

## FDI Feature Interview

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### **'The Objective I Have for the Army is to be Able to Confront the Full Spectrum of Threats': General Teeravat Boonyapradub**

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#### **Key Points**

- The Royal Thai Army is modernising its weapons systems and equipment in preparation for a number of potential future contingencies ranging from conventional to irregular threats.
- Presently, Thailand appears to be more concerned about its restive Islamic population in the south of the country, than with the continuation of border tensions with Cambodia.

#### **Feature**

The Royal Thai Army, one of South-East Asia's oldest armies, is currently in the midst of reassessing its numerical strength while it continues to implement its modernisation agenda, which focuses on re-equipping its combat units to maintain a high-level of readiness for a range of contingencies that may emerge.

#### **Commentary**

According to **General Teeravat Boonyapradub**, the Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army, the modernisation plan is in line with the army's vision to sustain capabilities in full-spectrum operations. 'I want to see the Thai Army become an adaptive army in order to confront all kinds of situations, non-traditional or traditional. The objective I have for the army is to be able to confront the full-spectrum of threats,' he said.

'If we want to have a good level of defence we would prefer to be allocated over two per cent of Thailand's GDP. In 1997 during the Asian financial crisis, the defence budget was cut very low, down to 1.2 per cent of GDP. However, recently the economic situation has improved and we have received a larger budget that is around 1.4 per cent of Thailand's GDP.'

The increase in defence spending has also seen the Royal Thai Army move to reassess its numerical strength with a view towards expansion. He further explained, 'We are assessing what the right size of the army should be. In order to define the right size, we have to look at our threats. Ideally in each regional command we should have at least two divisions, as right now some regional commands have only one division and others have two.'

Conversely, the centrepiece of the army's modernisation emphasises the replacement of weapons, vehicles and aviation assets. 'In terms of procurement recently we have bought new infantry weapons, armoured vehicles and Black Hawk helicopters. The reason that we are looking to use new equipment is that the weapons we are currently using are quite old and we want to replace them. We cannot replace the whole army at once with new weapons and equipment, but we have given priority to the combat units first, and after that, we can look at re-equipping the combat support units,' he said.

'The infantry weapons we have purchased include the Israeli-manufactured TAR-21 assault rifle and the US made M4 carbine. The size of the rifle from Israel is quite compact and very handy for soldiers operating in urban areas. Although the Army's Special Forces units use a variety of weapons, the TAR-21 from Israel will also be given to them. We still stick with the M-16 as the standard weapon for the Royal Thai Army, but we are looking to replace them with the newer M4 carbine. The armoured personal carrier vehicle that we are talking about is the Ukrainian BTR-3E1.

'We also procure small quantities of assault rifle and RPG ammunition from China. As China is our neighbour in Asia we of course co-operate on defence matters,' Gen Boonyapradub said. 'Starting with education and training, we send military personnel on exchange and we also have combined exercises at the small unit level between both armies.'

While Thailand's border regions remain relatively stable, even in the wake of the recent border skirmishes between Thai and Cambodian troops, General Boonyapradub emphasises that the army's modernisation has little to do with considerations of external threats to Thailand. 'Despite whatever happened between the two countries, the relationship remains the same. It has not turned sour,' the general explained. 'At the government level they still talk, the militaries talk and regional military units still talk. We are in contact. We are not concerned about the modernisation of the Cambodian Army,' he said. 'We believe that a conventional war is unlikely to occur in the region within the next ten years,' he added.

However, the prevalence of radical Islamist groups in Thailand's restive south continues to dominate security concerns for the future. 'Right now our main concern internally is with the situation down south. In southern Thailand the role of the Thai Army is to provide security and we believe winning hearts and minds is the key for success in counterinsurgency.' He added, 'The success of the operation is to win the hearts and minds of the local people by providing education, employment and economic upliftment. From our assessment the number of incidents has reduced significantly to date. We have started to get more and more information as people turn to the military and trust the military more than they did before,' he said.

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