



Arms and Education: The Deployment of Soldiers for Overseas Study and the Development of the Thai Navy in the 1940s



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[*Abstract*]

After the Revolution of 1932, the military government sought to strengthen the armed forces. The Royal Thai Navy was also given priority by the government, as it lacked both the quality and quantity of battleships and sophisticated officers. Consequently, the Thai government decided to purchase battleships from Italy and Japan, which led the navy to send sailors to train and study in these countries. Therefore, the military importance of Italy and Japan became crucial to the navy, seemingly replacing Britain, which had previously played a significant role in developing the Thai navy. However, the Thai government did not want to rely solely on one country, so it adopted a strategy of balance-of-power diplomacy by sending officers to study in Britain as well. Meanwhile, tensions in global politics, particularly Japan and Italy, both Axis powers, seeking to expand their influence over Thailand, prompted the British government to shift its military policy. Previously reluctant to allow Thai midshipmen and officers to train or study with its forces, Britain eventually permitted Thai officers to train aboard British battleships and attend the British Naval Academy.

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Hence, Thailand's balancing strategy helped the Thai navy quickly develop its forces by sending soldiers abroad for training.

Keywords: Study Abroad, Balance of Power, Navy, Military Development, Thailand, Diplomacy

I . Introduction

Since the reign of King Chulalongkorn, the Siamese government¹ had prioritized the development of the army, recognizing it as the primary force for ensuring the stability of the government against both external and internal threats. However, the systematic reform of the navy, based on Western models, began even before the army was reformed. During the reign of King Rama III, many princes were allowed to build and maintain their personal armed forces. King Pinklao also commissioned the construction of modern vessels and oversaw the training of soldiers in Western military practices.

The Paknam Incident of 1893, however, exposed the failure of the Siamese government's efforts to develop a strong navy. The few French battleships were easily able to defeat the Siamese navy and even dock in front of the Grand Palace. As a result, the government was forced to cede part of the country's territory to France. This defeat pushed King Chulalongkorn to urgently prioritize the modernization of the navy. Five years later, in 1898, a naval academy was established to train modern sailors. However, there was also a pressing need for skilled commanders who could properly instruct midshipmen. To address this, the government decided to send individuals, mostly Chulalongkorn's sons, to study naval science abroad.

Seemingly, the importance of the navy in the eyes of the Siamese elites diminished after the threat of Western naval powers disappeared. This shift was reflected in the government's reduced

¹ Siam was the official name of Thailand until 1939, when Phibunsongkhram decided to change the nation's name as part of his nationalism policy, which required the nation's name to reflect the race of its people.

naval budget. Previously, the government had allocated more funds to the navy than to the army, particularly after the Paknam Incident. However, over time, the government began to focus more on the possibility of land warfare rather than naval conflict, especially as neighboring territories were occupied by Western powers such as Britain and France (National Archives of Thailand. R.5 Ministry of Defense 13.2/35).

Due to budget constraints, the government had to prioritize the army, which created a problem for the navy. Although there were many sailors who had graduated from the naval academy both domestically and abroad, there were not enough battleships in service to accommodate them. Thereby, most sailors were assigned to administrative duties. This issue was somewhat alleviated when King Prajadhipok ascended to the throne and the government ordered new battleships for the navy. However, these battleships were limited to serving as coast guard vessels. (National Archive of Thailand. R.7 Ministry Defense 4/27)

After the Revolution of 1932, the new government, led by the Khana Ratsadorn, adopted a policy to expand the navy and increase the fleet's size. Therefore, the navy commissioned 13 battleships from Italy and another 13 from Japan (The Royal Thai Navy 1999). At the same time, it sent officers and sailors to both countries to observe and study their naval operations. During the interwar period, from the First World War to the Second World War, military technology and strategy advanced rapidly. To keep pace, the navy needed officers and midshipmen with expertise in these areas, so it sent personnel abroad for specialized training.

The tension in global politics prompted the Thai Navy to seek Japan's support in developing its forces, as Japan itself had significantly altered its military policy. During the Meiji Restoration, the Japanese Navy had restricted foreigners from studying at its naval academy (National Archives of Thailand. R.5 Ministry of Foreign Affairs 49/54). However, in the 1940s, Japan unexpectedly began to accept Thai officers for study in its navy. The underlying reason for this shift was Japan's desire to expand its influence by having foreign soldiers train and observe in Japan. Thus, this policy

proved highly beneficial for Thailand, as it provided the opportunity to send officers to study naval science in Japan.

Moreover, sending soldiers abroad for study became a key part of Thailand's diplomatic strategy to balance power between the major world powers, an essential approach that Thai leaders actively pursued. Hence, the officers sent abroad were not only tasked with gaining knowledge, but also with strengthening the relationship between Thailand and these superpower nations. Furthermore, the Thai government appeared to avoid relying solely on the military support of any one country, opting instead to send soldiers to study in multiple nations.

Many scholars have studied the military in Thailand, and most of these researches have focused on the role of the military in politics or the political dynamics within the armed forces, rather than on the development of the forces. However, there are some notable scholars who have examined the history of modern Thai military development. Paul Chamber (2013), in "Knight of the Realm: Thailand's Military and Police, Then and Now," offers a thorough analysis of the evolution of the armed forces, particularly following its modernization. Another significant work is Gregory Vincent Raymond's "Thai Military Power: A Culture of Strategic Accommodation" (2018), which explores the organizational culture of the Thai military. Thep Boontanondha (2020), in "The King's Soldiers: Building Royalism in the Armed Forces, 1868-1957," investigates how the armed forces instilled the concept of royalism among soldiers. While these works provide valuable insights into the development of Thailand's armed forces, they rarely focus on how the Thai Navy specifically improved, especially through the practice of sending officers abroad for training. The seminal work by Noel A. Battye (1974), "The Military, Government and Society in Siam, 1868 – 1910: Politics and Military Reform during the Reign of King Chulalongkorn," examines Thai military policy under Chulalongkorn, arguing that the practice of sending officers to study abroad became a cornerstone of his modernization efforts.

Although the work of Nattapol Chaiching (2020) in "Tamroi Athit Uthai: Pan Sang Chatthai Samai Khana Ratsadorn" [Following

Japan: The Policy of Nation-Building by the Khana Ratasadorn] presents the idea of sending sailors to Japan for submarine training, it ultimately focuses more on the general activities of the sailors rather than on the government's policy regarding the development of the navy. In contrast, Thep Boontanondha (2025), in "Rethinking National Defence During the Reign of King Chulalongkorn," further explores the intersection of military policy and diplomacy regarding overseas education. He suggests that following the 1893 Paknam Incident, the Thai government pivoted toward Japan for naval and military training to avoid an exclusive reliance on European powers. However, existing scholarship has yet to fully examine the direct causal link between naval development and the broader diplomatic strategy of balancing powers. By engaging with the concept of the balance of power, this research focuses on two key aspects: first, the policy of modernizing the Navy through overseas education; and second, how balancing diplomacy enabled the government to send personnel abroad during periods of global crisis.

II . Japan as the Destination of the Thai Navy

Since the reign of King Chulalongkorn, the Siamese government had been keen to send midshipmen to study naval science in Japan. However, the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) did not allow foreigners to attend the Imperial Japanese Naval Academy (Kaigun Heigakkō). Hereby, the first group of Siamese midshipmen, who went to Japan in 1906, had to study mechanics at the Kawasaki Dockyard instead. Despite this, the Siamese government continued to view Japan as a suitable partner for the future development of its navy. Consequently, the Thai navy regularly sent personnel to observe and study Japan's maritime techniques, including the purchase of armaments (National Archives of Thailand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 44.4/21).

After the 1932 Revolution, the government seemingly sought more military support from Japan. It sent soldiers to study navigation at a Japanese institution (National Archives of Thailand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 44.4/21). Additionally, the navy purchased

significant amounts of military equipment from Japan, which required sending personnel there for training. This included sending one of the prominent commanders, Luang Sindsongkhramchai, to observe the Imperial Japanese Navy (National Archives of Thailand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 44.4/80).

The Japanese policy of expanding its influence over Southeast Asia through the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere was a key factor in the Japanese government's willingness to sell armaments and allow Thai soldiers and midshipmen to study and train with the IJN and at the Naval Academy. This initiative contributed to the spread of Japanism among these soldiers. Since 1935, the Thai government consistently ordered battleships from Japan. It procured the gunboats HTMS Thonburi and HTMS Sri Ayutthaya from the Kawasaki Dockyard, both of which featured advanced technology for the Thai navy at the time (The Royal Thai Navy 1999: 114-155). Furthermore, in 1938, the navy purchased new battleships, HTMS Mae Kong and HTMS Ta Chin, from Uraga Dock Company (Chesneau and Gardiner 1980: 411). Both battleships were equipped to carry seaplanes, which had been purchased from Japan in 1936 (Kanathamngan Judthum Nungsue Prawat Kongtabruea 1998: 70-72).

During the construction of HTMS Thonburi and HTMS Sri Ayutthaya, the Thai government sent Luang Sangwonyutthaikit and Luang Navawichit to inspect the progress and observe the Japanese navy. Additionally, these officers, along with other personnel who were to serve on the battleships, were sent to the Kawasaki Dockyard for two years of training (Na Pompetch 2007: 193). Notably, the Kawasaki Dockyard offered to train the soldiers at no cost, prompting the navy to send twelve officers and mechanics to take advantage of this opportunity (National Archives of Thailand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 44.4/82).

Naturally, the amicable relationship between the two nations directly impacted the Thai armed forces, which consequently acquired a large number of arms from Japan. Before the Second World War, the Thai navy not only spent considerable amounts of money to send soldiers to study and train in Japan, but also seemingly relied on Japan's support. The Royal Thai Navy also

procured submarines from Mitsubishi Heavy Industries to strengthen its fleet. However, training personnel to operate these submarines posed a new challenge, as the navy lacked experienced sailors in submarine warfare. Hence, in 1936, the navy sent numerous soldiers to Japan for specialized training in submarine operations (National Archives of Thailand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 44.4/23). This initiative became one of the largest military projects of the armed forces, reflecting Phibunsongkhram's commitment to invigorating the military through militarism and nationalism.

2.1. Sending Soldiers to Train in Submarine Operations

The Thai Navy recognized submarines as valuable assets in modern maritime warfare, especially as superpower nations had been operating submarines since the First World War. In 1915, Prince Vudhijaya Chalermlabha, the Chief of Staff of the Navy, tasked Prince Mahidol, a graduate of the Mürwik Naval School, with writing a report on submarines to help the navy assess the feasibility of acquiring them. In his report, Mahidol acknowledged that submarines could serve in coast guard duties. However, he raised concerns about the high cost of submarines, noting that they were more expensive than other ships and required substantial funds for maintenance. He recommended that the navy to send personnel to Denmark to study submarine operations before making a final decision (Adulyadej 2017: 78-86).

In 1918, following the end of the First World War, Prince Paribatra Sukhumbandhu, the commander-in-chief of the navy, ordered Luang Hansamut to study submarine operations in Britain, in preparation for the potential procurement of submarines by the navy. In response, Luang Hansamut submitted a report to the commander-in-chief, recommending that the navy also send an engineering officer to study submarine mechanics (National Archives of Thailand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 43.10/79). Therefore, Luang Chamnikolkarn, who had studied mechanical engineering in Britain and served aboard the HTMS Dreadnought of the British Navy, was selected to further his studies in submarine mechanics and to request permission to serve on a submarine (National Archives of Thailand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 44.4/5). However, the British

Navy only allowed Chamnikolkarn to serve aboard HMS Titania, a submarine depot ship, for six months, rather than assigning him to an actual submarine (National Archives of Thailand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 44.4/5). This was unsurprising, as the British Navy did not permit foreigners to serve on its submarines, due to the highly advanced and classified nature of submarine technology.

The project to commission a submarine, which was a costly endeavor that required sending personnel for specialized training, was ultimately canceled when Siam faced an economic crisis following the First World War, forcing the government to drastically reduce the military budget. Nonetheless, in an effort to bolster the armed forces, the government decided to purchase nine torpedo boats from Italy for coast guard duties (National Archives of Thailand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 45.8/6).

After the Revolution of 1932, the military government embraced militarism and nationalism as part of a broader effort to strengthen the armed forces in anticipation of potential future conflicts. As a result, the government launched a modernization program for the military. For the navy, this included the acquisition of several new battleships. In 1936, two coastal defense ships, HTMS Thonburi and HTMS Sri Ayutthaya, were purchased from the Kawasaki Dockyard. Moreover, in 1939, the government ordered a light cruiser of the Etna class from Italy. However, the Italian Navy later decided to retain the vessel for its own use during the Second World War, preventing its delivery to Thailand (The Royal Thai Navy 1999).

The navy, under the command of Admiral Sind Kamonavin, decided to revive the submarine project. In 1934, the navy contracted Mitsubishi Heavy Industries to build four submarines of the Matchanu class (National Archives of Thailand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 45.8/7). This initiative was strongly supported by the Japanese government, which aimed to replace Western weaponry in the Thai armed forces with Japanese-made armaments, in line with its broader policy of expanding influence over Southeast Asia.

A submarine was an entirely new type of equipment for Thailand, and operating one was vastly different from serving on a

surface battleship. To serve on a submarine, sailors needed intensive, specialized training from experienced personnel who had served aboard submarines. However, at that time, the Thai Navy lacked soldiers with knowledge or experience in submarine operations. Additionally, there was no naval school in Thailand to provide submarine training. Hence, the navy had to send officers and sailors who were to serve on submarines to Japan for training.

Although the Japanese government was willing to allow Thai soldiers to study submarine operations in Japan, it required the courses to be taught in Japanese rather than English, as requested by the Thai Navy. Thus, all the trainees had to learn Japanese. The reason the Japanese government insisted on this was that the Japanese Navy could not provide sufficient instructors who were fluent in English (National Archives of Thailand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 44.4/23). Another, and perhaps more important reason was that the Japanese government wanted the Thai soldiers to adapt to Japanese culture and traditions, fostering Japanism among them. Interestingly, this policy seemingly was effective, that the two officers who were sent to study submarine in Japan, Min Boonsupha and Jarrat Duangurai, wrote the Japanese language textbooks after they returned to Thailand (Murashima 2020: 10). Furthermore, the Japanese government might have anticipated that Thailand and Japan would become allies in future conflicts, making it important and beneficial for the Japanese military if Thai soldiers stationed on submarines were able to communicate in Japanese.

The Thai Navy divided the soldiers who were sent to study submarine operations into two groups. The first group, consisting of 8 officers and 34 noncommissioned officers, traveled to Japan in June 1936. They began learning Japanese with a Japanese instructor in Chiba until they acquired a basic understanding of the language. Afterward, they were sent to Kobe to study both Japanese and submarine operations (National Archives of Thailand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 44.4/23). In January 1937, the Thai Navy sent another group of soldiers, including 4 officers and 71 noncommissioned officers, to Japan. Two months later, the navy also sent 2 officers to oversee the construction of the ships. The navy also sent Nopparat Samittanon and Siri Lueksawat to study the production and

maintenance submarine battery in Japan (National Archives of Thailand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 44.4/23).

Not only did the armed forces and government, but also Japanese organizations and companies offer support to Thai soldiers studying in Japan. They organized welcome events and provided necessary supplies for the Thai soldiers. The Dai Nippon Brewery hosted a luncheon, while Mitsui Butsan and Mitsubishi Electric covered travel expenses. Saito Senoseke donated money, and the National Defense Women's Association provided towels and soap. The Funabashi municipality arranged a banquet, and the Kyoto Buddhist Organization hosted a dinner. Additionally, the Japanese Shipbuilding Association donated Kendo and Judo uniforms (National Archives of Thailand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 44.4/23).

Japan actively supported the training of Thai soldiers in submarine, as part of its broader diplomatic strategy to extend its influence over Southeast Asia because Thailand, being the only independent nation in the region at the time, was seen as a valuable target. By strengthening its ties with Thailand, Japan could establish a foothold in the area without facing direct opposition from Western powers, who viewed Japan as a potential threat. From a military standpoint, Japan expected Thailand's armed forces to become more dependent on Japanese military assistance. When Thailand requested to purchase submarines and send soldiers to train in Japan, it presented Japan with a valuable opportunity—not only to sell armaments but also to extend its influence over the Thai soldiers who would be trained in Japan. In terms of economic factors, Japan's investment in Thailand increased, prompting the Yokohama Specie Bank to open a new branch in Thailand in 1937 to support Japanese businesses. Furthermore, the number of Thai people in Japan steadily grew, making the Yokohama Bank a key intermediary for transferring money from Thailand to Thai students studying in Japan. Given these factors, the Japanese government decided to strengthen ties with the Thai government.

In military strategy, a key question arose: Could submarines truly secure national security? This question was especially relevant since submarines did not participate in defending the nation during

two critical battles—the Battle of Koh Chang and the 1941 Japanese invasion. Despite concerns from the French Navy about the threat posed by Thai submarines, none of the Thai submarines were deployed during these conflicts. When French battleships arrived at the battlefield, the Thai submarines were not used. The Thai Navy decided to retire the submarine in 1951 due to a lack of spare parts. This was partly because Japan's new constitution prohibited the export of military equipment. Then, the navy decommissioned all the submarines and reassigned the crew members to serve on other ships.

Sending soldiers to study in Japan primarily focused on military such as navigation and mechanics, which was different from the army's emphasis on engineering and sciences. This was because the Thai Navy had commissioned a large number of battleships from Japan, making it essential to train soldiers to serve on these ships. The Thai Navy appeared to heavily rely on Japan for its naval needs. However, there was also a belief that Western navies had more advanced technology and superior naval strategies than Japan. Thus, many soldiers and midshipmen were sent to Europe to study naval science, and the Thai Navy also acquired numerous European-made armaments. Furthermore, the Thai leader realized that Japan's ultimate desire was to expand its influence over Thailand.

Ⅲ. The Role of the Superpower Nations in Producing Thai sailors after the Revolution of 1932

During King Chulalongkorn's reign, the reforms of the Thai navy followed a similar approach to the reforms of the Thai army, prioritizing the education of soldiers in Europe, where they could learn Western military techniques and organizational methods to enhance the Thai armed forces. However, a key difference between the two branches lay in the attitudes of Western nations. While Thai army cadets were generally allowed to attend military academies abroad, the situation was different for naval cadets. Thai midshipmen were usually barred from enrolling in naval academies,

and even those who were allowed to attend had limited access, being excluded from courses that covered sensitive military strategies or classified information. This policy stemmed from the fact that the navy played a central role in colonial expansion, allowing foreign nationals to learn about naval tactics could potentially undermine colonial powers.

Many Thai midshipmen allowed to study at European naval academies encountered a significant obstacle. They were excluded from courses on military strategy and naval security, even though they came from elite families. For instance, when Phon, the son of Phraya Phairatpakpakdhi, was sent by the government to study naval science at the École Navale in France, he reported that the French officers treated him with disdain and did not provide him with the same education given to their own midshipmen. Consequently, Phon requested a transfer to Belgium for his naval studies (National Archives of Thailand. R.5 Ministry of Foreign Affairs 49/54).

Although sending soldiers to study naval science in Europe was hindered by the policies of the superpower nations, Europe remained the center of naval education at the time. Thus, the Thai government had no choice but to persist in sending military students to Europe, especially to Britain, where most of the battleships in the Thai navy were sourced. Thus, sending Thai officers to study naval science in Britain was crucial for the development of the Thai navy during its early reform period.

After the First World War, global politics shifted, with the United States emerging as the most powerful nation. In Asia, Japan had already demonstrated its naval strength before the war. Importantly, Japan shifted its policy to allow foreign nationals to attend its Naval Academy. This change led the Thai navy to look to Japan for support, as Japan was eager to strengthen its influence within the Thai navy. Japan welcomed many Thai officers to train in its naval forces. In response, European nations, which had previously exerted influence over the Thai military, sought to maintain the balance of power and their own roles. Ultimately, these nations adopted a crucial policy of permitting Thai soldiers to enroll

in their naval academies. This situation proved advantageous for the Thai navy, as it not only leveraged these nations against each other to balance power but also significantly improved by sending officers and midshipmen abroad for training. As various countries sought to extend their power in Thailand, Italy emerged as a particularly important player, playing a significant role in the development of the Thai navy in the 1940s.

3.1. The Thai Navy under the Support of Italy

Japan played a significant role in the development of the Thai navy during the Phibunsongkhram regime. However, Italy, despite not being a great power, was another key nation that provided important support to help expand the Thai fleet. The Thai government sent soldiers to study in Italy and also imported naval equipment and battleships from there. The Thai navy turned to Italy because of the friendly diplomatic and military relationship between the two nations, which contrasted with the more distant relations Thailand had with other European powers. Furthermore, Italy, under Benito Mussolini, wanted to expand its influence over Asian nations. In the 1930s, the Italian government sent instructors to train Chinese pilots because it aimed to strengthen the Chinese armed forces to resist the aggressive expansion of Japan wanting to occupy China (Ferretti 2003: 173). Seemingly, the Italian government might be anxious about the situation of Thailand, which had begun to rely on Japan. Hence, the Italian government decided to strengthen the Thai armed forces by allowing Thai soldiers to study naval science in Italy, including attending the naval academy and staff college. Additionally, the Italian armed forces permitted Thai soldiers to serve actively in the Italian military, where they received further training alongside Italian personnel (National Archives of Thailand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 43.13/1).

The Thai government held a favorable view of Italy. Since the reign of King Vajiravudh, the Thai armed forces had been sending soldiers and midshipmen to study military science in Italy, believing that the capabilities of the Italian military were on par with those of other great powers. The Italian government, in turn, seemed willing to allow Thai soldiers to study alongside their Italian

counterparts. Therefore, sending soldiers to study military science in Italy proved to be highly beneficial for Thailand. Notably, the Italian government permitted Thai soldiers to attend any classes, even those that involved sensitive national security information, such as details about the Italian military's strategies and technologies, particularly in submarine warfare. Based on these factors, in 1914, the Thai government decided to send six sailors to study naval science in Italy (National Archives of Thailand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 43.13/5).

The extensive assistance from Italy encouraged the Thai government to shift its focus toward Italy, leading it to consider importing expensive armaments from Italy instead of relying on Britain, which Thailand had depended on since the reign of King Chulalongkorn. Therefore, King Prajadhipok's government procured nine torpedo boats from Cantieri Riuniti dell'Adriatico in 1930. The reason for purchasing several battleships from Italy was that the Italian government assured the Thai government that the ships would not be seized during construction. In times of war, nations often requisition military resources, including armaments and ships for their own forces, which could result in foreign-procured vessels being expropriated. Such confiscation would have a direct impact on the legitimate owners of those ships. Hereby, the Italian government's pledge acted as a guarantee that the Thai navy would retain its battleships and use them as planned. This assurance was a key factor in the Thai navy's decision to further strengthen its ties with Italy, especially during periods of political tension (National Archives of Thailand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 45.6/4).

In 1935, the Italian government offered to allow Thai soldiers to train in the Italian navy for two years at no cost. The offer came in response to Thailand's order of nine torpedo boats from Cantieri Riuniti dell'Adriatico in 1930, as the Thai navy needed sailors with experience in operating ships of this class. Italy's offer was particularly appealing because European nations typically required the Thai government to cover the costs of training, even when Thailand had purchased armaments from them. However, the Thai navy was forced to decline the offer, as it had already sent many

personnel abroad to observe and study weaponry and shipbuilding, leaving it with insufficient personnel to take advantage of the training opportunity in Italy. In fact, the Thai government also expressed a desire to send midshipmen to study at the Italian naval academy in the future, as most of the battleships in the Thai Navy at that time had been imported from Italy. As before, the Thai Navy sent four personnel to train with the Italian Navy (National Archives of Thailand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 43.5/36).

In 1938, the Italian government notified the Thai government that the Naval Academies Preparatory School in Brindisi and the Francesco Morosini Naval Military School in Venice were open to Thai citizens, especially the descendants of Thai officers, and that Thai students were allowed to attend these institutions alongside Italian midshipmen. The program at these academies lasted for five years. Afterward, any student wishing to continue at the Naval Academy in Livorno (Accademia Navale) had to pass an entrance exam and complete an additional three years of study there. Thus, Luang Yutthasartkoson contacted the Italian government to inquire about sending his son to study at the academy. In response, the Italian government informed him that applicants must have graduated from high school and possessed proficiency in both Latin and Italian (National Archives of Thailand, Supreme Commander 5/10).

With the German Air Force bombing Britain in the early days of World War II, Phibunsongkhram became concerned for his son's safety and decided to have him moved. The strong diplomatic ties between Thailand and Italy led Phibunsongkhram to consider transferring his son, Prasong Phibunsongkhram, who was studying naval science in Britain, to the Italian Naval Academy. Phibunsongkhram instructed the Thai diplomat in London to reach out to Italy about the possibility of transferring Prasong to their naval academy. The Italian government responded swiftly, agreeing to the transfer. However, Phra Manowetchwimon, the Thai minister in London, objected to the plan, arguing that it could harm Thailand's relations with Britain, as Italy was aligned with the Axis Powers, the enemy of Britain. Then, Prasong had to remain in Britain to continue his studies until Thailand entered the war.

(Phibunsongkhram 2003: 62).

The case of Prasong highlighted the Thai leadership's view of Italy as a key partner in strengthening its armed forces. Similarly, the Italian government prioritized improving its relationship with Thailand, especially with the onset of the Second World War. As a member of the Axis Powers, Italy sought to extend its influence over Thailand, which at the time had a fascist government and maintained friendly relations with Germany, Italy, and Japan. Consequently, Thailand became an important focus for Italy's diplomatic efforts.

Seemingly, sending Thai soldiers to study in Britain became less important after the Revolution of 1932. For Phibunsongkhram, maintaining a balance of power between Thailand and the major European powers was a priority. The premier, nevertheless, chose to send his son to Britain to study naval science. At the same time, the British government also shifted its diplomatic and military stance toward Thailand. Previously, the British military had been reluctant to accept Thai cadets into their academies, both in the army and navy. However, changes in global politics and military strategy prompted the British government to revise this policy, now allowing Thai cadets to study at its naval academy.

3.2. Balancing Military Power by Sending Sailors to Study Naval Science in the British navy

One of the primary reforms of the Thai Navy during the reign of King Chulalongkorn involved sending Prince Abhakara Kiartivongse to study naval science in Britain. However, sending Thai naval officers to Britain faced several challenges, particularly due to restrictions imposed by the British government. Thai midshipmen were not permitted to attend courses that involved sensitive national security topics, such as military strategy. Moreover, Thai officers were not allowed to enroll at the British Staff College. As a result, most Thai military personnel studying in Britain, including figures such as Luang Chamnanavakol and Luang Rottaratwichan, were limited to studying engineering, a field the British government was more willing to concede (Amarinratana 1979: 307). Regarding these

factors, the Thai government chose to send its military personnel to study abroad in Germany, Italy, and Japan rather than Britain. However, Britain remained a significant player in military matters for Thailand, as most of the battleships commissioned by the Thai Navy prior to the Revolution of 1932 had been imported from Britain. Hereby, it was still deemed essential to send officers to Britain for naval training.

Toward the end of the absolute monarchy, the Thai government began to shift its naval policy, aiming to reduce its reliance on Britain. As part of this strategy, the government opted to import more battleships from Italy and Japan to strengthen the navy, which subsequently diminished the strategic importance of Britain to Thailand. Several Thai midshipmen, such as Prince Karnwannadis Diskul and Prince Chaloemlap Vudhijaya, personally funded their studies in Britain (National Archives of Thailand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 43.10/224). The overall number of Thai officers sent to Britain for naval training was relatively small. This suggests that the government viewed sending military personnel to Britain as less beneficial for the development of the Thai Navy.

As the influence of the British military over Thailand's armed forces had declined, the British government, in fact, was extremely concerned about this situation, as the Thai navy had increasingly relied on Japan for support. Japan had gained significant influence over the Thai armed forces, particularly the navy. Moreover, Japan's political agenda sought to expand its sphere of influence in Southeast Asia through the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere." This expansionist policy caused Britain to worry about Japan's potential threat to its Asian colonies, especially the strategically important Straits Settlements, which were vital both militarily and economically. In response, the British government sought to reassert its influence over Thailand. Consequently, during the 1940s, an unprecedented event occurred, something that had never happened during the colonial period, when Britain offered military assistance to Thailand. This included allowing Thai midshipmen to train on a training battleship.

In March 1937, the British government sent a memorandum outlining the regulations for accepting Thai midshipmen into the British navy. The memorandum specified that Thai officers would be stationed on a training vessel rather than on one of the British cruisers, as British law prohibited any foreigner from serving aboard a British battleship. The officers were allowed to undergo 15 months of training in areas such as gunnery, torpedo operations, navigation, and signal operations (National Archives of Thailand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 43.5/44). However, this military curriculum was specifically designed for foreigners, making it different from the original curriculum (National Archives of Thailand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 43.5/44). The Thai navy quickly seized this opportunity to send midshipmen to study in Britain. While it was clear that the curriculum would not provide advanced academic knowledge, it was recognized as a valuable source of practical naval knowledge and experience for Thai officers. Eventually, the navy sent two officers to study naval science in Britain (National Archives of Thailand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 43.5/44).

Although the British government had allowed Thai officers to study naval science, the Thai navy's true expectation was for these officers to be stationed on British battleships, where they could gain more hands-on experience. However, the British navy rejected this proposal. It was not until the 1940s that the British government changed its military policy, allowing Thai officers to train aboard British battleships. Six Thai officers were granted permission to do so, and in addition to a three-month gunnery course. Moreover, they were also allowed to observe naval maneuvers in 1939 (National Archives of Thailand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 43.5/11). To take advantage of this opportunity, the Thai navy sent Pravis Sripiprat, Lhee Sindhusophon, Savasti Kongsiri, and Pin Puntawee, who had studied in Germany, as well as Tongrod Meksupha, who had studied in Denmark, to observe the war games (National Archives of Thailand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 43.5/11). Still, the British government did not allow Thai officers to attend the Advanced Weaponry School and the Staff College, which was the ultimate goal of the Thai armed forces (National Archives of Thailand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 43.5/11).

The adjustment in Britain's military policy prompted the Thai government to once again prioritize its relationship with Britain. Thus, in 1936, Phibunsongkhram decided to send his son, Prasong Phibunsongkhram, to study naval science in Britain. The British government accepted Prasong without reluctance, allowing him to study in Britain without any specific conditions, though he was required to pass an entrance examination like any other candidate (National Archives of Thailand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 43.10/312). Interestingly, while Prasong was studying in Britain, global affairs were unstable, both in Asia and Europe. Britain, with its colonies in Southeast Asia, recognized the growing threat posed by Japan's desire to expand its influence in the region. Hence, Thailand, located among European colonies and maintaining friendly relations with Japan, was given special attention by Britain. The British government was keen to prevent Thailand from cooperating with Japan. In light of this, Britain offered Prasong the opportunity to study any course at its naval academy, a privilege typically reserved for British citizens. However, British policy ultimately failed when Japan's armed forces invaded Thailand in 1941, leading Thailand to declare war on Britain shortly thereafter.

IV. Conclusion

Since the end of the First World War, many nations, including Thailand, had faced an economic crisis. However, the development of the armed forces remained crucial for ensuring national security. With a limited budget, Thailand could only modestly improve its navy, primarily by purchasing small battleships, such as torpedo boats. After the Revolution of 1932, the navy was rapidly expanded under the militaristic policies of Phibunsongkhram, who sought to use the armed forces to enhance his political and military reputation. Additionally, the military was instrumental in securing his political stability.

Desiring to rapidly develop the navy, many sailors were sent abroad to study and train with the new weapons and technology procured by the government. At that time, Thailand was strongly

aligned with Japan militarily. The navy acquired numerous battleships from Japan, including four submarines, necessitating the sending of many sailors to Japan for training.

Thailand seemed to rely on Japan for the development of its navy. Prior to the outbreak of World War II, Thailand occupied a strategically significant position, making its geopolitics crucial to global affairs. Furthermore, Phibunsongkhram chose to adopt a balance-of-power strategy to profit from the superpowers. Therefore, Thailand was able to easily negotiate with these superpowers for military assistance. Moreover, the impending conflict prompted European superpowers, including Italy and Britain, to offer military assistance in an attempt to extend their influence over Thailand. Hence, many officers were dispatched to study naval sciences and other subjects related to naval operations in both Allied and Axis countries. These powers attempted to influence and pressure Thailand into taking a side, or at the very least, to avoid supporting their adversaries. Hereby, Thailand was able to leverage the opportunities presented by the global conflict.

One of the notable examples was the British navy's offer to allow Thai soldiers to train on British battleships, something that had never been permitted before. Moreover, when Phibunsongkhram decided to send his son to study naval science, the British government suddenly welcomed Prasong and allowed him to study there. Similarly, Italy willingly permitted Thai midshipmen to attend its naval academy and sold many battleships to Thailand.

The Thai government seemed to recognize the shifting global situation, which was leaning toward a new conflict. Although Thailand wanted to rapidly develop its navy, it chose to adopt a balance-of-power strategy by sending soldiers to study abroad in various countries, both Allied and Axis, so that Thailand could continue to strengthen its navy without relying solely on the military support of one side. Interestingly, the Thai armed forces continue to actively pursue a policy of strategic balance. Nowadays, the Thai navy leverages the rivalry between superpowers, namely the United States, Russia, and China. Many personnel are sent to study in these superpower nations, which willingly accept Thai students in hopes

of expanding their influence over the Thai military. Furthermore, the navy procures armaments from a diverse range of countries, from China to South Korea. This policy clearly demonstrates how the Thai government and armed forces utilize international competition to strengthen their own capabilities. To sum up, Thailand's military policy serves as an excellent example of a middle power seeking to maximize its strategic gains amidst global competition.

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