

การวิเคราะห์การจัดหายุทโธปกรณ์ทางทหารของไทยจากเกาหลีใต้: โอกาสและความท้าทาย An Analysis of Thailand's Military Equipment Procurement from South Korea: Opportunities and Challenges

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(Received: 19 May 2025; Revised: 18 June 2025; Accepted: 18 June 2025)

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยฉบับนี้ศึกษาการจัดซื้อยุทโธปกรณ์ทางทหารของประเทศไทยจากเกาหลีใต้ โดยมุ่งเน้นสองกรณีสำคัญ ได้แก่ เครื่องบินขับไล่และฝึก T-50TH Golden Eagle และเรือฟริเกตชุดเรือหลวงภูมิพลอดุลยเดช งานวิจัยนี้มุ่งเน้นศึกษาที่อิทธิพลของการจัดซื้อด้านกลาโหมที่มีต่อความสัมพันธ์ทวิภาคีระหว่างประเทศไทยกับเกาหลีใต้ งานวิจัยใช้ข้อมูลจากสมุดปกขาว งานเขียนวิเคราะห์ด้านความมั่นคง และข้อมูลเชิงคุณภาพจากแหล่งข้อมูลที่เชื่อถือได้ และนำข้อมูลมาประยุกต์ใช้ทฤษฎีการทูตโดยฝ่ายทหาร (Defense Diplomacy) และทฤษฎีแห่งดุลอำนาจ (Balance of Power) ผ่านเครื่องมือ SWOT เพื่อสำรวจประเด็นความร่วมมือสำคัญ เช่น การถ่ายทอดเทคโนโลยีทางทหาร การฝึกซ้อม และความร่วมมือด้านอุตสาหกรรม ทั้งนี้ยังพิจารณาถึงความท้าทายที่เกี่ยวข้อง เช่น ข้อจำกัดด้านงบประมาณ ปัญหาการใช้งานร่วมกันของระบบยุทโธปกรณ์ และการเปลี่ยนแปลงทางภูมิรัฐศาสตร์ ผลการศึกษาแสดงให้เห็นว่าความร่วมมือด้านกลาโหมระหว่างประเทศไทยกับเกาหลีใต้สะท้อนถึงความสัมพันธ์ทวิภาคีที่กำลังขยายตัว ซึ่งมีลักษณะของความร่วมมือในรูปแบบเชิงสถาบัน ความสอดคล้องทางยุทธศาสตร์ และการดำเนินงานทางทหารในเชิงปฏิบัติ แม้ว่าความร่วมมือนี้จะเผชิญกับความท้าทาย แต่ก็เปิดโอกาสอย่างมีนัยสำคัญในด้านการฝึกอบรม การพัฒนาทักษะ และการสนับสนุนทางเทคโนโลยี

คำสำคัญ : การจัดซื้อจัดจ้างยุทโธปกรณ์; เรือฟริเกตชุดเรือหลวงภูมิพลอดุลยเดช; เครื่องบินขับไล่และฝึก T-50TH Golden Eagle; ทฤษฎีดุลแห่งอำนาจ; ทฤษฎีการทูตโดยฝ่ายทหาร

Abstract

This research aimed to examine Thailand's strategic military equipment procurement from South Korea, focusing on two pivotal events: the procurement of the T-50TH Golden Eagle training aircraft and the HTMS Bhumibol Adulyadej frigate. The research investigated the key areas of cooperation and the challenges of military equipment procurement between Thailand and South Korea. Data were collected from white papers, defense analysis reports, and qualitative data from authoritative sources. The researchers then evaluated the application of defense diplomacy and the balance of power theory through SWOT analysis to explore key areas of collaboration—namely, defense technology transfer, joint training, and industrial partnerships—while also considering related challenges such as financial constraints, interoperability, and geopolitical changes. The results indicated that defense collaboration between Thailand and South Korea reflects an expanding bilateral relationship characterized by institutional engagement, strategic congruence, and pragmatic military cooperation. Although the cooperation faces challenges, it offered substantial opportunities in training, skill development, and technological support.

Keywords: Military Procurement; HTMS Bhumibol Adulyadej Frigate; T-50TH Golden Eagle; Balance of Power; Defense Diplomacy

Background

The strategic term “global arms trade” has become increasingly relevant in today’s polarized international environment, where major powers such as the United States, France, China, and Russia continue to dominate the global defense market. The United States dominates the share of global arms exporter in 2020-2024 with 43 percent. The market share of other arms exporter countries is only in the single digits. However, in recent years, South Korea has emerged as a significant player, ranking among the top ten arms exporters, with 2.2 percent market share globally, 4.9 percent change from 2015-2019 (Wezeman et al., 2024). South Korea’s defense equipment is often praised for combining advanced technology with cost-effectiveness, making it attractive to markets in Southeast Asia (Kim & Sim, 2023).

Thailand’s defense procurement has historically relied on a diverse set of suppliers, including the United States, China, Russia, and European countries. For example, the Royal Thai Navy has long used Chinese-built ships as existing in Second Frigate Squadron (Pape, 2020), while the Royal Thai Air Force previously relied on U.S., like F-16 and European-origin aircraft, such as JAS-39 Gripen from Sweden. This diversification has supported Thailand’s strategic autonomy but has also posed challenges in interoperability and long-term capability planning (Broad & Laksmana, 2023).

Parallel to this procurement strategy, Thailand and South Korea has shared a long-standing bilateral relationship that has expanded over 70 decades. Their diplomatic cooperation began during the Korean War, when Thailand was one of the first countries to send troops under the United Nations Command in order to support of South Korea. Since then, the two nations have enhanced their ties through frameworks such as ASEAN+3, Mekong–ROK Cooperation Fund, as well as ongoing economic partnerships, including the Thailand–South Korea Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA). In addition, South Korea has established several organizations in Thailand to foster bilateral relations in various sectors, including the Korea Tourism Organization (KTO), Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA), and the Korean Cultural Center (KCC), among others. South Korea is also considered one of Thailand’s top fifteen trading partners, with annual bilateral trade valued at around USD 14.7 billion in recent years (Bangkok Post, 2025).

In light of shifting regional dynamics, Thailand has increased interest in diversifying its defense procurement sources, especially as it seeks to modernize its aging fleets and enhance national capability. The HTMS Bhumibol Adulyadej, a DW3000F-class frigate is the only equipment from the Royal Thai Navy (RTN), acquiring from Daewoo Shipbuilding and Marine Engineering (DSME) in 2013 and delivered in 2018. This frigate represents a cornerstone of Thailand to modernize its naval fleet and to enhance maritime surveillance and defense readiness. Meanwhile, the Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) has procured 14 T-50TH Golden Eagle aircraft across multiple phases since 2015 from Korea Aerospace Industries (KAI). These aircraft serve both as advanced trainers and light combat platforms, replacing aging fleets and improving training standards. The procurement also included comprehensive training and maintenance with additional cooperation. Therefore, these procurements signify more than equipment upgrades. They reflect Thailand’s broader implication of bilateral relations between two nations, foster international cooperation, and build capacity for future defense industrial growth.

Objective

This research aimed to analyze Thailand’s defense procurement from South Korea by examining the key areas of defense cooperation and exploring challenges in partnership. Specifically, to investigate the broader context on defense diplomacy and balance of power by highlighting the significance of Thailand-South Korea relationship from the procurement. The research also aimed to identify challenges such as budgetary constraints, political factors, and other factors that hindered procurement. As the result, it assessed the understanding how Thailand-South Korea defense procurement has shaped both countries relationship.

Research Questions

1. What are the key areas of defense cooperation between Thailand and South Korea from procuring the military equipment?
2. What are the main challenges in defense procurement and cooperation between the two countries?

Theoretical Framework

Defense diplomacy refers to the strategic use of a nation's military capabilities to achieve specific national goals. Defense diplomacy transforms from conventional military relations to a more cohesive strategy that combines hard and soft power to tackle global security challenges. Defense diplomacy includes training cooperatively, soldier rotation, arms sales, peacekeeping activities, and higher military policy debates (Drab, 2018).

This theory highlights how Thailand's acquisition strengthens Thailand-South Korea security ties, fosters trust and long-term bilateral relations. Beyond military capability, it enhances naval cooperation, training exchanges, and technology transfer. Furthermore, it can highlight both opportunities and challenges from the procurement that Thailand has made with South Korea.

The balance of power (BoP) theory is generally understood as the fundamental international relations' theory. The theory is about the state that tries to protect its power by balancing among international system in order to ensure national survival and prevent domination by other nations (Haas, 1953).

Thailand's decision to procure military equipment from South Korea can be seen as part of a broader strategy to foster its military capability. From balance of power theory perspective, the procurement can be seen to serve to counterbalance regional powers and ensure that its military capability can defend against external threats.

Literature Review

The literature on South Korea's defense industry highlights a significant transition from dependence on the United States to be self-sufficiency and be export-driven sector (Chaebols). The reasons of South Korea's success are from strategic governmental policies, robust research and development, and the presence of huge conglomerates (Kwon, 2018). Despite these advancements, South Korea remains facing some constraints, including dependence on imported components and difficulties due to geopolitical issues, particularly regarding the US-China rivalry.

However, South Korea has initiated the Indo-Pacific policy, which facilitates enhanced security relationships and increases arms supply across several regions, particularly Southeast Asia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). The naval shipbuilding industry of South Korea clearly shows its capacity to present itself as a competitive arms provider by smart use of defense offsets (Jang & Park, 2023). This keeps gaining reputation in the worldwide arms market by aggressively supporting international defense shows and alliances.

In terms of Thailand's defense procurement, the documents indicate that Royal Thai Navy (RTN) and Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) shifted to focus to modernize their fleets (Royal Thai Navy, 2024; Royal Thai Air Force, 2023). However, the government has several challenges, including inadequate procurement policies, limited defense resources, and persistent reliance on foreign suppliers. In contrast to South Korea, Thailand has not succeeded robust domestic defense research and production capability. Consequently, this affects Thailand's ability to develop a self-sufficient defense sector. Numerous studies highlight the necessity to enhance governmental assistance, continuous investment in domestic research and development, and the implemented sustainable offset policies, to promote the local military sector (Thanyanan & Chittaladakorn, 2019; Punpayak et al., 2022; Defence Technology Analysis Department, 2020). One literature mentions the Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA) of South Korea as a potential model for Thailand because of its systematic and regulated procurement approach (Suntud, 2020). Therefore, DAPA may be Thailand's model to enhance strategic planning, local production capacities, and long-term sustainability for domestic defense sector. Finally, fostering collaboration between government agencies, private enterprises, and academic institutions is crucial for the sustainable development of Thailand's defense industry as well.

Although research on nations like Indonesia and Sweden provides insightful analyses of defense procurement and diplomacy, studies focusing on Thailand's defense collaboration with South Korea remain scarce. Indonesia's partnership with South Korea in joint ventures, like the KF-X/IF-X fighter program, exemplifies the strategic significance of bilateral cooperation and technology transfer. Nonetheless, this collaboration has encountered obstacles such as constrained resources and delayed programs (Isjchwansyah, 2024). In parallel, research on Swedish public procurement and defense industry emphasizes cost efficiency and regulatory adherence. The research focuses on domestic suppliers and budget constraints (Hellberg, 2023). These research cases provide useful insights into defense diplomacy and procurement strategies.

Nevertheless, there is a considerable gap in the literature concerning Thailand's defense procurement from South Korea. The literature review illustrates Thailand's overall military procurement challenges and analyzes South Korea's defense industry independently. There is a

gap in examining the specific bilateral procurement relationship between Thailand and South Korea. Therefore, this study aims to focus on opportunities and challenges by analyzing Thailand's defense procurement from South Korea, the frigate and the aircraft. The focus is placed on the key areas of cooperation, so as to identify opportunities, and explore challenges in this partnership. Furthermore, the research analyzed the strategic implications of this bilateral relations with the regional environment especially in order to understand the elements influencing Thailand-South Korea military equipment procurement. Finally, by highlighting the importance of Thailand-South Korea relations through the lens of defense procurement, this study seeks to elaborate on the larger background of defense diplomacy and balance of power context.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative content analysis combined with a SWOT analytical framework to examine opportunities and challenges from the procurement. The primary sources consist of official Thai defense documents, such as the Royal Thai Navy and Air Force white papers (2023–2024), procurement records from the Thai government and South Korean defense suppliers (e.g., DSME and KAI). The secondary sources consist of news articles regarding Thailand–South Korea defense relations, and so on. However, due to the confidentiality of military procurement and the inaccessibility of internal decision-making data, this study relies on open-source materials such as industry publications and government documents.

Furthermore, the SWOT framework allows to analyze strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, which is applied to assess Thailand's procurement strategy on two case studies: the HTMS Bhumibol Adulyadej frigate and the T-50TH Golden Eagle aircraft. This allows for a structured evaluation of internal and external factors that influence Thailand's defense cooperation with South Korea, particularly in the context of defense diplomacy and balance of power.

Research Result

The procurement of the HTMS Bhumibol Adulyadej frigate in 2013 by the Royal Thai Navy (RTN) was a landmark decision, which marks a departure from Thailand's previous reliance on Chinese-built frigates. The DW3000F-class frigate, built by Daewoo Shipbuilding and Marine Engineering (DSME), is designed to provide multi-role capabilities, including air defense, anti-submarine warfare, and anti-surface warfare (ThaiPublica, 2013; Eshel, 2013). The procurement of the HTMS Bhumibol Adulyadej frigate exemplifies Thailand's strategic initiative to enhance its naval capabilities and strengthen defense relations with South Korea. The procurement initiatives

included technology transfer, personnel training, and defense collaboration. Although, budgetary limitations and shifting priorities postpone Thailand in acquiring the second frigate. Diplomatic interactions and defense dialogues between Thailand and South Korea have persisted (Lee, 2022). Meanwhile, Thailand has the ongoing challenge with submarine procurement from China, which further complicated future RTN naval acquisitions. Therefore, the expert has suggested alternatives, including revising procurement orders while considering financial and strategic issues (Bamrungsuk, 2023).

The Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) began its procurement of the T-50TH Golden Eagle advanced trainer aircraft in 2015. This multi-role platform, developed by Korea Aerospace Industries (KAI) in partnership with Lockheed Martin, is selected to replace aging training aircraft L-39ZA/ART and enhance military operational readiness (Thairath Online, 2015). The procurement includes four phrases so as to expand the fleet up to 14 aircraft. The third phrase is not aircraft procurement, but is the T-50TH upgrades, which include advanced radar and countermeasure systems (BBC News Thai, 2018). Beyond procurement, Thailand-South Korea has strengthened defense ties through technology transfer, training, and industrial cooperation. Both countries also collaborate to establish a Maintenance, Repair and Overhaul (MRO) center in Thailand (Taithailand, 2023). The cooperation reflect that South Korea has a significant role as a defense partner, which also contributes to Thailand's long-term aviation and technological advancement. The T-50TH procurement lays a foundation for further cooperation between Thailand and South Korea in defense procurement and aerospace development.

South Korea has emerged as a highly attractive defense partner for Thailand, offering distinct advantages over traditional arms suppliers such as the United States and China. A primary benefit lies in the cost-effectiveness of South Korean platforms. Equipment from South Korea, like the T-50TH trainer aircraft and the HTMS Bhumibol Adulyadej frigate provide modern, has high-quality capabilities at lower prices when compared to Western alternatives (Park & Thakkar, 2024). South Korea is defined as second-tier suppliers. The first-tier suppliers, like U.S., focusing on highly advanced, position themselves often to more expensive and project power capabilities that may not be relevant for regional players (Park & Thakkar, 2024). The quality gap appears where the offerings of first-tier suppliers are either too far ahead of the technology curve or they neglect some platforms altogether which leaves defense needs in some nations unmet (Park & Thakkar, 2024). Therefore, the second-tier suppliers have the strength that are able to fill the quality gap in military equipment procurement.

South Korea also demonstrates a more responsive and collaborative approach. This includes a willingness for technology transfer and cooperation in upgrading Thailand's domestic defense industry, as noted by the discussion between Thai and South Korean defense ministers in 2024 (The Nation, 2024). This comprehensive package, combining superior value with robust equipment quality and flexible, long-term support, positions South Korea as a uniquely beneficial and preferred partner for Thailand's ongoing military modernization efforts. When Southeast Asian countries procure advanced military platforms from South Korea, it means they can avoid the domestic and geopolitical suggestion that they are taking sides in the competition between the United States and China (Broad & Laksmana, 2023).

Defense Diplomacy Aspects

Thailand's military equipment procurement from South Korea, particularly the HTMS Bhumibol Adulyadej frigate and the T-50TH trainer aircraft, has significantly strengthened defense diplomacy between the two nations. Nevertheless, this partnership extends beyond mere arms deals. This partnership has fostered deeper military cooperation, joint training programs, and military discussions that reinforce bilateral ties.

The collaboration in technology transfer between Korea Aerospace Industries (KAI) and Thai Aviation Industries (TAI) has culminated in the creation of a Maintenance, Repair, and Overhaul (MRO) center in Thailand, thereby augmenting the nation's defense capabilities and diminishing reliance on foreign entities (Taithailand, 2023). Similarly, in 2024, Thai and South Korean defense officials have discussed potential cooperation with the Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA) of South Korea (The Standard Team, 2024), which highlights Thailand's interest in modernizing its defense industry. This signals a growing recognition within Thailand of the need to develop domestic defense production capacity.

In terms of joint training and exercises, both T-50TH and the HTMS Bhumibol Adulyadej frigate have the training session for pilots and crews before commission (ThaiPublica, 2013). Acquiring military equipment also fosters closer military collaboration through joint training exercises. These training exchanges, therefore, enhance interoperability and foster professional military ties. The commission of the T-50TH aircraft in 2018 marked the beginning of an intensive training exchange program between the Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) and the Republic of Korea Air Force (ROKAF). This has significantly improved the proficiency of pilots operating the T-50TH aircraft (Thairath Online, 2015).

Regarding defense policy dialogue and high-level engagements, the year 2018 witnessed the commissioning of the T-50TH aircraft in 2018 was witnessed by the Ambassador of the Republic of Korea to Thailand, in conjunction with senior officials from the Royal Thai Air Force (Thairath Online, 2018). Furthermore, the acquisition of the HTMS Bhumibol Adulyadej frigate facilitates opportunities for naval collaboration, highlighted by the visit of the Commander of the Republic of Korea Marine Corps to the Royal Thai Navy in 2018 (Thairath Online, 2018). In 2021, the South Korean Defense Minister Suh Wook engaged in discussions with Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha regarding the enhancement of defense collaboration, which encompasses the prospective procurement of an additional frigate (Lee, 2022). In 2023, Thailand attended the meeting, ROK-United Nations Command (UNC) Member States Defense Ministerial Meeting. This meeting results in practical steps to enhance cooperation within the UNC. The dialogue in the meeting also includes agreement on things like sending staff to the UNC, participating in joint training with other nations, and setting up regular conversations to handle any future issues together (Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters, 2023; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand, 2024).

The historical basis of relations between Thailand and South Korea originated from military cooperation during the Korean War, which marked the beginning of defense collaboration in both nations. In 2025 Thai Army Day celebration in Seoul, the Thai ambassador characterized the bilateral relationship as durable, highlighting ongoing military collaboration, joint exercises, and collaborative defense industry development (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025). The repatriation of Thai veterans' remains from the Korean War was presented as a symbolic representation of the nations' established historical connections. However, when analyzing the long-term sustainability of this partnership, it is important to consider a key factor. The continued viability of the relationship depends on the ongoing identification and maintenance of shared strategic interests. This must go beyond a reliance on historical sentiment.

In terms of challenges in defense diplomacy aspects, there are financial and budgetary constraints. Thailand's limited defense budget clearly influences the scope and timetable of procurement projects. The delays in the acquisition of other defense equipment, such a sister ship to the HTMS Bhumibol Adulyadej, highlight the financial restrictions. Thailand has other financial objectives, like recovery from the epidemic and socioeconomic needs, which cause delays in procuring military equipment. However, even South Korea offers attractive options and favorable defense offset agreements, such as the offer of frigate 4000 from Hanwha (Rahmat, 2025). Thailand still faces challenges in mobilizing resources for large-scale. Hence, this creates

an uneven dynamic in the bilateral relationship, where strategic intentions may outpace actual implementation capacity.

Regarding the interoperability, possessing diverse platforms from different countries is still another challenge. The HTMS Bhumibol Adulyadej presents certain integration challenges within the existing Second Frigate Squadron of the Royal Thai Navy (RTN), which is largely composed of older Chinese-origin ships. These platforms significantly differ in terms of combat systems, communication protocols, and logistics support. So, integrating them into a cohesive naval command structure can cause some difficulties or it is impossible to do so. In term of sister ship, there is a possibility in acquiring a sister ship to the Bhumibol Adulyadej frigate, which is a part of standardize capabilities within the fleet intents. However, delays and uncertainty in procuring the sister ship from the same source further complicate efforts.

Balance of Power Aspects

The 2024 White Paper from the Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) highlights the growing regional geopolitics issues among major global powers such as the United States, China, and Russia. The current geopolitical issues have placed ASEAN countries in a challenging position. In response, the RTAF has positioned itself as a stabilizing force within the region, committed to preserving peace and freedom of navigation, especially in intense zone like the South China Sea. The T-50TH aircraft were procured to modernize the Royal Thai Air Force and to replaced outdated aircraft. The aircraft fulfill a wider geopolitical role by improving air defense and surveillance capabilities. This strategy also allows Thailand to monitor regional movements and maintain airspace sovereignty in an increasingly contested air and maritime environment.

Meanwhile, the HTMS Bhumibol Adulyadej is a contemporary multi-role frigate bought from South Korea. The broader narrative in Royal Thai Navy (RTN) White Paper 2023 highlights the frigate as a force multiplier that enhances Thailand's military ability to secure its maritime domain, patrol territorial waters, and deter aggression. These are the core functions among overlapping maritime claims, strategic competition, and geopolitical issues (Royal Thai Navy, 2024). The HTMS Bhumibol Adulyadej aligns to the RTN intention which is to enhance the Royal Thai Navy's capacity to respond to maritime incidents and maintain a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region.

The significant turmoil in this region is South China Sea dispute. Even though Thailand is not a direct claimant in the South China Sea dispute, it is strategically positioned as a nearby littoral state. Therefore, Thailand has the position with significant interest in regional maritime

stability, particularly in ensuring security. Freedom of navigation and the protection of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) are vital for Thailand's economic and security interests (Royal Thai Air Force, 2023). Hence, the fleets need to be modernized, which both South Korea-provided frigate and trainer aircraft allows Thailand to play a more active role in preserving peace in these contested waters without becoming entangled in direct confrontation.

As noted in the Royal Thai Navy (RTN) White Paper, maintaining a credible deterrence is crucial not only to protect Thailand's national interests, but also to signal that Thailand will not be outpaced militarily. Thailand's ongoing defense modernization also reflects a response to the escalating military spending and naval expansions that happened throughout Southeast Asia (Royal Thai Navy, 2024). The countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and notably China have considerably enhanced their maritime power. This atmosphere has developed a security dilemma, wherein states feel a pressing need to procure more sophisticated military systems simply to avoid a relative decline in their security standing.

In this context, Thailand's acquisition of a modern frigate and advanced aircraft can be counted as a strategy aimed at maintaining strategic balance. The RTN White Paper emphasizes that sustaining a credible deterrent capability is crucial for protecting Thailand's national interests and demonstrating the country's resolve against military challenges (Royal Thai Navy, 2024). This narrative exemplifies the established principle of balance of power, which ensures that one maintains adequate strength to deter coercion from more powerful entities while also contributing to overall regional stability.

However, there is challenges involves political and strategic decisions. The decisions are often shaped with the intention to balance between major powers, particularly the United States and China. So, cooperating with South Korea is also implicitly tied to Thailand's broader geopolitical hedging strategy.

In 2017, Thailand's then-Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha stated as much when announcing the acquisition of South Korean-made aircraft, remarking, "You can see that we are not tied to one particular country" (Reuters, 2017). Yet, Thailand rarely makes public statements about its desire to diversify defense suppliers as a form of strategic autonomy. Thailand's procurement behavior indicates effort to avoid over-dependence on any single power. The choice to procure from South Korea, a country viewed as geopolitically "neutral" in the U.S.-China rivalry, allows Thailand to modernize its forces without provoking concerns from either side. Therefore, acquiring military equipment from many sources can be considered as hedging strategy, which is one of the risk management forms (Wang, 2021). Hedging strategies can be useful in the context of geopolitical uncertainty. Given the current relative stability in Thailand's immediate security

environment, this hedging may appear overly cautious or inconsistent in strategic focus. Also, hedging strategies can cause issues with interoperability since equipment comes from different sources and platforms.

SWOT Analysis of Thailand's Defense Procurement from South Korea

This study applies a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) framework to provide a structured evaluation of Thailand's defense procurement strategy vis-à-vis South Korea. This analytical tool enables a systematic assessment of internal and external factors influencing bilateral cooperation, especially in the case of the procurement of the T-50TH Golden Eagle aircraft and the HTMS Bhumibol Adulyadej frigate.

Table 1 SWOT Analysis of Thailand's Defense Procurement from South Korea

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Strategic Alignment and Institutionalized Cooperation The two countries share longstanding diplomatic and security ties, dating back to the Korean War. These ties have evolved into formalized defense diplomacy, encompassing joint training, high-level military exchanges, and defense policy dialogues. Technologically Advanced and Cost-Effective Platforms South Korea provides modern defense systems at competitive prices. The T-50TH and the DW3000F-class frigate meet Thailand's requirements for performance, reliability, and affordability, making them attractive procurement choices. Technology Transfer and Industrial Collaboration Defense deals have incorporated provisions for knowledge and 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Budgetary Constraints Thailand's limited defense budget has delayed the acquisition of additional assets, such as a second frigate. Competing domestic priorities further constrain fiscal allocations to defense. Fragmented Procurement Strategy The diversity of Thailand's suppliers, including the United States, China, and European states, creates challenges in system integration and interoperability, particularly in naval platforms where older Chinese systems are still in use. Insufficient Domestic Industrial Capacity While agreements often mention technology transfer, the absorptive capacity of Thailand's domestic defense industry remains limited. This

<p>technology transfer. The establishment of a Maintenance, Repair, and Overhaul (MRO) center in partnership with Korea Aerospace Industries (KAI) and Thai Aviation Industries (TAI) represents a tangible outcome of industrial cooperation.</p> <p>4. Operational Interoperability with Western Allies</p> <p>The T-50TH platform, co-developed by KAI and Lockheed Martin, enhances interoperability with other Western-standard systems, supporting Thailand's multi-vector defense posture.</p>	<p>reduces the long-term impact of cooperative ventures.</p> <p>4. Procurement Bureaucracy and Political Sensitivity</p> <p>The decision-making process in defense procurement is often influenced by shifting political considerations, leading to delays, inconsistency, and a lack of strategic coherence.</p>
Opportunities	Threats
<p>1. Diversification and Strategic Hedging</p> <p>South Korea serves as a viable alternative to traditional suppliers, enabling Thailand to pursue a hedging strategy that balances relations with major powers while avoiding over-dependence on any single source.</p> <p>2. Industrial and Technological Development</p> <p>The partnership opens avenues for enhanced industrial collaboration, including co-development projects, and expanded MRO services, which can contribute to the growth of Thailand's domestic defense ecosystem.</p> <p>3. Human Capital and Capacity Building</p> <p>The transfer of technical expertise and the implementation of joint training</p>	<p>1. Geopolitical Risks of Hedging Strategy</p> <p>Engaging multiple defense partners, including South Korea, requires careful diplomatic management, especially amid intensifying U.S.-China rivalry. Missteps may lead to political tension or reduced strategic leverage.</p> <p>2. Economic Vulnerability</p> <p>External shocks, such as pandemics or economic downturns, could restrict future defense budgets and delay planned procurements or cooperative initiatives.</p> <p>3. Technology Dependence</p> <p>There is the risk of continuing reliance on foreign suppliers, including South Korea, without parallel development of domestic defense capabilities. Depending only on foreign suppliers</p>

<p>programs strengthen human resource development within Thailand's armed forces, promoting operational readiness and professionalism.</p> <p>4. Alignment with National Modernization Goals</p> <p>The procurement aligns with the Royal Thai Navy and Royal Thai Air Force modernization plans, which emphasize enhanced deterrent capabilities and strategic flexibility in a complex regional security environment.</p>	<p>can also pose a long-term threat to Thailand's strategic autonomy and may result in over-dependence on a single partner.</p>
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Conclusion

Focusing on two significant procurement cases—the HTMS Bhumibol Adulyadej frigate and the T-50TH Golden Eagle aircraft—this paper has investigated the key areas and challenges of defense cooperation between Thailand and South Korea. The results of the first research question show that defense cooperation between the two nations goes beyond merely procurement, to encompass technological transfer, combined training, and industrial cooperation. Thailand and South Korea have strengthened military cooperation and improved fleets capabilities. As a result, regular defense dialogues and the implementation of a Maintenance, Repair, and Overhaul (MRO) center show initiatives toward long-term strategic alliances.

Regarding the second research question, budgetary constraints, interoperability issues, and the complex geopolitical scenario of Thailand offer the main challenges in defense procurement and cooperation. Even though South Korea has attractive present with acceptable prices, financial constraints have delayed future acquisitions including the second frigate. Possessing equipment from different sources affects interoperability. As most of the frigates originates from China, only HTMS Bhumibol Adulyadej frigate originates from South Korea. However, this issue is explained as a hedging strategy, which mitigates the risk of excessive dependence on single power.

While defense cooperation between Thailand and South Korea has achieved considerable strides, sustainability of this type calls for stronger strategic alignment, better financial planning, and more coordination between long-term national security goal. By continuous cooperation, both nations may raise mutual interests and support regional stability, thereby promoting both.

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