both the counterinsurgency experience of the Thai Army and its impact have been somewhat different. The contrast is manifest in a variety of areas. For one, the armed forces of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) did not threaten Bangkok’s control of expanses of the national territory to a degree that recalls the situation faced by the Tatmadaw across the past seven decades. Yet the Thai Army, and the Thai state more generally, took very seriously the threat to the integrity of that state posed by those forces. The military’s experience of besting Communist insurgents, as it did by the early 1980s, became central to its self-

image.<sup>19</sup> This remains true even despite its failure to bring to an end the bloody insurgency that has scarred South Thailand's Patani region for the past decade and a half.

More important than the impact of counterinsurgent campaigns against the forces of the CPT on the Thai Army's self-image was its fundamental and formative impact on Army thinking, and on the Thai state's relationship with Thai citizens. In contrast to the situation in Myanmar, that is, the most noteworthy legacy of Thailand's experience of counterinsurgency has little to do with actual warfare, or even with national security as traditionally understood. Rather, the significance of that experience lies in the socio-political vision to which it gave rise, and in the strategies and tactics of civic action, inclusion and incorporation, co-optation and control, and depoliticization that that vision informs. Those strategies and tactics remain central to the Thai Army's project of what Connors and Ukrist term regime-framing; they represent a factor in its continuing ability to occupy a partial regime in Thailand's ambivalent state. Indeed, appreciation of the quasi-organicist grounding of those strategies and tactics is central to any understanding of the Thai state's ambivalence today.<sup>20</sup>

Two further kinds of legacy merit mention in a comparative discussion of the Tatmadaw and the Thai armed forces. One concerns the relationship between military officers and civilian officials in the Burmese and then Myanmar state and in the Thai state. While an "imbalance" between soldiers and civilians certainly has marked both those states during most of the past six decades,<sup>21</sup> that imbalance has proved far more severe in the case of Burma and then Myanmar than in that of Thailand. The latter state has simply never witnessed the extensive substitution of military officers for civilian officials that occurred across the bureaucracy of the latter (Nakanishi 2013, pp. 27 and 142 ff.).<sup>22</sup>

Then there is the legacy of royalism. Military officers figured prominently among the members of the *Khana ratsadon*, or People's Party, whose seizure of state power in Bangkok on 24 June 1932 brought Siam's absolute monarchy to an end. Determined to "place the King under the law" (Ferrara 2015, p. 5), the group did not intend to bring institutional change alone. With its composition of well educated, commoner officials—both civilian and military—and its emphasis on constitutionalism, its target was not only royal absolutism as a

system of government but also royalism as a socio-political principle. Nevertheless, as Chambers's study in this volume makes clear, it is impossible to understand the Thai Army's conception of its role, and indeed of its mission, without taking the continued existence and—in the post-1957 and above all post-1973 periods—the renewed institutional and ideological prominence of the Thai monarchy into account. That prominence, and the influence and resources of the palace, means that the monarchy has occupied a partial regime of its own in Thailand. In the present century, the "monarchization" of the Thai military has, Chambers observes, reached perhaps unprecedented levels. It has, in fact, become a factor in renewed Army factionalism—a curse apparently alien to the history of the Tatmadaw (Nakanishi 2013, p. 285).<sup>23</sup>

To be sure, parallels between the hyper-royalism of the Thai military and the Tatmadaw's stake in Bamar Buddhist ethnic chauvinism merit attention from scholars. But for present purposes emphasis must be on the absence of royalism from the Myanmar political and ideological landscapes. In highlighting the contrasting situations of Thailand and Myanmar in this respect, Taylor recalls in his epilogue a conversation with a Tatmadaw officer who expressed his gratitude to the country's former British colonizers for abolishing—in 1885, at the conclusion of the brief Third Anglo-Burmese War—its monarchy. Taylor notes, too, that the military of Imperial Germany abandoned the Kaiser at the end of the First World War; the birth of the Weimar Republic would soon follow. Taylor's discussion touches on more than just the question of formal political regime, however. It calls attention to the reality that, as in the Siam of 1932, the institutional interests of armed forces and of reigning monarchies do not always coincide. The need to confront the divergence of those interests is not a legacy of the Tatmadaw's history.

On one level, the contrasting legacies that shape the Myanmar Tatmadaw and the Thai Army appear to pose a fundamental challenge to Berlin's stress, in his study of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, on the importance of a Southeast Asian context for military influence on and involvement in politics. On another level, however, they impel one to look harder in the search for commonality, or at least for comparative perspective.

It is the search for comparative perspective on the Southeast Asian context that leads Robert Taylor to consider the case of interwar Germany in this volume's epilogue. Recourse to the case of the Weimar

Republic is apropos. Its history of social turmoil and ideological contention certainly matches Ukrist's and Connors's characterization of an ambivalent state. Turning to the work of John Wheeler-Bennett to trace the German military's relationship to the fraught and hectic politics of that star-crossed polity, Taylor centres his discussion on the distinction that that scholar drew between the years during which that military controlled politics and those during which it made the mistake of playing politics.

In the Southeast Asian context, and understood with reference to Ukrist's and Connors's ideas, this distinction is both relevant and revealing. Taylor argues that the armed forces of six of the ten states that comprise the region today have largely avoided both trying to control politics and actively playing politics. He lists Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. Indonesia, the Philippines, Myanmar and Thailand present a different picture.<sup>24</sup>

Comparing Myanmar and Thailand in particular, Taylor observes, "It would appear, on balance, that the army of Thailand has been more willing to play politics and less able to control the outcome of politics than the army of Myanmar". Taylor's broad conclusions map neatly onto ideas about ambivalent states and the contests to frame regimes that characterize those states. Simply put, the Thai Army's willingness, or need, to play politics has been a function of the chronic ambivalence of the Thai state. In contrast, for half a century the Tatmadaw framed the regime that governed Burma and then Myanmar, suffering no competing actors. In state ambivalence, or the periodic lack thereof, may lie the crucial commonality between the militaries of these two Mainland Southeast Asian neighbours and the political roles of those militaries.

The control of politics that the Tatmadaw exerted during that half-century, from the early 1960s, has in the last decade given way to the necessity that Myanmar's soldiers play politics. In a situation of their own making, and even as they may have designed the country's 2008 constitution to ensure continued military hegemony, theirs is now an ambivalent state. In moving in 2019 to amend that constitution and thus to reduce the political role of the Tatmadaw,<sup>25</sup> the NLD government sought nothing less than to reframe the regime. Now in the position of rival aspiring regime framer, the military, with its allies, found itself forced to join the ensuing political contest.

An analogous situation of political contestation obtained in Thailand at the same time. Submitting to close scrutiny the post-2014 regime of General Prayut and the NCPO, Prajak Kongkirati and Veerayooth Kanchoochat have exposed its effort to secure lasting control of Thailand's politics (Prajak and Veerayooth 2018). The junta's chosen means included attempting to depoliticize society, enhancing and embedding military power, designing the 2017 constitution to ensure lasting military influence, and recalibrating the role of big business in the Thai polity. But, in finally calling the elections of 24 March 2019, the Prayut regime effectively traded political control for the need to play politics.<sup>26</sup> Thailand again became an ambivalent state, in which contending occupiers of partial regimes—including not just the Thai Army but also the increasingly active monarchy—sought to frame the hegemonic regime.

Nothing illustrated this abrupt change so clearly as the emergence of the Future Forward Party. Both during the campaign for the 2019 polls and after taking its seats in parliament, the new party succeeded in putting onto the political agenda existential questions about the Army's prominence in the country's affairs.<sup>27</sup> It did so with remarkable deftness and timing. And the ferocious legal and political backlash on the part of the military and its allies that the upstart party thus provoked only called attention to the ongoing competition to frame the regime. It was a case of the Thai military playing politics, and certainly not controlling politics.

Ironically, both the SPDC and the NCPO juntas effected on timetables of their own choosing the 2010–11 and March 2019 “transitions” in their respective countries. It was these transitions that left them compelled to play rather than able to control politics. In normative terms, of course, neither a military that controls politics nor one that plays politics is acceptable. Like Filipinos, Indonesians, and their other Southeast Asian neighbours, citizens of Myanmar and Thailand deserve regimes and economies free of military interference and even influence. As Sam Huntington argued fifty years ago, however, achieving that objective is not a military matter. Rather, it requires overcoming obstacles in the social and political and other realms. The need to overcome those obstacles presents the most noteworthy commonality between Myanmar and Thailand, as the four important studies in this volume make evident.

## NOTES

1. This book is the published version of Berlin (1982).
2. Note that page numbers in citations to Ukrist and Connors (2019) refer to the advance publication version of the article at <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2019.1635632>.
3. Ukrist and Connors borrow this analytical approach from Brown (2016) (Ukrist and Connors 2019, p. 21 n. 6).
4. This usage of “occupation” is also drawn from Ukrist and Connors (2019, p. 8).
5. See the various chapters in Montesano, Chong, and Heng (2019).
6. See Wa Lone et al. (2018) and Lassetter (2018).
7. As the design of the cover of the present volume suggests, its editors would place it in the lineage of two important earlier ISEAS publications on the Thai military, Chai-anan (1982) and Suchit (1987).
8. The term refers to the armed forces as a whole, including the Army, Navy, and Air Force, though it is difficult to argue that the first of those services has not been the dominant branch of the Tatmadaw. Nakashi notes, for example, that as of 2012 or 2013 the manpower level of the Army stood at 375,00, while those of the Navy and Air Force stood at 16,000 and 15,000, respectively (Nakanishi 2013, p. 291).
9. On the abrupt launch of a more liberal economic order from late 1988, see Nakanishi (2013, p. 294).
10. The same is true at the level of state and regional assemblies.
11. What remains the best study of the General Administration Department is Kyi Pyar Chit Saw and Arnold (2014).
12. Among Thailand’s three service branches, the Air Force has as an institution never played a political role, and the political role of the Navy, insignificant for many decades now, never seriously rivalled that of the Army. The commanders-in-chief of that latter branch or *phubanchakan thahan bok*, rather than the Thai military’s inter-service supreme commander or *phubanchakan thahan sungsut*, is, likewise, the most powerful officer in the armed forces. Studies of the influence on and involvement of the military in Thai politics like those in this volume must therefore focus on the Army. While in English that dominant service affects the name “Royal Thai Army”, its actual Thai name, *kongthap bok*, simply means “ground forces”. That name contains no element relating to royalism or the monarchy; see *Kongthap bok* (n.d.).
13. See Thak (2007 [1979]) for a classic and long influential interpretation of the Sarit era.
14. For earlier Thai-language publications, see for example Kanda (2012a, 2012b); also see Kanda (2020) for a recent, related, paper in English.



15. See Callahan (2004, pp. 114 ff.).
16. Also see Nakanishi (2013, pp. 289–90).
17. For elaboration of this same point, see International Crisis Group (2016) and Abrahamian (2017).
18. Callahan here borrows terminology from Young (1988, p. 51).
19. The best-known statement of this case is probably Saiyud (1986). Also see Marks (1994); Chai-anan, Kusuma and Suchit (1990); Moore (2010); and Bergin (2016). Murray (1984), which gestures at a more balanced understanding of the end of the insurgency of the Communist Party of Thailand, also merits attention. On a related point, Kanda's study in this volume notes the early counterinsurgent role of military radio channels in Thailand.
20. See Puangthong (2017) and Puangthong (2019), each of which draws on the author's forthcoming book, *Infiltrating Society: The Thai Military's Internal Security Affairs*. Also see Montesano (2015, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c).
21. The term comes from Nakanishi (2013, p. 288).
22. See Riggs (1966) on the functioning of Thailand's "bureaucratic polity" in its heyday.
23. On Thailand's "monarchized military" and Chambers's extended analysis of Thai royalism in relation to the armed forces in the most recent period, see Chambers and Napisa (2016).
24. Both the Republic of Vietnam and pre-1975 Cambodia fall outside of the set of cases that Taylor considers.
25. See San Yamin Aung (2019).
26. On the Thai elections of March 2019 and their outcomes, see Pitch (2019) and McCargo (2019).
27. See *Bangkok Post* (2019).

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