

“Thailand’s Foreign Policy Does Not Exist”

Windy Times Call for Better Roots, Not Just More Bending

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Abstract

Thailand’s foreign policy has garnered numerous descriptions, often highlighting its adaptability. However, as time has passed and as governments of varying ideologies, ranging from military to civilian, progressive to conservative, have assumed leadership, flexibility has evolved into both an obsession and an apparent justification for blatant opportunism. The prioritization of bending has overshadowed any discernible substance in Thai foreign policy.

Thailand’s foreign policy has received numerous descriptions, often emphasizing its adaptability. Notably, Thai foreign policy has been likened to “bamboo in the wind”; always solidly rooted, but flexible enough to bend whichever way the wind blows in order to survive.”¹

However, as time has progressed and governments of varying ideologies, from military to civilian, progressive to conservative, have taken the helm, flexibility has transformed into a fetish and an excuse for blatant opportunism. Bending has supplanted any discernible substance in Thai foreign policy. It is as if Thai foreign policy actors—politicians, bureaucrats, and diplomats alike—have overlooked the other facet of this aphorism: bamboo is to be emulated not just because it bends but also because it remains well-rooted. Without such anchoring, bamboo may sway and bend, but it does so without purpose.

I contend that Thailand lacks a foreign policy, be it flexible or otherwise. Instead, it engages in international activities that are, at best, purposeless and, at worst, rooted in regime survival rather than national interest. Thai foreign policy has severed its roots, and it’s imperative to reclaim them. This will be a challenging process that hinges on generating and applying ideas and beliefs to ground Thai foreign policy. However, it remains unclear whether this is presently attainable, as the long-anticipated “sea change” in Thai politics, glimpsed during the 2023

¹ Arne Kislenko, “Bending with the Wind: The Continuity and Flexibility of Thai Foreign Policy,” *International Journal* 57, no. 4 (2002): 537–61, <https://doi.org/>.

elections but frustratingly concealed in subsequent government formation, tragically illustrates.²

Critiquing Bangkok for its absence of foreign policy is not to suggest its uniqueness in this regard.³ Nor is it to assert that they bear sole responsibility: the geopolitical pressures from both Washington and Beijing are tangible and may necessitate hedging as a method of adaptation, if not outright coping. Nevertheless, Thailand traditionally perceives itself not as a ‘small power’ devoid of agency, helpless in the face of tumultuous forces. Somewhat immodestly, Prasanth Parameswaran points out, “Thailand is just outside of the top 20 populous countries in the world. It’s the second largest economy in Southeast Asia, and it’s one of just five U.S. treaty alliances in Asia as we’re talking about this dynamic of US-China competition. So it’s an extremely significant country.”⁴ While this may hold true, it remains challenging to pinpoint a foreign policy that corresponds to such significance.

Outside, But Looking In

As Hubert H. Humphrey intoned, “foreign policy is really domestic policy with its hat on.” Nevertheless, for nations possessing a degree of agency, foreign policy adorns its hat to venture into the world, transcending parochial confines to influence the global landscape nested within the domestic sphere. Therefore, I echo the call made by Anthony Abuza for Thailand to formulate a set of “pro-active, Thai-driven, and forward-facing policies [that Thailand would be] prepared to discuss, defend, and promote.”⁵

However, it is essential to scrutinize Thailand’s recent foreign policy record. Without exaggeration, it can be affirmed that Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai’s “tenure [2015–2023] has been marked by a conservative and defensive posture rather than one of enterprise or ambition.”⁶ Nonetheless, attributing the current state of Thai foreign policy solely to Don’s leadership falls short. As Arin Chin-

² For an explanation of what took place following the 2023 election, see Shawn W. Crispin, “Thailand: Pita’s Loss Is Thaksin’s Gain,” *Asia Times*, 13 July 2023, <http://asiatimes.com/>.

³ See, for example, my argument that Canada’s foreign policy regarding Asia is similarly pliable without a clear direction. Christopher Ankersen, “Canada’s Future in the Indo-Pacific Is Plastic,” in *A Changing International Order? Implications for the Security Environment*, ed. William G. Braun III, Stéfanie von Hlatky, and Kim Richard Nossal (Kingston: Kingston Conference on International Security, 2020): 115–23.

⁴ Mark Leon Goldberg, “A Political Earthquake in Thailand and What Comes Next for Thai Foreign Policy,” *UN Dispatch*, 15 June 2023, <https://undispatch.com/>.

⁵ Benjamin Zawacki, “An Absence Felt: Thai Foreign Policy’s Decade of Retrenchment,” *New Mandala* (blog), 6 September 2021, <https://www.newmandala.org/>.

⁶ Zawacki, “An Absence Felt.”

nasathian and Karen Lee underscore, "under [Prime Minister] Prayuth [Chan-ocha], foreign policy has not been the government's priority." Indeed, Chan-ocha has been "much less active abroad than his regional counterparts."⁷ Consequently, the net result is that "almost nine years under Prayuth has caused Thailand to 'disappear from the world stage.'"⁸

While this assessment is accurate, it's noteworthy that Thailand's retreat from the global stage did not commence in 2014. Writing in 2006, Thitinan Pongsudhirak warned, in the aftermath of another coup, that "Until recently, Thai foreign policy was renowned for its highly effective flexibility and pragmatism. . . . Overwhelmed by domestic concerns, Thailand is likely to be out of action in a number of foreign policy areas, while its engagement may appear tentative and haphazard."⁹

Thitinan presciently foresaw the trajectory of Thai foreign policy for the following 17 years and identified its root cause: domestic concerns. "Thailand's famously pragmatic path has become increasingly patchy, captive to a wrenching political maelstrom at home. Until its political drama reaches a conclusion—which will include the royal succession and its aftermath—Thailand's foreign policy is likely to appear inert, makeshift and downright murky."¹⁰ This was especially evident following the 2014 coup, executed with the understanding that King Rama IX's health was precarious. The junta prioritized its own political survival as the *sine qua non* of Thai foreign policy.¹¹ An observer succinctly summarizes the situation: "Since the military coup in May 2014 that ousted democratically elected Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has used substantial resources in defending the image of the Thai junta that ruled until 2019 rather than protecting and advancing Thailand's national interests on the global stage."¹²

⁷ Arin Chinnasathian and Karen Lee, "Thai Election Look-Ahead: How the Kingdom's Foreign Policy May Change," *New Perspectives on Asia* (blog), 5 April 2023, <https://www.csis.org/>.

⁸ Current Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin, cited in Chinnasathian and Lee "Thai Election Look-Ahead."

⁹ Thitinan Pongsudhirak, "Battle Between Continuity and Change: Thailand's Topsy-Turvy Foreign Policy Directions," *Global Asia*, September 2009, <https://www.globalasia.org/>.

¹⁰ Pongsudhirak, "Battle Between Continuity and Change."

¹¹ The domestic imperative has often been overlooked in international relations scholarship. I agree with Murphy when she says, "Scholars and policymakers alike have engaged in extensive debates over whether Southeast Asian countries are balancing against China, bandwagoning with China, or attempting to hedge their bets. Missing from many of these studies of small state responses to structural changes in their external environment, however, is an examination of how domestic politics influences the strategic choices of Southeast Asian states." Ann Marie Murphy, "Great Power Rivalries, Domestic Politics and Southeast Asian Foreign Policy: Exploring the Linkages," *Asian Security* 13, no. 3 (2017): 165–82, <https://doi.org/>.

¹² Zachary Abuza, "America Should Be Realistic About Its Alliance with Thailand," *War on the Rocks*, 2 January 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

Moreover, this preoccupation with domestic legitimacy has exacerbated the traditional hedging strategy at the core of Thai foreign policy. “The current military government . . . likely to prioritize its own domestic political legitimacy over relations with either [China or the United States] and will take advantage of the Sino-U.S. competition however best suits its own regime survival.”¹³ Some argue that Bangkok has taken its hedging too far, transitioning from hedging to bandwagoning, leading to the assertion that “the U.S.-Thai alliance has simply become an empty vessel.”¹⁴ This shift is not driven by ideological affinity but rather by more pragmatic considerations. “The Thai government wants what China has put on offer—artificial intelligence, internet controls, and surveillance technology for social control. China has exported its artificial intelligence-powered system of public surveillance, referred to as ‘Smart Cities,’ to the paranoid Thai regime.”¹⁵ This is far from bending in the wind. Instead, it is a deliberate strategy aimed at avoiding US criticism and consolidating authoritarian governance. As former foreign minister Kasit Piromya elucidated in 2015, “Our foreign policy really is swinging to China and Russia, given the fact that Western countries are putting pressure on us for the return to a fully democratic regime. This is a matter of choice that is reflected through [our foreign policy]. Thailand is currently behaving like a child, which is a graceless act.”¹⁶

Delving into this statement in detail reveals an intriguing dimension of the ‘blowing in the wind’ aspect of Thai foreign policy. The characterization of Bangkok’s preference for China and Russia as a “matter of choice,” as Moch Faisal Karim does, is uncommon.¹⁷ All too often, it is *the wind* that is held responsible for such shifts. Some observers, like Abuza, argue that this passive aspect of the ‘bending with the wind’ metaphor makes it less than satisfactory: “bamboo trees do not of their own accord sway in anticipation of a wind; rather they are swayed by that wind—often suddenly, swiftly, and in directions they would not have chosen had they had the agency to choose at all.”¹⁸ Veteran diplomat Tej Bunnag seeks to

¹³ Enze Han, “Entrenching Authoritarian Rule and Thailand’s Foreign Policy Dilemma as a Middle Power,” *Asia Policy* 29, no. 4 (2022): 181–98.

¹⁴ Benjamin Zawacki, “Thai Elections Won’t Shift Bangkok’s Drift Toward China,” *Foreign Policy*, 12 May 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>.

¹⁵ Abuza, “America Should Be Realistic About Its Alliance with Thailand.”

¹⁶ “Everything Starts at Home’ If We Want Foreign Policy to Regain Dynamism,” *The Nation* (Thailand), 3 August 2015, <https://www.nationthailand.com/>.

¹⁷ Moch Faisal Karim and Tangguh Chairil, “Waiting for Hard Balancing?: Explaining Southeast Asia’s Balancing Behaviour towards China,” *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 15, no. 1 (2016): 34–61, <https://www.jstor.org/>; and I Gede Wahyu Wicaksana and Moch Faisal Karim, “How regional organisation survives: ASEAN, hedging and international society,” *Contemporary Politics* 29, no. 5 (2023): 659–79, <https://doi.org/>.

¹⁸ Abuza, “America Should Be Realistic About Its Alliance with Thailand.”

dispel the recent portrayal of Thai foreign policy as passive when he states, “Thai diplomacy bends BEFORE the wind, not just WITH the wind. The difference between the two prepositions is very important, before or with. In other words, good diplomacy is pro-active and not reactive. You have to see where the wind is blowing in order to keep safe and survive in a dangerous and difficult world.”¹⁹ Jittapat Poonkam contends that the passive portrayal is problematic because it does not allow for a forward-looking strategy: “The bamboo diplomacy narrative stresses continuity and tradition in foreign policy. It does not anticipate moments of change and rupture in the history of Thai diplomacy.”²⁰

This concern regarding agency uncovers an intriguing facet of Thai foreign policy discourse. I assert that there is a highly convenient ambiguity embedded in the bamboo analogy: when it serves its purpose, Thailand is inclined to present itself as merely responding helplessly to structural forces. After all, Bangkok cannot reasonably be held responsible for actions it was powerless to oppose. As Anthony Giddens has emphasized, agency is not so much the capacity to act as it is the ability to “act otherwise” in the face of social forces.²¹ Within Thailand, some readily employ the bamboo image either to deflect blame or to claim credit, depending on the circumstances: “the bending-with-the-wind method could be metaphorically equated with the panacea because it perfectly and legitimately conforms to everything Thailand has played in an international sphere. As such, disproving it becomes superficially improbable.”²²

Setting this aside, and returning to the earlier emphasis on domestic primacy, it’s worth noting that Thai elites, composed of the military, the bureaucracy, the judiciary, and business leaders, which Duncan McCargo has termed the *network monarchy*, heavily depend on the normative authority provided by the monarch himself. It is not particularly surprising, then, that a significant portion of domestic policy efforts aimed at regime survival focused on bolstering the revered image of the monarch.²³ What is astonishing, however, is the extent to which this element extended into Thai foreign policy. Various official websites of the Thai Ministry of

¹⁹ Tej Bunnag and Anuson Chinvanho, *Thai Diplomacy: In Conversation with Tej Bunnag* (Bangkok: International Studies Center, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021).

²⁰ Jittapat Poonkam, “The Bamboo Breaks: Thailand’s Diplomatic Challenge,” *Asialink*, 9 September 2021, <https://asialink.unimelb.edu.au/>.

²¹ Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis*, 1st ed. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 1979), <https://doi.org/>.

²² Peera Charoenvattananukul, “Rethinking Approaches to the Study of Thai Foreign Policy Behaviours,” *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, 26 February 2017, <https://kyotoreview.org/>.

²³ For further discussion of the sacred in Thai social and political life, see Christine Gray, “Thailand—The Soteriological State in the 1970s” (PhD thesis, Chicago, 1986), 241–9. For an examination of how Thai elites leverage that sacredness in the latter stages of the Rama IX era, see Christopher Ankersen “Culture in Action:

Foreign Affairs featured a version of a 2019 Policy Statement delivered by the prime minister to the National Legislative Assembly, which included, among other priorities, the following two points: (1) protecting *and* upholding the monarchy and (2) maintaining national security and foreign affairs.²⁴

As astonishing as it may appear, there are assertions that the foreign ministry might have gone beyond mere internet postings. There are indications that in various parts of the world, including the United Kingdom and Japan, members of Thai embassy staff, whether directly or indirectly, could have been involved in incidents of harassment, assault, and extradition requests targeting expatriate Thais viewed as anti-royalist.²⁵

Furthermore, Thailand has faced criticism for its lackluster diplomatic efforts in addressing the political violence in Myanmar or supporting its Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) neighbors in their claims within the South China Sea. Perhaps the most significant disappointment, not only from the perspective of the United States but also in the eyes of observers globally, was Thailand's abstention at the UN General Assembly vote on a resolution upholding Ukrainian sovereignty in response to Russia's 2022 invasion. This put Thailand at odds with its neighbors: "The majority of ASEAN member countries—where Thailand has often insisted on the regional organization's harmony and resilience time and again—actually voted for the resolution."²⁶ The collective impact of these developments is that "Thailand has diminished in global diplomatic importance. Whatever diplomatic capital the country may have had, it was used to explain why the coup happened and then when the elections would be held."²⁷

"It Is Crucial to Think about Our Illustrious Diplomatic Record"²⁸

It was not always this way. Even if characterized by pragmatic bending, some believe there was a time when Thai foreign policy was firmly grounded in ideas. In

The Case of Contemporary Thai Politics," in *Religion And Politics In Southeast Asia*, ed. Amy Freeman (New York: Pace University Press, 2020), 23–44.

²⁴ "Thai Foreign Policies" (press release, Royal Thai Consulate-General, Dubai, United Arab Emirates, 12 January 2018, <https://dubai.thaiembassy.org/>).

²⁵ "OAG Asked to Indict in 'London Rose,'" *Bangkok Post*, 21 July 2014, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>; Pavin Chachavalongpun, "Opinion | My Attacker Has Been Jailed. But Who Was Pulling the Strings?," *Washington Post*, 10 June 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

²⁶ Kasira Cheepensook, "Diplomatic Balancing in the Quagmire: Thailand's Foreign Policy among Great Powers," *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, 8 November 2022, <https://th.boell.org/>.

²⁷ Thai PBS, "Thai Foreign Policy at a Low Point, Experts Say," *The Irrawaddy* (blog), 26 October 2021, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/>.

²⁸ "Everything Starts at Home," *The Nation* (Thailand).

the late 1990s and early 2000s, across “four foreign ministers [and] three Thai premierships that had very little regard for one other and [who] did not share a common vision for Thailand in the region, but common among them was that each had such a vision—encapsulated, articulated, and pursued.”²⁹ Past eras of Thai foreign policy were undoubtedly marked by ambition, even if that ambition was not always realized or realistic. Consider, for example, a speech by then-Foreign Minister Siddhi Savetsila in which he spoke of an “omnipresent, omnidirectional foreign policy.”³⁰

Regardless, Thailand was well-regarded, in part due to its thoughtful stance and professional diplomatic practice. In 2002, Arne Kislenko credibly claimed that “At a regional level, the Thais have exercised a foreign policy blend of prudence, pragmatism, and cynical opportunism. . . . Thailand has . . . emerged in the 21st century as a considerable regional power. . . . Thailand remains a pivotal player in Southeast Asia.”³¹

Few share that perspective today. Sihasak Phuangketkeow, a former permanent secretary for foreign affairs, expressed a rather dismal assessment of the current state of Thai foreign affairs when he said, “My concern is whether we have limited ourselves with neither a position nor a strategy.”³² Kiat Sittheeamorn, a Democratic Party of Thailand member of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, was equally pessimistic: “We found that we don’t have a clear foreign policy strategy and have to redefine what our interests are. The world has changed a lot and we have become unusually silent.”³³

So, what can be done? The initial optimism following the 2023 elections led many to believe that change was on the horizon. Move Forward Party election winner Pita Limjaroenrat expressed his “objective [was] to see Thailand up the ante in external relations.” There were speculations that he would even act as his own foreign minister.³⁴

Now that Pita’s chances of assuming any government role have been dashed, attention has turned to Pheu Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin. Two things are clear: first, Srettha’s primary foreign policy objectives will be economic rather

²⁹ Zawacki, “An Absence Felt.”

³⁰ Eric Teo Chu Cheow, “New Omnidirectional Overtures in Thai Foreign Policy,” *Asian Survey* 26, no. 7 (1986): 745–58, <https://doi.org/>.

³¹ Kislenko, “Bending with the Wind.”

³² Quoted in: Thai PBS, “Thai Foreign Policy at a Low Point, Expert Says,” *The Irrawaddy*, 26 October 2021, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/>.

³³ Thai PBS, “Thai Foreign Policy at a Low Point, Experts Say.”

³⁴ Kavi Chongkittavorn, “Imagining Thai Diplomacy under MFP,” *Bangkok Post*, 30 May 2023, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

than geopolitical.³⁵ Second, this suggests we can expect to witness more bending in the wind: “Srettha stressed foreign policy would be neutral and not take sides with the United States and China, adding that Japan was a major power that Thailand was committed to, given its long history as the country’s top investor.”³⁶ As one commentator remarked during the election campaign, “Srettha’s pragmatic and specific manifesto, [does not] reveal a clear vision for Thai foreign policy.”³⁷

Perhaps this is the best that can be expected. Pheu Thai has had to make serious concessions with the military to take up the government and facilitate the return of exiled former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.³⁸ Indeed, the recent *lèse-majesté* conviction of a prominent human rights lawyer is a reminder that this election does not signal a complete break with the past. Such continuity may be in the cards for Thai foreign policy as well. As Kavi Chongkittavorn notes, “it is likely the current foreign policy as outlined under the 20-year National Strategy will continue as it has served the national interest well given the day-to-day circumstances and constraints.”³⁹ It may well be that there are many more years of rootless bamboo bending to come. If that is the case, it will mean that Thailand will continue to lack a foreign policy worthy of the name. 🌿

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³⁵ “Will New Foreign Policy Tilt Away from China towards the West?,” *Thai PBS World*, 8 September 2023, <https://www.thaipbsworld.com/>.

³⁶ “Thailand’s New PM Seeks FTA Expansion to Lure Major Foreign Investors,” *Reuters*, 28 September 2023, <https://www.usnews.com/>.

³⁷ Sek Sophal, “Whatever the Outcome of Its Election, Thailand’s Foreign Policy Needs a Reset,” 5 May 2023, *The Diplomat*, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

³⁸ Rebecca Ratcliffe, “Thai Party of Thaksin Shinawatra Strikes Deal with Ex-Military Rivals,” *The Guardian*, 21 August 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

³⁹ Chongkittavorn, “Imagining Thai Diplomacy under MFP.”