

Thailand's Indo-Pacific Adrift?

A Reluctant Realignment with the United States and China

DR. JITTIPAT POONKHAM

Abstract

China's assertive rise triggers existential and discursive anxieties in the Indo-Pacific since 2017. The US rebalances, using strategies like institutional balancing (minilateralism) and discursive balancing (free and open Indo-Pacific). Thailand, a long-time US ally, hesitates to counterbalance China. Post-2014 coup, Thailand's military junta aligned with China due to necessity, persisting post-2019 elections. This article reevaluates Thai foreign policy under Prayut Chan-ocha, suggesting default hedging, not strategic hedging. Various agencies pursue diplomacy without a coherent strategy. The article unfolds in three parts. First, it examines Thailand's reluctance to embrace the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy, stemming from differing threat perceptions and bureaucratic politics. It then discusses Thailand's absence of a comprehensive Indo-Pacific narrative and its default hedging via military, economic, and ideational aspects. The article concludes by exploring the post-Prayut era's impact on Thai foreign policy.

China's assertive rise—indeed a global power transition—has triggered and exacerbated deep-seated existential and discursive anxieties across the expansive Indo-Pacific region, most notably within the United States. Since 2017, the United States has rebalanced in this region through a series of strategies to counterbalance China, including discursive and institutional balancing. The new discourse, “free and open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP), represents a form of discursive balancing, integrated into the discourse level. At the same time, the United States has reinvigorated minilateralism as a new strategy of institutional balancing through key mechanisms like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the Australia–United Kingdom–United States (AUKUS) trilateral partnership.

At the periphery of international society, Thailand, in the past decade, exhibited ambivalence as an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) actor in discursive balancing or counterbalancing concerning the Indo-Pacific. Despite its long-standing alliance with the US, Thailand hesitated to counterbalance China. While the Prayut Chan-ocha government engaged in the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) and sporadically cooperated with various US-led Indo-Pacific military frameworks, it maintained a relatively detached stance in Sino–US strategic rivalry to prevent alliance entrapment, safeguarding its burgeon-

ing economic interests with Beijing. Discursively, Bangkok did not clearly develop its own Indo-Pacific version, following the Indonesia-led *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific* (AOIP), which emphasized inclusive regional cooperation over great-power competition.

This article reevaluates Thai foreign policy under Prayut Chan-ocha, contending that the Prayut regime adopted a default hedging approach, rather than a strategic one. Thailand, as a bureaucratic state during this period (2014–2023), allowed different governmental agencies to pursue diplomacy independently, lacking a cohesive and comprehensive strategy.

The article comprises three main sections. The first elucidates why and how Thailand displayed reluctance to engage with the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy and to counterbalance China. This reluctance stems from the default hedging approach, resulting from varying threat perceptions and internal bureaucratic politics. In practice, Thailand aligned with China out of necessity, rather than choice. Structural constraints following the 2014 coup intensified the Sino-Thai strategic partnership. Realignment did not occur even after the 2019 national elections, as Thailand does not perceive China as a strategic competitor, let alone a security threat.

Subsequently, the article explains why Thailand has not developed its own strategic Indo-Pacific narrative and examines its default hedging through three examples: military (Indo-Pacific Conference of Defense Chiefs), economic (IPEF), and ideational explorations (AOIP). The argument posits that Thailand under Prayut merely reacted to the evolving Indo-Pacific narrative. In conclusion, the article explores the future of Thai foreign policy in the post-Prayut era.

Thai Foreign Policy: Hedging by Default?

I have argued elsewhere that Thai foreign policy over the past nine years or so was *hedging by default*.¹ Traditionally, Thailand's foreign policy is commonly described as “bamboo,” bending to the changing winds of geopolitics. This flexible and pragmatic diplomacy, as the story goes, has historically aided the country's survival.²

It comes as no surprise that, even in today's era of intense geopolitical competition, Thai leaders assert that the country can maintain its relatively neutral stance and refrain from taking sides. Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha has stated that

¹ Jittipat Poonkham, “Thailand's Foreign Policy: Hedging by Default?” *RSIS Commentary*, No. 38 (15 March 2023); and Jittipat Poonkham, “Thailand's Bamboo Diplomacy in the Age of Geopolitical Rivalry: Bending or Gone with the Wind?” in *CSCAP Regional Security Outlook 2023* (Canberra: Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), 2023), 43–46.

² For a critique of the bamboo diplomacy narrative, see Jittipat Poonkham, *A Genealogy of Bamboo Diplomacy: The Politics of Thai Détente with Russia and China* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2022).

since the 2019 election, Thailand has successfully maintained good relations with all nations and played constructive roles on the international stage. However, its Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) chairmanship in November 2022 witnessed the absence of key global players like Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin.

In practice, Prayut's interpretation of bamboo diplomacy presented a misleading portrayal, constraining Thailand's strategic posture. Three significant reasons support this contention.

First, Prayut's Thai foreign policy was not guided by a strategic, whole-of-government assessment of Thai interests and options. Instead, bureaucracy, or more precisely, a bureaucratic state, molded and dominated foreign policy. Each government agency had its own foreign orientation. Thailand appeared to simultaneously hedge with various powers, but there was no grand strategy behind it. Instead, it was scattered and lacked direction.

For instance, the Royal Thai Army engaged with US-led military forums such as the Indo-Pacific Conference of Defense Chiefs and purchased the US-made Stryker armored fighting vehicles in 2019 whereas the Navy appeared inclined to bandwagon with China, especially in its attempt to acquire Chinese submarines. While the Ministry of Commerce took part in the IPEF, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs sought to maintain a more inclusive understanding of the Indo-Pacific by endorsing Indonesia's initiated AOIP during Thailand's ASEAN chairmanship in 2019.

The outcomes might resemble hedging, but the main cause was different government agencies pursuing their preferences, orientations, and options. This is more accurately described as hedging by default, where a balanced posture emerged purely by accident.

Second, Prayut's Thai foreign policy increasingly leaned toward China. Rather than strategically committing to a bandwagoning strategy, Thailand gravitated closer to China due to four key factors: political necessity, ideational/normative convergence, China's economic attractiveness, and the absence of a clear US strategic commitment.

Political necessity. The military coup d'état orchestrated by General Prayut Chan-ocha, the Commander of the Royal Thai Army, on 22 May 2014, led to a legitimacy crisis for Thailand domestically and internationally. Thailand's options dwindled after the coup, and Western sanctions triggered by the coup further encouraged Thailand's Sino-centric approach. Since then, Thailand has expanded its defense cooperation with Beijing. The latter has offered an array of major weapon systems, most notably a *Yuan*-class submarine, and began a series of joint

exercises with the Thai military forces. The return to elections in 2019 did not alter this direction.³

Ideational/normative convergence. This synergy between Thai conservatism and the emerging illiberal world order led by China resonated in Bangkok. Prayut referred to China and Thailand not as strangers but as “brothers and sisters,” illustrating identity closeness, at least at the elite level.⁴

China's economic allure. Although Thailand's Chinese High-Speed Railway remained behind schedule, Xi Jinping's infrastructure investment projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) were attractive to the Thai elites. Also, there was little concern about China's “debt trap diplomacy.” The Prayut government sought to attract investments from China, by improving Thailand's infrastructure and developing new industrial zones such as the Eastern Economic Corridor. Despite Thailand's annual trade deficit with China, Prime Minister Prayut stated that Thailand is looking to boost its partnership with China for a future that is “strong, wealthy and sustainable.”⁵ Consequently, Prayut's Thailand was gradually drawn toward Beijing's trade and infrastructural power.

Absence of a clear US strategic commitment. Although Thailand is often dubbed as the United States' oldest Asian ally on the basis of the 1833 Treaty on Amity and Commerce, ASEAN and Thai leaders have doubted America's long-term strategic commitment and inconsistent diplomatic engagement in the post-Cold War era.⁶ Biden's decision to skip Thailand's APEC in the last year and this year's East Asia Summit and ASEAN meeting in Jakarta raised concerns.⁷

³ “China and Thailand to expand military ties amid Asia-Pacific ‘security challenges,’” *Bangkok Post*, 11 June 2023, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

⁴ “Thailand ready to strengthen economic ties with China, PM affirms,” *The Nation*, 28 September 2023, <https://www.nationthailand.com/>.

⁵ “Thailand ready to strengthen economic ties,” *The Nation*.

⁶ Thailand and the United States officially established diplomatic relations in 1818. Since then, the bilateral ties had strengthened in both economic and security realms, especially throughout the Vietnam War. It culminated in Bangkok's participation in the 1954 Manila Pact of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and its bilateral security guarantee under the Thanat-Rusk joint communique of 1962. After the Cold War, US security commitments to Thailand remained, at least rhetorically, like Thailand's ceremonial status of major non-NATO ally (MNNA) since 2003 and the 2012 Joint Vision Statement for the US-Thailand Defense Alliance. The two coups since 2006, however, have strained this bilateral partnership.

⁷ The 2023 Survey by Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute captured this trend very well. It highlighted that ASEAN countries have remained ambivalent about the United States' regional leadership role on multiple fronts. Among the ASEAN6 countries—Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines—confidence in the United States as a reliable strategic partner and provider of regional security has been steadily declining since 2021. Although when forced to choose between Beijing and Washington, the region in general has expressed a growing preference to align with the United States, the survey indicated that the region has identified China not only as the most influential economic power in Southeast Asia but

More importantly, the United States increasingly shifted its focus to geopolitical competition with China, by pursuing a new—discursive and institutional—balancing strategy. Washington has established its own pool of minilateral groupings of like-minded states—including the reinvention of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the establishment of the Australia–United Kingdom–United States (AUKUS) trilateral partnership—thereby bypassing ASEAN-centered multilateral institutionalization.

The most recent institutional balancing was Biden’s IPEF, aimed at promoting economic cooperation in areas like trade facilitation, clean energy, and anticorruption. IPEF was not explicitly a free trade agreement granting ASEAN countries greater access to American markets, as discussed in the next section.

Furthermore, America’s economic posture lacked substantiation. Despite promises to ASEAN leaders of “a new era in US-ASEAN relations” during a meeting in Washington DC in May 2022, Biden had not directed substantial investments toward the region. The rebooting of trade relationships appeared unpromising since there were no considerations to rejoin the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), from which Donald Trump had withdrawn in 2017.

At the level of discursive balancing, the US-led FOIP, centered on China as a strategic rival, raised regional concerns about being forced to choose sides. Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, wary of Sino–US strategic rivalry, suggested at the 2018 ASEAN Summit that ASEAN might eventually have to choose sides.⁸ Washington’s overemphasis on the China threat had repercussions on its relationship with mainland Southeast Asian nations, including Thailand, which had significant economic ties with Beijing.

This leads to the third and final—but no less important—point: Thailand under Prayut did not maintain itself as a principled and prestigious actor on the international stage, particularly during the Russo-Ukrainian War, which began on February 24, 2022. Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai was reported to have stated that there was no need for Thailand to “rush into playing a role.”⁹ In fact, the war in Ukraine disrupted and undermined the legal principle of national

also as the most influential politically and strategically. See *The State of Southeast Asia: 2023 Survey Report* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2023).

⁸ “Singapore leader Lee Hsien Loong warns region may have to choose between China and US,” *South China Morning Post*, 15 November 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/>.

⁹ Quoted in Pisan Manawapat and Jakkrit Srivali, “Thailand Must Take Stand on Ukraine,” *Bangkok Post*, 11 March 2022, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

sovereignty under the auspices of the UN Charter, which Thailand had long recognized and upheld.

For the first time in Thailand's diplomatic history, the often-cited tradition of "bamboo diplomacy" was publicly described as "spineless" and lacking principles. Liberals and many younger citizens called for a tougher stance against Russia's aggression.

Although Thailand initially voted in favor of a United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution to deplore Russia's actions in early March 2022, the country subsequently abstained from a vote to condemn Russia's annexation of four eastern regions of Ukraine in October. The Prayut government cited concerns that this might reduce the chances for diplomacy to bring about a negotiated solution.¹⁰ Among the 10-nation ASEAN bloc, only three countries, including Thailand, joined China and India in abstaining.

Despite their historic friendship, Thai-Russian relations held little significance in the current context of Thailand's balancing act between the United States, a major treaty ally, and China, its largest economic partner. With little substance to their relationship, Thailand and Russia were not comprehensive strategic partners, and this was unlikely to change in the near future.

In the short term, Thailand's stance on the Russo-Ukrainian War undermined its international image and reputation in the sense that the country was publicly criticized for not upholding the foundational bedrocks of international law. In the long term, the hedging by default approach exposed Thailand's national position and prestige.

In summary, Thailand under Prayut grappled with the agent-structure dilemma. Thailand lacked transformative agency to establish a clear and coherent direction in the world. Simultaneously, the structure of the bipolar world order limited and restricted Thailand's policy options. The intensifying geopolitical competition eventually pushed and pressured states to pick sides. While engaging in hedging by default, Prayut's Thailand was like a fragile, if not breakable, bamboo in the wind during the past and lost decade.

Prayut's Thailand and Three Indo-Pacific Explorations

From Donald Trump to Joe Biden, the United States has spearheaded the FOIP to maintain its preponderance of power and prestige in the region while countering China's growing assertiveness. Despite vocal support for ASEAN centrality,

¹⁰ "Thailand abstains in UN vote against Putin land grab," *Bangkok Post*, 13 October 2022, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

the US has increasingly bypassed ASEAN's regional architecture. The absence of both presidents from many regional forums, including APEC, EAS, and the ASEAN Summit, has raised concerns of credibility and trust deficit among South-east Asian nations.

Instead, the United States has established its own rules of the game through various minilateral groupings such as the Quad, AUKUS, IPEF, and trilateral relations with Japan and South Korea. Simultaneously, Washington has revitalized the "hub-and-spokes" system of bilateral ties with allies and friends. The ultimate goal of the US is to contain China in all dimensions, from military balancing to trade and technological conflicts.¹¹

Despite being a traditional US ally, Thailand under Prayut was not explicitly on the American geostrategic radar, as it had been during the Cold War era. It was often overshadowed by American shifting strategic priorities that overwhelmingly focused on China, the Philippines, and Vietnam. At the geopolitical fringes of international society, Thailand played an ambivalent role in discursive balancing or counterbalancing in the Indo-Pacific. Unlike Indonesia, Thailand lacked its own version and vision of the Indo-Pacific. This was largely due to Thailand's previously mentioned default hedging. Different bureaucracies held varying stances and stakes in global affairs and the Indo-Pacific.

The most contentious area of interest for the US in Thailand was military cooperation. While Thailand engaged with the American Indo-Pacific strategy, it did not develop a coherent and comprehensive Indo-Pacific strategic position in discourse. Without discursive (counter-)balancing, its engagement with the Indo-Pacific was more reactive than proactive. Thailand's default hedging approach can be observed through three dimensions: military (Indo-Pacific Conference of Defense Chiefs), economic (IPEF), and ideational aspects (AOIP), respectively.

The Indo-Pacific Defense Chiefs Conference

To manage the growing ties between Thailand and China, the United States has employed military relations to enhance and strengthen its bilateral cooperation with Thailand through new frameworks, such as the Indo-Pacific Defense Chiefs Conference (CHOD). This conference, held annually by the US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), was renamed in May 2018 as part of Washington's evolving approach to a free and open Indo-Pacific in the region. The conference

¹¹ Jittipat Poonkham, "Pax Indo-Pacifica in the Sino-US Ice Age: Geopolitical Anxiety and America's Struggle for Global Supremacy," in *ASEAN and Regional Actors in the Indo-Pacific*, ed. Chosein Yamahata and Sueo Sudo (Singapore: Springer, 2023), 73–90.

is regarded as “a more high-profile, annualized forum that can showcase U.S. collaboration with allies and partners and practically strengthen military-to-military ties and advance defense collaboration on security challenges.”¹²

Thailand's default hedging approach manifested in the bureaucratic politics of military cooperation. While the Thai Navy appeared inclined to bandwagon with China, especially in its attempt to acquire Chinese submarines, the army continued to engage with the United States. After the 2014 military coup and later during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, the military relationship faced strains as the United States reduced military exchanges with Bangkok. Subsequently, during the Trump administration, the United States reinstated joint military exercises, most notably the annual Cobra Gold exercise, which is the largest of its kind in the Indo-Pacific. Under the framework of the FOIP strategy, the CHOD was co-hosted by the US INDOPACOM, led by Admiral Phil Davidson, and the Royal Thai Armed Forces, focusing on “Collaboration for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific” in Bangkok in late August 2019. The participation list increased from six countries in 2016 to 20 in 2018 and 33 in 2019. Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha delivered a keynote speech, emphasizing the significance of a strategic partnership and sustainable stability based on trust-building and close collaboration for mutual prosperity.¹³

A month later, the 11th biennial Indo-Pacific Army Chiefs Conference (IPACC) was held in Thailand, incorporating *Indo-Pacific* into its name for the first time. The conference was co-hosted by the Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army, General Apirat Kongsompong, and General James C. McConville, the US Army Chief of Staff. During his opening remarks, McConville stressed that “All the [army] chiefs that are here share the same concerns. They want a secure and stable pacific region, and that's what this conference is about; sustainable security in the region so that trade and peace can continue.”¹⁴

Despite Thailand's military involvement in the CHOD and other Indo-Pacific military forums, Washington and Bangkok held different and divergent interests regarding China's rise. While the US viewed China as a “strategic competitor,” Thailand did not perceive China as a significant threat to its national interests and prosperity.

¹² Prashanth Parameswaran, “How Does the Indo-Pacific Defense Chiefs Conference Fit into Asia's Security Landscape?,” *The Diplomat*, 3 September 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

¹³ “PM Prayut presides over CHOD 2019,” *National News Bureau of Thailand*, 27 August 2019, <https://thainews.prd.go.th/>.

¹⁴ Justin Silvers, “U.S. and RTA co-host 2019 Indo-Pacific Armies Chiefs Conference,” U.S. Army Pacific Public Affairs Office, 9 October 2019, <https://www.dvidshub.net/>.

Furthermore, the evolution of Thai–US military engagement did not result in a fully developed, closer tie with the United States. In 2019, when Thailand chaired ASEAN, the US president did not attend the summit. Instead, Washington emphatically prioritized its military agenda and fostered a new set of rules under the Indo-Pacific frameworks. This raised questions about the strategic commitment and credibility in the region.

The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework

Secondly, the IPEF represents America’s latest endeavor to engage Southeast Asia economically. President Joe Biden initially proposed the IPEF during a virtual meeting with ASEAN leaders at an ASEAN-US summit in October 2021. Officially launched in Tokyo, Japan, on 23 May 2022, the IPEF is a regional economic cooperation framework, consisting of a concise 12 paragraphs with broad and general concepts. The framework also underscores mutual economic interests and capacity building among IPEF’s partners to empower them in tackling emerging challenges, particularly related to supply-chain resilience, clean energy and decarbonization, infrastructure, taxation, and anticorruption.

Although the overarching goal of the IPEF is to enhance economic, trade, and investment cooperation in the region, the primary objective for the US is to counter China’s growing geoeconomic and military presence in the region by reinforcing democratic values and a rule-based liberal international order, addressing climate-change challenges, and promoting economic development. Notably, the framework does not specify market access or tariff reductions.

The Thai Ministries of Commerce and Foreign Affairs were receptive to the idea of the IPEF. Thailand wanted to tap into the IPEF to boost its agriculture trade while believing that the IPEF membership may be beneficial to a more dialogue and trade negotiation in the future. From the outset, the Prayut government had a green light stating that “If there are amendments in the [US] announcement on parts that are not substantive or go against Thailand’s interest, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is allowed to consider them without further cabinet approval.”¹⁵

On May 20, Thai Deputy Prime Minister and Commerce Minister Jurin Laksanawisit told US Trade Representative Katherine Tai on the sidelines of the APEC Ministers Responsible for Trade (MRT) meeting in Bangkok that the cabinet reaffirmed its support for the IPEF and decided to join it. Thailand was one of the 14 founding signatories of IPEF.

¹⁵ Kavi Chongkittavorn, “Behind the scenes: Thailand’s IPEF talks,” *Bangkok Post*, 24 May 2022, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

This can represent a hedging by default approach of Thailand. From early 2023, the implementation of the IPEF framework was interdepartmentally managed among different concerned agencies. For instance, the trade issues were handled by the Ministry of Commerce's trade negotiators and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs while the fair economy pillar came under the Customs Department and the anticorruption agency. At the same time, the Ministry of Industry was involved in issues related to supply chains while the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment and the Office of the National Economic and Social Development were responsible for the clean economy.¹⁶ Recently, the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs hosted the IPEF Negotiation Round in Bangkok during 10–16 September 2023.¹⁷

Nevertheless, the IPEF was not similar to the full-fledged, binding free trade agreements like the CPTPP or its institutional rivals such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). The IPEF lacked a robust trade and investment dimension. The market accessibility to the US market was not on the table. Nor did it grant the Indo-Pacific states lower trade and investment barriers. Without these, the United States was unable to provide a viable alternative to Chinese economic and investment schemes in the region.

The Biden administration chose not to revive the CPTPP primarily due to domestic political considerations. At home, the pact faced heavy criticism by the Democrats' constituents fearing job losses and getting worried about competing with cheap imports. Second, the current US strategy toward the region has emphasized hard power, security cooperation, and weaponized economic statecraft such as tariffs and export controls, exemplified by trade wars when the US unilaterally imposed tariffs on various industries, such as aluminum. Therefore, the IPEF was too narrow and too little, too late. It has undermined the US long-term strategic objectives in the region.

Undoubtedly, the IPEF was criticized by China as divisive, warning that the Asia-Pacific region “should not become a political chessboard” of the US. Likewise, Thailand's IPEF membership was even questioned as “a move perceived as putting the country at odds with China and Russia.” Former finance minister Thirachai Phuvanatanarubala, for instance, claimed that the US Indo-Pacific Strategy obviously showed “a clear intention [to go] against a rival country.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Kavi Chongkittavorn, “Deepening of Thai-US Economic Links,” *Bangkok Post*, 22 August 2023, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

¹⁷ The IPEF negotiating round was first held in Brisbane, Australia, 10–12 December 2022, followed by the second in Bali, Indonesia, 13–19 March 2023, the third in Singapore 8–15 May 2023, and the fourth in Busan, South Korea, 9–15 July 2023.

¹⁸ “Kingdom stands to gain from IPEF,” *Bangkok Post*, 29 May 2022, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific

Last but not least, Thailand held distinct perspectives on the Indo-Pacific, notably evident in the AOIP. The AOIP came into prominence during Thailand's ASEAN chairmanship in 2019, but its foundation largely relied on an Indonesian draft.

Arguably, ASEAN pursued a strategy focused on depoliticizing security agendas, emphasizing nontraditional security challenges, and maintaining its centrality in the evolving Indo-Pacific security landscape. This approach combined institutional hedging and community building to engage with major powers, all while representing a form of discursive counterbalancing. Instead of outright hard balancing, ASEAN crafted its alternative discourse, embodied in the AOIP.

At the 34th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok on 23 June 2019, ASEAN leaders officially adopted Indonesia's proposed AOIP.¹⁹ This signified a critical consensus within ASEAN, ensuring a unified approach to address broader Indo-Pacific security agendas while preserving regional autonomy. As one commentator noted, "The AOIP represents the grouping's latest common effort to interface with all other Indo-Pacific initiatives and face a new world in which many emerging powers are competing for influence and turf in the most unpredictable ways."²⁰

In contrast to Washington's FOIP strategy, ASEAN's AOIP took a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to regional security challenges. First, it was more inclusive, avoiding discrimination against undemocratic states. ASEAN refrained from engaging in a normative contest with nondemocracies, partly due to its own political diversity and adherence to the "ASEAN Way," emphasizing sovereignty and noninterference in internal affairs.

Second, unlike FOIP, AOIP did not explicitly address great-power competition or the Sino-US geostrategic rivalry. For ASEAN, China was not viewed as a strategic competitor aiming to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific security complex. Without directly addressing Sino-American geopolitical competition, ASEAN aimed to engage with both superpowers, benefit from their involvement, and avoid taking sides.

Third, through AOIP, ASEAN framed security agendas and challenges within the framework of regional institutionalization. By integrating security within existing ASEAN-led multilateral mechanisms like ARF, EAS, and ADMM-Plus, ASEAN reaffirmed its centrality in the Indo-Pacific.

¹⁹ *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific* (Jakarta: Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 23 June 2019), <https://asean.org/>. For the role of Indonesia in the AOIP, see: Dewi Fortuna Anwar, "Indonesia and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific," *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (2020): 111–29.

²⁰ Kavi Chongkittavorn, "AOIP: A New Asean Regional Guide," *Bangkok Post*, 25 June 2019, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

Fourth, AOIP adopted a comprehensive security approach with four priority areas of cooperation: maritime security, connectivity, sustainable development, and economic security. This reflected ASEAN's approach to nontraditional security cooperation.

In contrast to the security-centric FOIP, Thailand under Prayut embraced a more inclusive AOIP. Initially, Thailand's stance seemed reactive, aligning with Indonesia's initiative and the broader Indo-Pacific imperative. Nevertheless, Thailand's vision of the Indo-Pacific, by default, incorporated the ASEAN outlook, which diverged from the American perspective, particularly in the context of ASEAN and Thailand's reluctance to constrain China within the Indo-Pacific security architecture.

Thai Foreign Policy in the Post-Prayut Era *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose?*

Consequently, this article has argued that the Prayut regime did not have a proactive and progressive Indo-Pacific strategy. Thailand had no national initiative concerning the Indo-Pacific vision. Instead, its stance was merely a reaction to the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy. The latter is fundamentally a security-oriented approach, seeking to compete, counter, and contain China.

Militarily, the United States is seeking to maintain its involvement with Thailand through a new security framework, such as the Indo-Pacific Chiefs of Defense Conference, but it is still limited. Despite having the longest-standing alliance with Washington in the region, Thailand has a decreasing and diminishing role on the radar of the US geostrategic map. America's geostrategic commitment is shifting away from Thailand to the minilateral groupings such as Quad, AUKUS, and trilateral relations with Japan and South Korea. The United States under the Biden administration tends to engage more with Vietnam as an emerging economy and the post-Duterte Philippines under Bongbong Marcos.

Economically, the IPEF is merely a vague guideline with nothing concrete and substantive. So far, it does not provide Thailand access to markets or reduce tariffs. Though it provides a platform for future negotiations, IPEF is nothing comparable to the expanding RCEP or China-initiated Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP).

Ideationally, Thailand has a different discourse about the Indo-Pacific. The AOIP and the United States' FOIP are two distinct approaches to the Indo-Pacific region. While Washington emphasizes the containment of China through military cooperation and the promotion of liberal democracy, human rights, free trade, and freedom of navigation, ASEAN, coupled with Thailand, high-

lights regional inclusivity and prosperity, ASEAN Centrality, and nontraditional security threats.

From this perspective, Thailand's involvement with the Indo-Pacific vision over the past decade has faced several challenges. These challenges can be attributed to three main factors. First, Thailand under Prayut did not actively pursue a strategic hedging strategy but rather engaged in hedging by default. The second factor is the differing long-term threat perceptions between the United States and Thailand regarding China's ascent. Bangkok is inclined to prioritize its economic interdependence with Beijing over closer military ties with Washington. The third factor pertains to the United States' regional strategic commitment, or the lack thereof. Overemphasis on military and defense and underestimation of economic aspects have limited American credibility and trust-building efforts in the Indo-Pacific. These factors have contributed to Thailand's reluctance to realign with the United States amid the emerging bipolar international system.

Under the leadership of a coalition government headed by property tycoon Srettha Thavisin, what lies ahead for Thai foreign policy? It can be asserted that a significant and revolutionary shift in Thai foreign policy is improbable. This is not solely attributable to the dynamics of Thai politics but is also a consequence of the international system's structure and the ongoing geopolitical competition between the two superpowers. The evolving power dynamics necessitate Thailand's development of an updated and all-encompassing strategy for the region.

It is highly likely that changes in contexts will be gradually adopted and implemented. Economic diplomacy constitutes the strength and branding of the Pheu Thai Party since its inception. This is evident through the selection of Panree Phahitthanukorn, a former trade representative, as the new foreign minister and deputy prime minister responsible for international affairs and trade. Thai foreign policy under Srettha is oriented toward a business-focused approach. While addressing the UN General Assembly in New York, the Thai prime minister reaffirmed the nation's readiness to embrace international investment: "We are ready for both inbound and outbound investment. There will be not only investors from abroad, but several Thai companies are also ready to invest in foreign countries."²¹

Furthermore, it is improbable that the Srettha government will explicitly pursue a "rules-based" foreign policy, a position asserted by Pita Limjaroenrat, whose party, the Move Forward Party, emerged victorious in the elections but could not form a government due to constitutional constraints and conservative objections. Rejecting a Thai-style bamboo diplomacy, Pita emphasized that Thai foreign policy should

²¹ "PM talks up Thai credentials at UN meet," *Bangkok Post*, 24 September 2023, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

be grounded in rules, upholding liberal principles such as human rights and the rule of law. Pita pledged to adopt a tougher stance on Russia's military intervention in Ukraine and authoritarian regimes, especially Myanmar. According to Pita, Thai foreign policy, particularly regarding China, should be "more à la carte than buffet." Ultimately, international and regional issues will be approached on a case-by-case basis to maintain a delicate balancing act.²²

Despite not explicitly endorsing a rule-based foreign policy, a shift in approach is likely under the Srettha government. On the one hand, he views Thailand as a small state that should assume a neutral stance to avoid aligning with one side in international politics. Srettha cautioned that, in the long run "a small nation is forced to choose sides." The prime minister cited this as "one of [his] greatest fears."²³ "Our country is small," Srettha proclaimed at the UN, "but we are proud of our independence. . . . It is incumbent upon this government and its leader to maintain the country's independence and stay neutral. We believe in peace and sustainable prosperity."²⁴

On the other hand, Thailand should position itself as a more principled and prestigious player in the global arena. According to Srettha, Thailand will play a constructive role in partnership with the international community, forging closer ties and greater prosperity through commerce, investment, and trade agreements. Consequently, Thailand can firmly uphold UN principles and international law, vigorously supporting and promoting global agendas such as sustainable development, human rights, climate change, and environmental issues, among others. Srettha recently made this commitment during the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA78) in September 2023. He also endorsed Thailand's application for membership in the United Nations Human Rights Council as ASEAN's candidate for the 2025–2027 term.²⁵

Moreover, the Srettha government has pledged to employ a multifaceted and diverse diplomatic strategy, spanning from free trade agreements to cultural diplomacy and the innovation and creative economy (despite potential misappropriation of the soft-power concept). The goal is to improve people's income and well-being and enhance creativity from the family level to the national level. That being said, it is both robust and resilient for the incoming government to move

²² Jittipat Poonkham, "The View from Thailand," *Australian Foreign Affairs*, 5 July 2023, <https://www.australianforeignaffairs.com/>.

²³ Patpicha Tanakasempipat and Suttinee Yuvejwattana, "New Thai Leader Says He Wants to Catch Vietnam, Attract Tesla," *Bloomberg*, 21 September 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/>.

²⁴ "PM talks up Thai credentials at UN meet," *Bangkok Post*, 24 September 2023, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

²⁵ "PM talks up Thai credentials," *Bangkok Post*.

away from the default hedging approach, instead adopting a strategic hedging strategy at the very least, and ideally, embracing a middle-power strategy.²⁶ By doing so, Thailand's foreign policy stance should be repositioned as an internationalist, outward-looking, and responsible approach to international relations. Failing to do so may result in the country fading into insignificance in the twenty-first-century world. 🌐

Dr. Jittipat Poonkham

Dr. Poonkham is an Associate Professor of International Relations, Associate Dean for Academic and International Affairs, and Director of International Studies Programme in the Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University, Thailand. He is the author of *A Genealogy of Bamboo Diplomacy: The Politics of Thai Détente with Russia and China* (Australian National University Press, 2022) and co-editor of *International Relations as a Discipline in Thailand* (Routledge, 2019).

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²⁶ I have argued elsewhere that Thailand should adopt a leading-from-the-middle strategy. See: Jittipat Poonkham, "The Bamboo Breaks: Thailand's Diplomatic Challenge," *Asialink*, 9 September 2021, <https://asialink.unimelb.edu.au/>; and Jittipat Poonkham, *Thailand-Australia Relations and Regional Geopolitics: A Thai View*, Center of Gravity Series Paper 53 (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Center, Australian National University, August 2020), 22–24.