

# Characterizing Chinese Influence in Thailand

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## Abstract

This article delves into the expanding sphere of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) influence within Thailand and its consequent impact on Thailand's relations with the United States. Employing a comprehensive methodology for characterizing PRC influence, the study scrutinizes Chinese influence-seeking activities across a spectrum encompassing traditional media, social media, overseas Chinese networks, pro-China associations, geoeconomic channels, and geostrategic domains of influence. The findings reveal that while PRC influence in Thailand has undeniably burgeoned, it is not a trigger for alarm in the corridors of power in Bangkok. Thai strategic culture has cultivated a degree of familiarity with, and developed a set of countermeasures to regulate, the extent of Chinese influence within Thailand. This article offers vital insights tailored for senior military and civilian leaders, enabling them to comprehend the evolving landscape in Thailand and presenting recommendations to fortify the enduring and robust US–Thai partnership.

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*For our friends, we have fine wine.*

*For jackals or wolves, we welcome with shotguns.*

—Li Shangfu, PRC Minister of National Defense

This article delves into the expanding sphere of influence wielded by the People's Republic of China (PRC) within Thailand and the subsequent repercussions for Thailand's relationship with the United States. Within the broader context of the unfolding geostrategic competition between the PRC and the United States, Southeast Asia emerges as a critical theater. Situated at the heart of the Southeast Asian landmass, Thailand finds itself on the frontline of a shifting political landscape driven by China's ascent. The nation's burgeoning economy, strategic geographical location, bountiful natural resources, and regional influence have rendered it a prime focus of PRC investments, cultural outreach, and immigration. Simultaneously, Thailand stands as a steadfast US ally, serving as a pivotal anchor for US policy in Southeast Asia and a vital

conduit for controlling the Straits of Malacca.<sup>1</sup> Given the escalating sway from Beijing, it is imperative to comprehend the tactics the PRC employs to advance its interests in Thailand, gauge the extent of Beijing's influence in Bangkok, and explore potential US responses.

This article employs a qualitative methodology to assess the degree of PRC influence and coercion within specific target states or audiences. The methodology scrutinizes common indicators of Chinese influence and coercion across diverse domains, including traditional media, social media, overseas Chinese networks,<sup>2</sup> pro-China associations, geoeconomic channels, and geostrategic realms of influence.<sup>3</sup> By implementing this methodology, the research offers a deeper understanding of how the PRC deploys its multifaceted influence-seeking activities to amplify its sway within Thailand. The subsequent sections of this article are structured as follows: the first section provides a concise overview of how the PRC strategically deploys influence operations to achieve its stated objectives. The second section applies the methodology to the Thai case study, methodically assessing each medium of influence. The final section concludes with key implications and recommendations for effectively managing coercive influence-seeking activities emanating from the PRC in the future.

### The Wolf in Panda's Clothing

A recent examination of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) information warfare reveals how PRC leaders strategically employ influence operations to achieve their objectives. It also presents a practical methodology for characterizing the extent of PRC influence and coercion within a targeted state or audience.<sup>4</sup> PRC leaders have identified the "Chinese Dream" of national rejuvenation as the

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<sup>1</sup> Sebastian Strangio, *In the Dragon's Shadow: Southeast Asia in the Chinese Century*, Paperback (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022), 5–8; Benjamin Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the US and a Rising China* (London: Zed Books, 2017), 6–8; Office of the Spokesperson, "United States-Thailand Communiqué on Strategic Alliance and Partnership" (Department of State, 10 July 2022), <https://www.state.gov/>.

<sup>2</sup> In this context, *overseas Chinese* refers to those tracing their heritage to an origin in China but living elsewhere.

<sup>3</sup> Ryan Skaggs, "Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Information Warfare: Ideology, Influence, and Coercion in the Indo-Pacific" (PhD dissertation, Maxwell AFB, AL, Air University, 2022), 139–43.

<sup>4</sup> The study referenced is the author's PhD dissertation on Chinese information warfare. The study defined *influence operations* as, "A spectrum of activities employed by an actor to deliberately shape the behavior, actions, and decisions of other key actors or audiences. Influence operations primarily serve the interest of the sponsor and employ a coordinated set of information-related capabilities to deliver selective information, tailored messages, and compelling narratives to persuade, co-opt, sway, or coerce targeted entities or the general public." Skaggs, "Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Information Warfare," 5.

strategic aspiration for the nation.<sup>5</sup> The study illustrates how the PRC deploys influence operations as an integral component of its broader political warfare strategy, designed to control the information environment and project power over long distances. The evidence demonstrates how Beijing has “developed the strategy, propagated the narratives, fostered the strategic concepts, and funded the bureaucracy required to execute its global influence war.”<sup>6</sup>

PRC leaders are convinced that prevailing in the contemporary information environment demands control over communication channels and the strategic employment of influence operations to reach and leverage key audiences and institutions. To achieve this, the PRC employs diverse information methods and mediums to disseminate strategic narratives, thereby shaping the behavior and decisions of other key stakeholders. Beijing’s narratives aim to create a conducive strategic environment essential for realizing the Chinese Dream by portraying a favorable image of China, promoting economic investment, securing access to Western markets and technology, advocating preferential policies for the PRC, and curtailing or censoring anti-China content.

The PRC’s overarching strategy for influence operations seeks to synchronize various forms of influence-seeking activities to maximize their efforts in cultivating relationships and gaining influence and control over foreign influencers, organizations, and resources. The CCP employs both overt and benign activities associated with public diplomacy, alongside covert and more sinister actions that aim to manipulate the attitudes and actions of targeted audiences. By operating across the entire spectrum of influence, Beijing obfuscates its self-interested motives and blurs the lines between generally acceptable and unacceptable influence-seeking activities. Influence and control yield leverage, which the party subsequently deploys to manipulate and coerce targeted entities into advancing Beijing’s interests. This dual approach to influence ultimately combines elements of soft and hard power, utilizing both incentives and penalties to influence, control, and sometimes coerce Beijing’s targets.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The Chinese Dream of national rejuvenated is a broad and flexible concept that contains multiple supporting themes. See the following sources for information on the Chinese Dream. Skaggs, “Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Information Warfare,” 9; Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*, Bridging the Gap Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 27–31.

<sup>6</sup> Skaggs, “CCP Information Warfare,” 46.

<sup>7</sup> Morgan A. Martin and Clinton J. Williamson *Mapping Chinese Influence in Hollywood*, Kenney Paper 4 (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, January 2023), <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>; and Paul Charon and Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer, *Chinese Influence Operations: A Machiavellian Moment*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Institute for Strategic Research, 5 October 2021), <https://drive.google.com/>.

The study's methodology classifies Beijing's influence-seeking activities into six broad methods or mediums that PRC leaders routinely employ to achieve their objectives: traditional media, social media, overseas Chinese networks, friends of China, geoeconomic channels, and geostrategic domains. Application of this methodology provides a more comprehensive understanding of the environment that can be used to gauge the extent of PRC influence and coercion within a targeted entity. The PRC's comprehensive approach to influence suggests that seemingly isolated incidents of influence and coercion may, in reality, be part of a larger strategic effort to gain leverage and control. Thus, it is imperative to consider Beijing's influence operations within a broader context.<sup>8</sup>

## PRC Influence in Thailand

### *Traditional Media*

Traditional media refers to Beijing's state-owned television, radio, and news media empire that promotes a favorable view of China, encourages economic investment, and suppresses or censors negative content.<sup>9</sup> The PRC has maintained a long-standing presence in the Thai information space, with PRC state-run media widely available in Thailand. PRC propaganda is disseminated daily through television, radio, newspapers, and online platforms, delivered in both Thai and Mandarin languages.<sup>10</sup> PRC media influence can be categorized into three distinct

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<sup>8</sup> Skaggs, "CCP Information Warfare," 140–43.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Cook, "Beijing's Global Megaphone: The Expansion of Chinese Communist Party Media Influence since 2017," Special Report (Freedom House, January 2020), <https://freedomhouse.org/>; Anne-Marie Brady, "China's Foreign Propaganda Machine," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 4 (October 2015): 51–52; Renée Diresta et al., "Telling China's Story: The Chinese Communist Party's Campaign to Shape Global Narratives" (Stanford, CA: Stanford Cyber Policy Center, Hoover Institution, 2020), <https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/>; and Anne-Marie Brady, "Magic Weapons: China's Political Influence Activities under Xi Jinping," Wilson Center, 18 September 2017, 3–7, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/>.

<sup>10</sup> China Radio International, a PRC state-owned radio station, originally began broadcasting anti-US and pro-PRC propaganda from inside of China and into Thailand in 1950. The PRC's main media outlet, Xinhua News Agency, has been operating out of Bangkok since 1975. In 2005, the English-language *China Daily* newspaper joined Xinhua by establishing a regional hub in the area, and the *Guangming Daily* media group and the CRI network also began operating out of Thailand around that time. Kerry K. Gershaneck, *Political Warfare: Strategies for Combating China's Plan to "Win without Fighting"* (Quantico, Virginia: Marine Corps University Press, 2020), 64, 76–77, 87–88; Teeranai Charuvastra, "China, As Told by China: Beijing's Influences Reach Thai Media and Beyond," Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Foundation, 28 December 2019, <https://th.boell.org/>; Samantha Custer et al., "Winning the Narrative: How China and Russia Wield Strategic Communications to Advance Their Goals," Conference Reference Materials, Gates Forum I (AidData: A Research Lab at William & Mary, November 2022), 3–12, <https://docs.aiddata.org/>; and SiamTurakij, "The roles and the significance of Chinese media in Thailand," SiamTurakij, 2 August 2019, <https://siamturakij.com/>.

facets: Thai outreach and content distribution, content tailored for Mandarin speakers in Thailand, and investments in Thailand's telecommunications infrastructure.

Over the past few decades, the PRC has invested billions of dollars to expand the capacity and reach of its state-owned media empire. Chinese state-owned media companies are obligated to promote Beijing's narrative and censor unfavorable content. More recently, PRC state-owned media outlets, including *Xinhua Thailand*, *China Daily*, China Radio International (CRI), and others, have become actively engaged in circulating news and producing Chinese cultural content in Thai and English, specifically targeting the local Thai audience. PRC state-owned media endeavors to co-opt Thai media outlets into propagating pro-Chinese narratives and coverage through advertising payments, funding of Thai journalist associations, sponsorship of pro-Chinese coverage by Thai journalists, financing trips for Thai journalists to China, and providing free news content.<sup>11</sup> Since 2015, China has supplied free content to Thailand's most prominent state-run media outlets, balancing pro-Western reporting. Chinese and Thai media companies have entered into at least 13 separate content-sharing agreements between 2015 and 2019. These agreements enable Thai media outlets to republish content from Chinese sources at no cost, thereby further disseminating Chinese propaganda and enhancing the credibility of the content by obscuring its origin.<sup>12</sup>

The PRC has expanded its Chinese-language media presence to influence the substantial Chinese-speaking communities within Thailand. Currently, Chinese-language media is accessible on cable and satellite television via China Central Television (CCTV), and multiple newspapers in Thailand cater to the local Chinese-speaking community.<sup>13</sup> This media presence empowers the PRC to continuously influence the millions of Chinese speakers within Thailand "with the aim

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<sup>11</sup> Ryan Loomis and Heidi Holz, "China's Efforts to Shape the Information Environment in Thailand," Information Memorandum (Center for Naval Analysis, September 2020), 11–28, <https://apps.dtic.mil/>; Charuvastra, "China, As Told by China"; Gershaneck, *Political Warfare*, 76–77, 90–93; Custer et al., "Winning the Narrative," 3–12; Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground*, 116; and Cook, "Beijing's Global Megaphone," 5–9.

<sup>12</sup> In 2019, Xinhua and Thailand's Public Relations Department (PRD) signed a memorandum of understanding for exchanging news and information. Loomis and Holz, "China's Efforts to Shape the Information Environment in Thailand," 22–26; Charuvastra, "China, As Told by China"; Cook, "Beijing's Global Megaphone," 5–8; Jane Tang, "China's Information Warfare and Media Influence Spawn Confusion in Thailand," *Radio Free Asia*, 13 May 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/>; and Tyler Roney, "Chinese Propaganda Finds a Thai Audience," *Foreign Policy*, 28 August 2019, sec. Argument, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>.

<sup>13</sup> Loomis and Holz, "China's Efforts to Shape the Information Environment in Thailand," 25–26, 28–32, 35; Kornphanat Tungkeunkunt, "China's Soft Power in Thailand Culture and Commerce: China's Soft Power in Thailand," *International Journal of China Studies* 7, no. 2 (1 August 2016), 165–66; Charuvastra, "China, As Told by China"; "HunanTV," HunanTV, 2023, <https://corp.mgtv.com/>; and Deng Zhangyu, "Hit Chinese Shows Gain Popularity in Overseas Markets," *China Daily*, 31 December 2022, Global Edition, sec. Film and TV, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/>.

of promoting China's interests and challenging the 'negative' news stories from largely Western media sources."<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Chinese companies such as Mango TV, Global CAMG, and Tencent have acquired broadcasting rights for Chinese content and have partnered with Thai broadcasters and digital platforms to distribute Chinese TV shows, movies, and digital content within Thailand. Much of this content is translated into Thai to broaden the reach of Chinese narratives.<sup>15</sup>

PRC investments in Thailand's telecommunication infrastructure have also enhanced Beijing's capacity to shape the Thai media environment. Despite Thai regulations limiting foreign ownership of media companies to less than 25 percent, Chinese companies have found ways to circumvent this requirement by establishing local subsidiaries led by Thai nationals. For instance, the Global CAMG Group, a subsidiary of CRI, has owned Bangkok's popular 103 Like FM radio station since 2011. Like FM is registered to two Thai businessmen who subcontract the station to CAMG, broadcasting popular music and Chinese news in Thai to 10 million local listeners.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the Thai subsidiary of Tencent acquired one of Thailand's leading media outlets, *Sanook*, in 2016. This acquisition allows PRC content to freely reach a Thai audience of over 40 million monthly visitors.<sup>17</sup> These media investments may not instantaneously alter Thai public opinion, but pro-Chinese content is increasingly permeating the information environment and gradually influencing Thai perceptions of China over time.

### **Social Media**

Social media serves as a tool to extend the reach of Chinese influence, obfuscate and magnify propaganda, monitor dissidents, censor information, and directly shape global public opinion.<sup>18</sup> In 2022, approximately 52 million Thai citizens, accounting for 72.8 percent of the population, were active on social media. Surprisingly, TikTok, the newest platform, amassed more than 40 million users in Thailand

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<sup>14</sup> Charuvastra, "China, As Told by China."

<sup>15</sup> Loomis and Holz, "China's Efforts to Shape the Information Environment in Thailand," 25–26, 28–32, 35; Charuvastra, "China, As Told by China"; "HunanTV"; and Zhangyu, "Hit Chinese Shows Gain Popularity in Overseas Markets."

<sup>16</sup> Loomis and Holz, "China's Efforts to Shape the Information Environment in Thailand," 28–31.

<sup>17</sup> Emma Lee, "Tencent Buys Full Control of Thailand's Sanook To Fuel Southeast Asia Expansion," *TechNode*, 22 December 2016, <http://technode.com/>; Loomis and Holz, "China's Efforts to Shape the Information Environment in Thailand," 32; "Sanook.Com, รวมข่าว ดุดาม หวย ผลบอล เพลง Joox เกม," *Sanook*, 2023, <https://www.sanook.com/>; and "Sanook Market Share, Revenue and Traffic Analytics," *Similarweb*, June 2023, <https://www.similarweb.com/>.

<sup>18</sup> Skaggs, "CCP Information Warfare," 99–107.

by early 2023, and is projected to surpass Facebook as the most-used social media platform in Thailand by year-end.<sup>19</sup>

Mandarin speakers in Thailand turn to the Chinese application WeChat, developed by Tencent. It finds popularity among users with connections to the Chinese community, while Chinese tourists and businesses rely on WeChat for communication and mobile payment systems. Given WeChat's centrality in China, it plays a vital role in family communication and business dealings with China.<sup>20</sup>

TikTok's rapid expansion in Thailand can be attributed to its popularity among the country's youth. Its emergence played a direct role in the May 2023 Thai House of Representatives elections. The Move Forward (Kao Iai) party, a newcomer, secured a significant victory over established mainstream parties, largely due to their effective use of TikTok for engaging with the public.<sup>21</sup>

The swift proliferation of Chinese social media platforms, such as TikTok and WeChat, provides the PRC with a potent instrument for directly influencing a global audience. This escalating influence raises concerns, especially considering the sway the PRC holds over Chinese tech companies. These firms have displayed their capacity to manipulate information for the PRC government within China, including the promotion of content and the monitoring and suppression of inappropriate material.<sup>22</sup> This influence was starkly evident when the PRC disseminated a wave of disinformation during the Coronavirus pandemic to shape Thai public opinion.

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<sup>19</sup> The most popular social media platforms among Thai people include Facebook and Facebook Messenger from the United States, LINE which is a messaging application that originated in Japan, and TikTok which is produced by the PRC company ByteDance. "DataReportal Media Report on Thailand for 2023," DataReportal – Global Digital Insights, 13 February 2023, <https://datareportal.com/>; "Social Media in Thailand—2023 Stats & Platform Trends," OOSGA, 13 January 2023, <https://oosga.com/>; and Jantima Kheokao and Dhanaraj Kheokao, "Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism: Country Profile for Thailand," Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 14 June 2023, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/>.

<sup>20</sup> "Forbidden Feeds: Government Controls on Social Media in China" (New York, NY: PEN America, 13 March 2018), 12–14, <https://www.chinafile.com/>; "Thai Kasikornbank, WeChat Tie up for Payment Services to Chinese Tourists," *Reuters*, 6 October 2016, sec. Financials, <https://www.reuters.com/>; and Bangkok Post Public Company, "CPN, WeChat Pay to Attract Chinese," *Bangkok Post*, 24 March 2023, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

<sup>21</sup> Kheokao and Kheokao, "Reuters Country Profile for Thailand."

<sup>22</sup> Justin Sherman, "Unpacking TikTok, Mobile Apps and National Security Risks," *Lawfare* (blog), 2 April 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/>; "Forbidden Feeds," PEN America, 4–6, 12–13, 17–20; Fergus Ryan, Audrey Fritz, and Daria Impiombato, "TikTok and WeChat: Curating and Controlling Global Information Flows," Policy Brief (Canberra, Australia: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, September 2020), 4–5, 17–18, <https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/>; Cook, "Beijing's Global Megaphone," 18–20; and Jane Tang, "China's Information Warfare and Media Influence Spawn Confusion in Thailand," *Radio Free Asia*, 13 May 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/>.

Chinese state media and counterfeit social media accounts disseminated conspiracy theories and fake news, unjustly attributing the virus's spread to US soldiers.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Overseas Chinese***

Thailand has the largest overseas Chinese population in the world and maintains deep cultural and historical ties to China dating back centuries. This connection is widely recognized by both Chinese and Thai officials who often refer to the Sino-Thai relationship as being between old friends or family.<sup>24</sup> For this reason, Beijing expends significant time and energy to mobilize the overseas Chinese community in Thailand as part of the PRC's *qiaowu* (侨务) policies. Overseas Chinese consist of Chinese nationals living outside of China and immigrants of Chinese descent who maintain some family or cultural connection to the Chinese motherland but may be residents or citizens of other countries. PRC leadership routinely emphasizes the importance of the overseas Chinese community in achieving the Chinese Dream and actively seeks to enlist these communities to enhance China's image, support Chinese policies, and defend the PRC's interests from within Thailand.<sup>25</sup>

PRC efforts to co-opt overseas Chinese communities in Thailand include cultivating *guangxi* (广西) networks with influential members of the Sino-Thai community, and Chinese-funded education to connect Sino-Thais back to their Chinese ancestral roots. Beijing's overseas Chinese policies in Thailand support and boost the effectiveness of the PRC's other influence-seeking activities grouped under the friends of China and goeconomics mediums.

The Chinese strategy of *guangxi* refers to the practice of building relationships and partnerships to facilitate successful business operations and cooperation within a region. Chinese companies aim to cultivate Sino-Thai networks within the overseas Chinese community to gain local trust and credibility in foreign markets by using their cultural history and similarities to navigate local markets, governmental barriers, and potential regulatory hurdles. Since the 1970s, multiple waves of Chinese businessmen and entrepreneurs emigrated to Thailand in search of economic

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<sup>23</sup> Tang, "China's Information Warfare and Media Influence."

<sup>24</sup> Reena Marwah and Sanika Sulochani Ramanayake, *China's Economic Footprint In South And Southeast Asia: A Futuristic Perspective—Case Studies Of Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Company, 2021), xiii, 211–12, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/>.

<sup>25</sup> Skaggs, "CCP Information Warfare," 111–13; James Jiann Hua To, *Qiaowu: Extra-Territorial Policies for the Overseas Chinese*, Chinese Overseas, volume 8 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 23–25, 185; and Enze Han, "Bifurcated Homeland and Diaspora Politics in China and Taiwan towards the Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019), 577–78.



opportunities and a better quality of life. Many of these migrants opened businesses, married Thai spouses, and assimilated into Thai culture.<sup>26</sup>

A recent 2022 study estimated that as many as 15 percent of the total Thai population can be classified as Sino-Thai. Of the Sino-Thai community, at least 25 percent are involved with major Thai businesses, and 53 percent of Thai prime ministers have been of Chinese descent.<sup>27</sup> Sino-Thai communities serve as a critical link to connect China's emerging business and investments with Thailand's economic and political establishment. Many Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments and subsidiaries are linked to Sino-Thai individuals and groups that advocate for increased ties between the two countries.<sup>28</sup> These same Sino-Thai communities are the very groups that the PRC attempts to reconnect to their Chinese cultural roots and increase their Chinese identity to "strengthen the cohesion of Chinese ethnic groups and realize the common prosperity of the Chinese nation."<sup>29</sup>

Chinese-funded education is used as a major tool to influence overseas Chinese populations by connecting them with their cultural links and instructing them on Beijing's narratives and political ideology.<sup>30</sup> Thailand's interest in Chinese schools is linked to expanding Chinese-language education to facilitate greater economic connections. Thailand currently hosts the most Confucius Institutes in Southeast Asia with 16 Confucius Institutes operating in Thailand's institutions and another 21 Confucius Classrooms operating in Thai schools. Thailand also had the most volunteer teachers with over 10,000 Chinese teachers operating in Thailand's schools

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<sup>26</sup> Sivarin Lertpusit, "The Patterns of New Chinese Immigration in Thailand: The Terms of Diaspora, Overseas Chinese and New Migrants Comparing in a Global Context," *ABAC Journal* 38, no. 1 (June 2018): 78–82; Olivier Languépin, "Challenges of Doing Business in Thailand for Chinese Companies," *Thailand Business News*, 30 June, 2023, <https://www.thailand-business-news.com/>.

<sup>27</sup> Antonio L. Rappa, "The Teochew Chinese of Thailand," *BOHR International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research* 1, no. 1 (2022), 10–11, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>28</sup> Lertpusit, "The Patterns of New Chinese Immigration in Thailand," 82–84; Languépin, "Challenges of Doing Business in Thailand"; and Akira Yonemoto, "The 'Belt and Road' Initiative and Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia," *Journal La Sociale* 1, no. 1 (29 January 2020), 14–15, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>29</sup> Xia Liu, "Study on Chinese Traditional Cultural Identity of Thai Chinese," *Journal of Global Humanities and Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (31 December 2020), 41–42, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>30</sup> Sivarin Lertpusit, "From Laissez Faire to Restriction to Cooperation: A History of Thai Responses to China's Influence on Thai Chinese Education," *Yusof Ishak Institute, Perspective*, 21, no. 2023 (27 March 2023), <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/>; Sivarin Lertpusit, "Chinese Investment into Thai Private Universities: The Need to Keep Standards Up," *ThinkChina*, 16 March, 2023, <http://www.thinkchina.sg/>; and Tang, "China's Information Warfare and Media Influence."

between the years 2003 and 2018.<sup>31</sup> Chinese-funded education programs are designed to promote “official versions of Chinese history, society, and politics.”<sup>32</sup> Though prevalent in Thai society, Chinese education is not without criticism. The source and scope of Chinese funding and influence in these institutions is often obscured, and studies have highlighted academic curriculum and policy advice that prioritizes Beijing’s interests over those of Bangkok. Also, inexperienced teachers, high turnover, overemphasis on traditional Chinese culture, and growing concerns of political influences on Thai students are all existing issues of contention among the Thai citizenry.<sup>33</sup>

Although Thailand has been experiencing a Chinese cultural renaissance, the Sino-Thai relationship is more nuanced and complex. The Thai government currently views Chinese language and culture as a source of economic benefit and has encouraged Thailand’s Sino-Thai population to help direct Chinese investments into the Thai economy. Then again, the Thai government has periodically enforced policies of assimilation when the Chinese population threatened to overtake Thai domestic influence.<sup>34</sup> As Benjamin Zawacki recently noted, Thai civil society separately ignores and welcomes numerous elements of Chinese policy.<sup>35</sup> The amount of Chinese influence in Thailand is openly debated, and the Thai public has pushed back on instances of perceived Chinese authoritarianism and influence in Thai domestic politics. In recent years, Sino-Thai relations were strained when Thai celebrities and netizens criticized the Chinese embassy in Bangkok over the PRC’s brutal actions against the Hong Kong protests, threats against Taiwan’s independence, and Chinese actions during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>36</sup> Addition-

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<sup>31</sup> Lertpusit, “China’s Influence on Thai Chinese Education,” 6–7; and Aranya Siriphon and Fanzura Banu, “The Nature of Recent Chinese Migration to Thailand,” *Yusuf Ishak Institute*, Perspective, no. 168 (2021), 6, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/>.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin Zawacki, “Of Questionable Connectivity: China’s BRI and Thai Civil Society,” *Council on Foreign Relations* (blog), 7 June 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/>.

<sup>33</sup> Yujiao Wang, “Confucius Institutes in Thailand: Revealing the Multi-Dimensionality of China’s Public Diplomacy,” *Journal of the Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies* 37, no. 37 (March 2019): 104–5, 108–9; Aranya Siriphon and Jiangyu Li, “Chinese Dream, Emerging Statecraft, and Chinese Influence in the Mekong Region,” *International Journal of Asian Studies* 18, no. 2 (July 2021): 289–90, 294–95, <https://doi.org/>; and Lertpusit, “China’s Influence on Thai Chinese Education,” 6–7.

<sup>34</sup> Lertpusit, “China’s Influence on Thai Chinese Education,” 4–6; and Rappa, “The Teochew Chinese of Thailand,” 13–15.

<sup>35</sup> Zawacki, “Of Questionable Connectivity.”

<sup>36</sup> Patpicha Tanakasempipat, “Young Thais Join ‘Milk Tea Alliance’ in Online Backlash That Angers Beijing,” *Reuters*, 15 April 2020, sec. Internet News, <https://www.reuters.com/>; Panu Wongcha-um and Patpicha Tanakasempipat, “China Denounces Thai Politicians for Show of Support to Hong Kong Activists,” *Reuters*, 11 October 2019, sec. Emerging Markets, <https://www.reuters.com/>; and Reuters, “China-Thailand Coronavirus Social Media War Escalates,” *Al Jazeera*, 14 April 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/>.

ally, it is important to note that many Chinese immigrants left China for a reason; most recently because of political oppression from the PRC government. While overseas Chinese can be an opportunity to advance China's interests, they can also be a liability to champion anti-China viewpoints based on their insider knowledge of the system.<sup>37</sup>

### *Friends of China*

*Friends of China* refers to the network of foreign influencers who are co-opted, whether wittingly or unwittingly, to promote Beijing's interests within the local information environment. Co-opting foreign support operates on the principle that influential academics, entrepreneurs, and politicians within the host country are more likely to have the influence to affect domestic political processes in Beijing's favor. The PRC has pursued various methods to build its network within Thailand, including Chinese-funded cultural and economic associations, political engagement, and academic institutions.<sup>38</sup>

Some of Beijing's most prominent defenders in Thailand tend to be domestic business groups with significant business interests in China. For example, the Thai Chamber of Commerce in China, the Thai-Chinese Chamber of Commerce, the Chinese-Thai Business Council, and the China-Thai Cultural and Economic Association all focus on fostering closer business and cultural ties between China and Thailand.<sup>39</sup> Some of Thailand's largest companies are members of these organizations, and they lobby the Thai government for increasing economic engagement with China.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Andrew Chubb, "China's Overseas Influence Operations: Disaggregating the Risks," *U.S.–China Perception Monitor*, 14 September 2021, <https://uscnpm.org/>.

<sup>38</sup> Joshua Kurlantzick, "China's Global Influence Campaign: Its Effects in Thailand," *Council on Foreign Relations* (blog), 15 February 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/>; and J. Yin and P. M. Taylor, "Information Operations from an Asian Perspective: A Comparative Analysis," *Journal of Information Warfare* 7, no. 1 (2008): 1–23, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

<sup>39</sup> Thailand also has an extensive sister-city program with China that cultivates long-term relationships at the provincial level. The PRC has leveraged sister-city programs in other countries to creating competing political and economic interests at the subnational level that will support Chinese interests. "Thai Chamber of Commerce in China," Thai Chamber of Commerce in China, 2023, <http://www.chinathaiacham.org/>; "Thailand–China Business Council," Thailand–China Business Council, 18 February 2023, <https://www.tcbc.or.th/>; "Thai-Chinese Culture and Economy Association," Thai-Chinese Culture and Economy Association, 2023, <https://www.thaizhong.org/>; "32 Provinces Strengthen Relationships around the World 'Sister Cities,'" *Prachachat*, 11 July 2017, <https://www.prachachat.net/>; and Tungkeunkunt, "China's Soft Power in Thailand," 167.

<sup>40</sup> Phusadee Arunmas, "Companies Push for Deeper China Links," *Bangkok Post*, 18 April 2022, sec. Business, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>; and Brian Y. S. Wong and Tidarat Yingcharoen, "How Thailand Can Draw Closer to China despite US Elephant in the Room," *South China Morning Post*, 5 August 5, 2023, sec. Opinion, <https://www.scmp.com/>.

Multiple voices advocate for Beijing's policies within Thailand. A few notable examples include Thaksin Shinawatra, the Chearavanont family, and Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. Thaksin Shinawatra served as the Prime Minister of Thailand between 2001 and 2006 and is widely credited with initiating a major shift in Thai politics by mobilizing ethnic Chinese and shifting Thailand toward Beijing. Thaksin has considerable business connections to China and entered office as one of the wealthiest men in Thailand. Thaksin oversaw the 2003 Sino-Thai Free Trade Agreement, Thai capital investment in China, and the PRC's expanded media presence during his tenure. Thaksin was deposed in a 2006 coup after mass protests accusing him of corruption.<sup>41</sup>

Another influential voice is the Chearavanont family. Dhanin Chearavanont, one of the world's wealthiest individuals, is chairman of Thailand's largest private company, the Charoen Pokphand Group. The Chearavanont family has been instrumental in forging Sino-Thai relations for decades and uses its extensive connections to PRC elites to facilitate their business activities within China. Notably, Thanin Chearavanont also serves as the president of the PRC's Overseas Chinese Business Association and honorary president of the Thai-Chinese Chamber of Commerce.<sup>42</sup>

Advocates are also found within the Thai Royal Family. Princess Sirindhorn has been actively involved in cultural exchanges and educational projects between the two countries for decades. In 2019, the princess was awarded China's Medal of Friendship for her contributions to China's development and exchanges between China and other foreign countries.<sup>43</sup>

Chinese funding also has a deep-rooted presence within Thailand's academic institutions. Beijing uses its influence to create connections with Thailand's academic and policy think tanks to advance and promote PRC interests. Many connections are benign and seek to generally advance Sino-Thai connections. For example, Huachiew Chalermprakiet University was founded by the largest Chinese charitable organization in Thailand and offers multiple degrees in Eastern Health Sci-

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<sup>41</sup> Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground*, 105–7, 111–18.

<sup>42</sup> Peggy Sito, "Exclusive: Thailand's Wealthiest Clan Mulls Setting up Hong Kong Family Office," *South China Morning Post*, 22 March 2023, sec. Business, <https://www.scmp.com/>; "Chao Sua Thanin' Promotes Thailand as the Center of ASEAN Inviting Chinese Businessmen around the World to Invest in EEC," *Siamrath Online*, 25 June 2023, <https://siamrath.co.th/>; and "Charoen Pokphand Group," 2023, <https://www.cpgroupglobal.com/>.

<sup>43</sup> Jitsiree Thongnoi, "Thailand's Long-Time Sinophile Princess Sirindhorn to Receive China's Friendship Medal," *South China Morning Post*, 22 September 2019, sec. This Week in Asia, <https://www.scmp.com/>; and "Chinese Vice President Meets Thai Princess Sirindhorn\_70th Anniversary of the Founding of the People's Republic of China," *Xinhua*, 30 September 2019, English edition, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/>.

ences and Chinese Studies.<sup>44</sup> The China Studies Center at Chulalongkorn University, Thailand's prestigious university in Bangkok and Princess Sirindhorn's alma mater, receives significant funding and support from Chinese entities. The Center focuses on promoting research and understanding of China's politics, economy, foreign policy, and other aspects within Thailand's political establishment.<sup>45</sup>

However, the darker side of Chinese influence seeks to obscure the source and scale of Chinese influence and to push policies that advance Beijing's interests over Bangkok's. While discussing his concerns about growing Chinese influence, Poowin Bunyavejchewin, a senior researcher at Thammasat University, stated that, "During the past 5 years or so, I feel like there was a CCP spokesperson in Thai academia. What they told the public was not fact-based truth, nor was it most suitable for Thailand's true national interests. But they dominate the opinions."<sup>46</sup>

### ***Geoeconomic***

Geoeconomic activities consist of economic punishments and rewards strategically applied to gain influence and control over key foreign influencers and assets. The PRC's economic goals are key to achieving the Chinese Dream. Chinese businesses and state-owned enterprises strategically advance the PRC's economic and political goals by securing access to key resources, controlling critical and emerging technology, and acquiring strategic assets to increase Beijing's economic influence in key geostrategic regions. Economic influence creates leverage that the PRC uses to get what it wants.<sup>47</sup>

Thailand's strategic location in mainland Southeast Asia and its growing economy make it an indispensable partner for China's geoeconomic ambitions. Geoeconomic factors linking China and Thailand are complex and include trade and investment flows, key industry investments, agricultural cooperation, and tourism that have increased over the past decade.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> The Huakiao Poatoetek Siaengteung Foundation, the largest Chinese charitable organization in Thailand with more than 80 years of operation, founded Huachiew Chalermprakiet University. An interesting observation is that *Huachiew* actually means overseas Chinese in the Teochew dialect. "Huachiew Chalermprakiet University," Huachiew Chalermprakiet University, 20 May 2020, <https://www.hcu.ac.th/>.

<sup>45</sup> Wang, "Confucius Institutes in Thailand," 105–6; and "Institute of Asian Studies," Chulalongkorn University, 2023, <https://www.chula.ac.th/>.

<sup>46</sup> Tang, "China's Information Warfare and Media Influence."

<sup>47</sup> Skaggs, "CCP Information Warfare," 120–25; Clive Hamilton and Alex Joske, *Silent Invasion: China's Influence in Australia* (Richmond, Victoria: Hardie Grant Books, 2018), 143.

<sup>48</sup> Shen Hongfang, "The Economic Relations between China and Thailand under the Context of CAFTA: An Assessment," *Chinese Studies* 2, no. 1 (2013), 52–53, <https://doi.org/>.

Thailand's strategic location and its strong economic growth have attracted Chinese investors seeking access to the broader Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) market and beyond. China and Thailand have signed multiple economic exchanges to expand their bilateral trade relationship, and Thailand has been one of the most active partners for the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement. In addition, Thailand has acted as an advocate and intermediary to link China's economic activity and investment with the rest of the region. Subsequently, China has become the primary trading partner for every ASEAN nation, including Thailand.<sup>49</sup> The value of Sino-Thai trade in 2022 reached 3.69 trillion baht (USD 107 billion), accounting for about 18 percent of Thailand's total foreign trade volume.<sup>50</sup> As China seeks to expand its global economic influence through initiatives like the BRI, the trade volume and diversification of products between China and Thailand are likely to continue increasing, contributing to the economic growth and development of both countries.<sup>51</sup>

Chinese investment into Thailand has increased the PRC's economic and political influence in Thailand with Bangkok rolling out various policy changes and incentives to attract and maintain foreign investment in key sectors such as transportation, technology, and agriculture. As a result, Chinese BRI investments have reshaped the competitive landscape in Thailand. China dethroned Japan in 2020 for the first time as the largest investor in Thailand, a position that Japan had held for the past five decades. Chinese investments for Thailand that year were valued at 262 billion baht (USD 8.5 billion), while Japan's were valued at 73.1 billion baht (USD 2 billion).<sup>52</sup> In 2020, Thailand set a target to convert about 30 percent of the country's annual vehicle production into electric vehicles (EVs) by 2030. Later in 2022, the Thai government courted investments from several Chinese companies, including BYD and Foxconn, to start producing EV batteries and vehicles in

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<sup>49</sup> Shen, "The Economic Relations between China and Thailand," 52–53; and Piratorn Punyaratabandhu and Jiranuwat Swaspitchayaskun, "The Political Economy of China-Thailand Development under the One Belt One Road Initiative: Challenges and Opportunities," *Chinese Economy* 51, no. 4 (1 July 2018), 333–35, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>50</sup> Natthaphon Sangpolsit, "Thailand and China to Expand Trade via Chinese Entrepreneurs Convention," *National News Bureau of Thailand*, 23 February 2023, sec. Economy, <https://thainews.prd.go.th/>.

<sup>51</sup> Punyaratabandhu and Swaspitchayaskun, "The Political Economy of China-Thailand Development," 336–39.

<sup>52</sup> Jitsiree Thongnoi, "China Becomes Thailand's Top Source of Foreign Investment for First Time," *South China Morning Post*, 24 January 2020, sec. This Week in Asia, <https://www.scmp.com/>.

Thailand in 2024.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, Thailand's fertile lands and agricultural resources offer opportunities for China to strengthen its food security, and China has been strategically investing in joint ventures with Thai agricultural companies.<sup>54</sup>

Tourism is another critical component of China's geoeconomic interests in Thailand. Tourism is a major sector for the Thai economy, and Thailand's Ministry of Tourism has been actively working with the Chinese government to expand tourism between the two countries. Thailand has a goal of hosting 30 million foreign tourists in 2023, with Chinese tourists expected to make up about a quarter of the total. Chinese tourism to Thailand has dramatically expanded over the last two decades and has fueled growth in many industries in Thailand, including hotels, restaurants, and financial services. In addition, many Chinese migrants have followed economic opportunities to set up businesses in Thailand that cater to these Chinese immigrants.<sup>55</sup> Tourism is still rebounding after substantially dropping during the Coronavirus pandemic, but Thailand is expecting Chinese visitors to contribute 446 billion baht (USD 13.18 billion) to the Thai economy in 2023.<sup>56</sup>

Increasing Chinese tourism and migration, however, has also brought several challenges for the Sino-Thai relationship. Chinese tourists have been described as rude and unpleasant, and Chinese visitors tend to support Chinese businesses in Thailand, which limits the economic benefit to the Thai economy. In addition, there has been an increase in reported crimes committed by Chinese nationals involving fraud, money laundering, gambling, drug trade, human trafficking, and

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<sup>53</sup> Kitiphong Thaichareon and Satawasin Staporncharnchai, "Thailand Approves \$1 Billion Foxconn-PTT Venture for Battery Electric Vehicles," *Reuters*, 13 June 2022, sec. Deals, <https://www.reuters.com/>; Mitsuru Obe and Francesca Regalado, "Thailand's Motor Industry Becomes a Japan-China Battleground," *Financial Times*, 17 January 2023, sec. Nikkei Asia, <https://www.ft.com/>; and "Horns of a Dilemma," *Bangkok Post*, 26 June 2023, sec. Business, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

<sup>54</sup> "Food Export Association: Thailand Country Profile," Food Export Association, 2023, <https://www.foodexport.org/>; and "The Board of Investment of Thailand," Board of Investment of Thailand, 9 February 2023, <https://www.boi.go.th/>.

<sup>55</sup> Bloomberg News, "Fewer Chinese Tourists to Upset Thailand's Recovery Goal," *Bangkok Post*, 28 June 2023, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>; Jian Gong, Pornpen Detchkhajornjaroensri, and David W. Knight, "Responsible Tourism in Bangkok, Thailand: Resident Perceptions of Chinese Tourist Behaviour," *International Journal of Tourism Research* 21, no. 2 (March 1, 2019), 221–22, <https://doi.org/>; Shen, "The Economic Relations between China and Thailand," 56–57; and Siriphon and Banu, "The Nature of Recent Chinese Migration."

<sup>56</sup> Panarat Thepgumpanat and Orathai Sriring, "Thailand Says 1 Million Chinese Tourists Visited from January to Mid-May," *Reuters*, 28 May 2023, sec. Asia Pacific, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

unlicensed businesses, which have contributed to negative perceptions of Chinese influence in Thailand.<sup>57</sup>

Unlike some of its neighbors, Thailand has the economic strength and diversity to balance Chinese influence and engage China on a more equitable level. Bangkok is concerned with becoming overly dependent on Chinese investment and has watched China gain control of strategic assets in Cambodia, Laos, and Sri Lanka. Thailand has been able to avoid the Chinese debt trap so far by limiting Chinese BRI ventures targeting Thailand's strategic assets and hedging its bets by maintaining other partners and markets to balance Chinese investment. While Sino-Thai economic activity has significantly increased, Thailand has continued to attract significant investment from the United States and Japan, and Thailand is actively seeking to further diversify by nurturing its relationships in the Middle East and Europe. Overall, Thailand's economic policy seeks to balance ties between the PRC and the United States to achieve the best outcome for Thai businesses. Because of Thailand's diverse partners, Thai businesses are poised to benefit from the economic decoupling between the PRC and the United States, as Western companies seek to relocate their production bases out of China.<sup>58</sup> In other words, Bangkok is an independent actor who plays both sides for its own benefit.

### ***Geostrategic***

Finally, the geostrategic category includes cultivating relationships with key foreign leaders, regional forums, and institutions that can increase Beijing's control over key countries, regions, and resources. Thailand's economic power, regional influence, and key geographic location make it a key target in the PRC's strategic calculus. PRC leadership uses frequent and high-level state visits, investment and infrastructure deals, and regional organizations like ASEAN to foster relationships

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<sup>57</sup> Nopparat Chaichalearmmongkol, "Return of Chinese Tourists to Thailand Has Pros, Cons," *VOA News*, 24 May 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/>; Siriphon and Banu, "The Nature of Recent Chinese Migration"; Gong, Detchkhajornjaroensri, and Knight, "Responsible Tourism in Bangkok, Thailand," 221–22; and Jon Whitman, "Raids on Drinking and Gambling Dens Expose Chinese Influence," *Thaiger*, 28 November 2022, <https://thethaiger.com/>.

<sup>58</sup> "Horns of a Dilemma," *Bangkok Post*; Punyaratabandhu and Swaspitchayaskun, "The Political Economy of China-Thailand Development," 334–38; and Marwah and Ramanayake, *China's Economic Footprint In South And Southeast Asia*, 230–35.



and gain influence with Bangkok. Moreover, the PRC's growing defense cooperation with Thailand also contributes to China's regional interests.<sup>59</sup>

Beijing's approach to defense cooperation includes visits from People's Liberation Army (PLA) senior leaders, exercises, port calls, military education, and military operations other than war.<sup>60</sup> Between 2002 and 2022, Thailand had the fourth-highest amount of military diplomatic interactions from the PLA. The two countries have also conducted joint military exercises under the Falcon and Blue Strike series since 2016, and China has become an important supplier of military equipment to Thailand. Recent purchases include programs for small arms, drones, Type-85 armored personnel carriers, and VT-4 main battle tanks. This list may soon also include Yuan-class submarines; however, the deal is currently at risk due to disagreements over propulsion systems. Chinese military hardware is often more cost-effective and accessible than their Western counterparts. However, Bangkok has revisited several of these deals in recent years due to concerns over training, replacement parts, and quality.<sup>61</sup>

In line with China's increasing economic and military power, the PRC has used aggressive and coercive diplomacy to defend and advance its interests in the region. This approach, however, has produced mixed results with the Thai government.<sup>62</sup> On one hand, critics highlight several cases over the past decade where Bangkok has conceded to Beijing's demands. Despite previously being a safe haven, Thailand has developed a reputation for deporting Chinese refugees and dissidents on behalf

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<sup>59</sup> Enze Han, "Under the Shadow of China-US Competition: Myanmar and Thailand's Alignment Choices," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 81–104, <https://doi.org/>; John Bradford, "China's Security Force Posture in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia," United States Institute of Peace, 15 December 2021, <https://www.usip.org/>; and "Joint Statement between the Kingdom of Thailand and the People's Republic of China on Working towards a Thailand - China Community with a Shared Future for Enhanced Stability, Prosperity and Sustainability" (press release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand, 19 November 2022), <https://www.mfa.go.th/>.

<sup>60</sup> "Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission—China's Military Diplomacy: Trends and Implications" (Washington DC, 26 January 2023); and Phillip C. Saunders and Melodie Ha, "Chinese Military Diplomacy" (presentation, National Defense University, prepared for "The PLA in a World of Strategic Competition with the United States," Institute for National Strategic Studies, November 2022).

<sup>61</sup> Sakshi Tiwari, "China Is Now Courting Thailand, A Key US Ally, With Joint Military Drills & Massive Arms Sales," *Eurasian Times*, 22 August 2022, <https://eurasianimes.com/>; Jack Detsch, "Washington Worries China Is Winning Over Thailand," *Foreign Policy*, 17 June 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>; Shawn W. Crispin, "China Losing, US Gaining Crucial Ground in Thailand," *Asia Times*, 9 June 2022, <https://asiatimes.com/>; Kevin Hewison, "Thailand: An Old Relationship Renewed," *Pacific Review* 31, no. 1 (1 January, 2018), 125–26, <https://doi.org/>; and Mark S Cogan, "Is Thailand Accommodating China?," *Southeast Asian Social Science Review* 4, no. 2 (2019), 38–39.

<sup>62</sup> Skaggs, "CCP Information Warfare," 129–30, 133–35; Cogan, "Is Thailand Accommodating China?," 33–37; and Crispin, "China Losing, US Gaining Crucial Ground in Thailand."

of PRC authorities. In 2014, Thai police detained 235 ethnic Uighurs who fled Chinese persecution and were seeking asylum. Despite international condemnation, Thailand's military junta deported the Uighur refugees back to Chinese authorities. Later in 2015, Chinese dissidents Jiang Yefei and Dong Guangping were also deported back to China when they fled to Thailand with their families after criticizing the CCP. Around the same time, Joshua Wong was arrested and deported in 2016 at the request of the Chinese government for his role in helping organize the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement.<sup>63</sup> More recently, Chinese dissident Gao Zhi and his family were arrested by Thai authorities in June of 2023 for allegedly making a series of bomb threats against airports, hotels, and the Chinese embassy. The family claims that Chinese authorities made bomb threats in their name to force Thai authorities to deport them back to China. Throughout these incidents, Thai authorities have denied caving to Chinese pressure and insist that these actions are simply enforcing Thai law and immigration policies. However, if Bangkok was accommodating Beijing's requests, the administrative angle offers plausible deniability for Thai leaders.<sup>64</sup>

On the other hand, Thailand has provoked Chinese ire by pushing back against several high-profile BRI infrastructure projects, the Lancang-Mekong River project, high-speed rail line plans, and the proposal for the Kra Canal. Initially approved in 2017, the Lancang-Mekong River project involves blasting 1.6 kilometers of rapids to expand river trade. Thailand suspended its portion of the project after Chinese construction of upstream dams significantly affected river flows, and China's domination of river traffic removed the benefit for Thai businesses. Bangkok also objected to Chinese-led riverboat police patrols through Thai territory.<sup>65</sup> Next, Thailand has repeatedly delayed the PRC's high-speed rail project since 2014. The lingering rail project has become a significant source of contention between Beijing and Bangkok. Thai officials have privately voiced concerns over the high cost and potential for China to take control of the strategic asset, as they did in

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<sup>63</sup> Wong was arrested shortly after he arrived at the Suvarnabhumi Airport in Bangkok. He was scheduled to give remarks as part of a forum at Chulalongkorn University commemorating the massacre of students protests at Thammasat University that occurred 6 October 1976. Cogan, "Is Thailand Accommodating China?," 33–37; "UN Anger after Thailand Departs 'Chinese Dissidents,'" *BBC News*, 17 November 2015, sec. Asia, <https://www.bbc.com/>; Jorge Silva, "Dissidents Fearful as Thailand, Once a Haven, Favors China," *Reuters*, 17 February, 2016, sec. APAC, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

<sup>64</sup> Wu Huizhong, Tian Macleod Ji, and Jintamas Saksornchai, "Accused of Bomb Threats They Say They Didn't Make, Family of Chinese Dissident Detained in Thailand," *ABC News*, 23 July 2023, <https://abcnews.go.com/>; and Cogan, "Is Thailand Accommodating China?," 33–37.

<sup>65</sup> Strangio, *In the Dragon's Shadow*, 134–36; and Crispin, "China Losing, US Gaining Crucial Ground."

Laos to settle the state's delinquent loans.<sup>66</sup> Lastly, the envisioned Kra Canal project has the potential to dramatically reshape the strategic environment in the region by introducing a shorter maritime route to the Indian Ocean by cutting through the Isthmus of Kra. Despite obvious economic benefits, Bangkok has repeatedly rebuffed the issue due to concerns over Chinese financing and creating a debt trap that could threaten Thai sovereignty. The canal would also physically divide the country and separate Thailand's rebellious Muslim population in the south from the rest of the country.<sup>67</sup>

These projects are part of the PRC's intent to bypass the United States' chokehold on the Straits of Malacca. Both the PRC and the United States rely on the maritime traffic flowing through the Straits to fuel their economies, and a land bridge through Southeast Asia would bypass this strategically important chokepoint to the Indian Ocean. Each of these options, however, must traverse Thailand's geography, a fact that Bangkok is well aware of. Thailand has repeatedly delayed and rebuffed BRI projects citing high costs, security and management arrangements, and sovereignty issues.<sup>68</sup> Simply put, Thailand is unwilling to be consumed by Chinese national security interests and will push back when Bangkok feels like their independence is threatened.

## **Conclusion**

### ***The Bamboo in the Wind***

Thai foreign policy has often been likened to a bamboo in the wind, alluding to bamboo's ability to adapt to whichever way the wind blows while still remaining firmly rooted to the ground.<sup>69</sup> As a symbol of Thai foreign policy, swaying bamboo signifies a strategic culture that skillfully blends pragmatism and adaptability to advance its interests. Thailand has a long tradition of balancing, hedging, and ac-

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<sup>66</sup> Crispin, "China Losing, US Gaining Crucial Ground"; Strangio, *In the Dragon's Shadow*, 139–40; and Cogan, "Is Thailand Accommodating China?," 40–41.

<sup>67</sup> Strangio, *In the Dragon's Shadow*, 138–39.

<sup>68</sup> Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground*, 312–13; and Strangio, *In the Dragon's Shadow*, 138–40.

<sup>69</sup> Kislenko attributes the analogy of the "bamboo in the wind" to an old Siamese proverb. Arne Kislenko, "Bending with the Wind: The Continuity and Flexibility of Thai Foreign Policy," *International Journal* 50, no. 4 (Autumn 2002), 537; and Strangio, *In the Dragon's Shadow*, 132.

commodating external interests while carefully preserving Thai independence.<sup>70</sup> This diplomatic legacy is evident in Thailand's penchant for sensing shifting power dynamics and adjusting its foreign relations accordingly. Much to the consternation of the Washington and Beijing, Bangkok makes independent decisions that advance Thai interests and preserve Thailand's sovereignty. Thailand resists efforts to pick a side in the ensuing strategic competition and prefers to play the United States and China off each other to achieve the best outcome for Thai interests.

The methodology in the previous section reveals that PRC influence in Thailand has markedly increased over the last few decades. PRC state-run media and social media are widely available. Chinese businessmen and entrepreneurs have footholds in Thailand's telecommunications, technology, manufacturing, agriculture, and tourism industries. And Beijing has fostered connections and *guanxi* networks with local influencers and the Sino-Thai community to advocate for Beijing's policies within Thailand. In many ways, Bangkok encourages the activity to benefit from China's growing economy. The Thai government promotes Chinese education, language, and cultural connections to attract Chinese foreign investment. In addition, Thai leaders have used their growing relationship with China to offset diplomatic pressure from the United States for advancing initiatives on human rights and democracy.<sup>71</sup>

Although PRC influence in Thailand has grown, Beijing's influence is not a cause for panic in Bangkok. With centuries of experience, Thai strategic culture has developed a level of familiarity as well as a set of antibodies to regulate Chinese influence. Thailand traditionally employs domestic law, its security and military establishment, Thai culture and nationalism, and its relationships with other foreign powers to help regulate PRC influence within the country.<sup>72</sup> The new wave of Chinese immigrants and businesses in Thailand offers potential pathways to advance

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<sup>70</sup> In 1855, Siam decisively terminated its tributary relationship with the Chinese emperor, making it the first country to do so. Unlike its regional neighbors, Siam skillfully averted colonization by navigating European rivalries and conceding peripheral provinces to mitigate imperial influence. Later, Bangkok aligned itself with the United States by entering World War I against the Central Powers, later shifting its support to Japan during World War II, and subsequently supporting US endeavors to contain the spread of communism from both the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China during the Cold War. In the 1990s, Thailand took a pragmatic leadership role by actively engaging with the PRC on economic development in Southeast Asia and welcoming China into ASEAN. However, following the US disengagement in response to the 2014 coup in Thailand, Bangkok realigned itself, leaning back toward its relationship with the PRC. Kislenko, "Bending with the Wind," 538–42, 555; Strangio, *In the Dragon's Shadow*, 132; Cogan, "Is Thailand Accommodating China?," 25–27, 29–30; and Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground*, 4–6.

<sup>71</sup> Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground*, 10–13; Zawacki, "Of Questionable Connectivity"; Lertpusit, "Chinese Investment into Thai Private Universities," 4–6; and Rappa, "The Teochew Chinese of Thailand," 13–15.

<sup>72</sup> Strangio, *In the Dragon's Shadow*, 132–33.

PRC malign interests within Thailand, and Bangkok's regulatory framework attempts to manage foreign influence by monitoring and controlling media ownership, foreign business and investment activity, and international and nongovernmental charitable organizations.<sup>73</sup> Thailand has also strengthened its already strict graft laws by increasing the punishment for corruption and bribery and expanding the law to cover actions by foreign officials and organizations.<sup>74</sup>

Moreover, Thai security services continue to contest the negative aspects of Chinese influence such as illegal immigration, human and drug trafficking, gambling and scam networks, corruption, and fake news in the local information environment.<sup>75</sup> The Royal Thai Police regularly arrest government officials and immigration police officers on bribery and corruption charges linked to illicit Chinese money and organized crime.<sup>76</sup> In addition, the Thai government established the Anti-Fake News Center to combat misinformation and the Police Cyber Taskforce to combat technology-related crimes and increase cybersecurity from threats largely emanating from China.<sup>77</sup> The ability of Chinese money to bend Thailand's laws is

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<sup>73</sup> "Foreign Business Act of 1999 and Activities Related to Foreign Nationals," Board of Investment of Thailand, September 2015, <https://www.boi.go.th/>; US Embassy Bangkok, "2021 Investment Climate Statements: Thailand," United States Department of State, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/>; "Operating a Foreign Non-Governmental Organization in Thailand," Siam Legal International, 5 August 2016, <https://www.siam-legal.com/>; "Primary Laws Governing the Operations of Foreign NGOs in Thailand," Siam Legal International, 11 August 2016, <https://www.siam-legal.com/>.

<sup>74</sup> Santipap Dumprapai and Prin Laomanutsak, "Understanding How Thai Law Looks at Bribery, Gift-Giving and Appropriate Controls," *DLA Piper* (blog), 29 June 2022, <https://www.dlapiper.com/>; and Timothy Breier, "Anti-Corruption in Thailand," *Global Compliance News*, 2023, <https://www.globalcompliancenes.com/>.

<sup>75</sup> Critics have documented numerous instances where the Thai government suppressed information critical of the ruling party or censored information to favor the PRC. However, Thai authorities also consistently regulate PRC narratives and activities. "Language Barrier, Stereotypes Frustrate New Chinese Migrants to Thailand," *South China Morning Post*, 31 March 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/>; Lertpusit, "The Patterns of New Chinese Immigration in Thailand," 74–76; Whitman, "Raids on Drinking and Gambling Dens"; Siriphon and Li, "Chinese Dream, Emerging Statecraft, and Chinese Influence"; "Country Profile for Thailand," *Reporters Without Borders*, 27 April 2023, <https://rsf.org/>; Gershaneck, *Political Warfare*, 87–91; and Cogan, "Is Thailand Accommodating China?," 33–34.

<sup>76</sup> Assawin Pakkawan, "11 Immigration Police, Officials Arrested on Bribery Charges," *Bangkok Post*, 17 September 2022, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>; "110 Thai Immigration Police Officers in the Dock over Bogus Visas," *Nation Thailand*, 6 February 2023, <https://www.nationthailand.com/>; and Vijitra Duangdee, "Criminal Charges Expected in Thailand Over Chinese Immigration," *VOA News*, 16 March 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/>.

<sup>77</sup> "Anti-Fake News Center Thailand," Anti-Fake News Center Thailand, Thai Government, 2023, <https://www.antifakenewscenter.com/>; "Thai Police Online," *Thai Police Online*, 2023, <https://www.thaipoliceonline.com/>; and "Thailand Cybercrime: Police Get 5,600-plus Complaints in a Single Week," *Nation Thailand*, 7 June 2023, sec. Thailand, <https://www.nationthailand.com/>.

concerning, but these enforcement activities also show the ability of Thailand's domestic regulatory framework to push back against Chinese malign influence.<sup>78</sup>

Unlike its neighbors, Thailand has so far managed to navigate its relationship without becoming overly reliant or subservient to Beijing. Thailand's economic strength and regional influence give Bangkok more options to navigate its relationship with Beijing. Thailand's enduring relationship with the United States, and its growing ties with other regional powers such as Japan and India, enable Thailand to set the terms of its engagement with the PRC.<sup>79</sup> While discussing Chinese influence, Sebastian Strangio noted that despite the growing Sino-Thai relationship, Thailand "remains willing and able to push back against anything perceived to compromise Thai sovereignty."<sup>80</sup> Despite considerable pressure from Beijing, several large infrastructure and foreign weapon deals have been delayed or canceled due to the perceived risk to Thai sovereignty. Thai policymakers deflected proposals for the Kra Canal, rejected Chinese-led security patrols for the Mekong River, delayed the Sino-Thai railway project, and revisited the purchase of Chinese-built military equipment when the projects potentially threatened Bangkok's independence.<sup>81</sup> Simply put, the Thai government places limits on how much it is willing to sway with the Chinese.

### ***Building Strong Roots***

Given the growing level of PRC influence in Thailand, it is important for US policy makers to realize that the United States has opportunities to strengthen the US-Thai relationship. US-Thai interests are largely aligned regarding the PRC; neither want Thailand to sacrifice its sovereignty by becoming a satellite within China's orbit. These core interests provide opportunities that should guide future US-Thai engagement. Instead of fighting Thailand's natural tendency to sway with the wind, US policy makers should focus on fostering strong roots that can withstand the storm. In other words, Washington should find ways to co-opt and strengthen Bangkok's natural immunities for balancing foreign influence. Washington and Bangkok are both working through how to balance economic engagement with the PRC while managing the negative effects of Chinese malign influence domestically. US efforts that are perceived to help Thailand preserve its

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<sup>78</sup> Duangdee, "Criminal Charges Expected in Thailand."

<sup>79</sup> Strangio, *In the Dragon's Shadow*, 132-33.

<sup>80</sup> Strangio, *In the Dragon's Shadow*, 139.

<sup>81</sup> Strangio, *In the Dragon's Shadow*, 138-39; "Thai Military Suspends Deals on Foreign Weapons While Nation Battles COVID-19," *Benar News*, 22 April 2020, <https://www.benarnews.org/>; and Hewison, "Thailand," 128.

sovereignty would likely be well received in Bangkok. Initiatives to help Thai security services detect and characterize malign Chinese influence, continued partnerships and capacity-building efforts with Thailand's security and military services, sharing regulatory best practices to close loopholes and manage foreign influence, deepening relationships with other foreign powers, and empowering multilateral institutions and organizations such as ASEAN should be seen as opportunities by Washington to counterbalance Chinese malign influence. Due to Thailand's influence with its neighbors, multilateral efforts can encourage regional-level action to balance Chinese influence across Southeast Asia.<sup>82</sup>

Building strong roots also involves investing in the US–Thai relationship for the long-term. This includes competing for influence, prioritizing the relationship over individual setbacks, and increasing US cultural and language proficiency. A critical part of competing is actually showing up for the competition. US perceptions about “losing” influence with the Thai government are more about US neglect than they are about Chinese displacement.<sup>83</sup> Washington needs to prioritize diplomatic and economic efforts in Thailand that advance mutually beneficial outcomes and act as a counterbalance to PRC influence. To that end, the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity will help expand US economic investment in the region.<sup>84</sup> Reinforcing Thailand's relationship with other regional powers such as Japan, India, and Australia, as well as further developing partnerships in Europe, presents additional opportunities for Bangkok to manage its exposure to Beijing. Next, the United States must be pragmatic and play a long game. Washington will not gain anything by completely disengaging with Bangkok over temporary setbacks. US actions to “chastise” Thailand after the 2014 coup were largely a self-inflicted wound that opened the door for increased Chinese influence. With this in mind, Washington must be extremely cautious when prioritizing values and short-term transactions at the expense of long-term influence. Lastly, the United States needs to reprioritize Thai cultural and language programs at US universities and for US diplomats and military leaders to develop relationships at the personal level.<sup>85</sup> The essence of these efforts to build stronger roots requires rediscovering the tenets for multinational operations in US joint military doctrine. The tenets of multinational operations include respect, rapport, partner knowledge, patience, trust, and confi-

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<sup>82</sup> Lowy Institute, “Thailand - Lowy Institute Asia Power Index,” *Lowy Institute Asia Power Index 2023*, 2023, <https://power.lowyinstitute.org/>; Strangio, *In the Dragon's Shadow*, 132–33, 284–89; and Loomis and Holz, “China's Efforts to Shape the Information Environment,” 41–42.

<sup>83</sup> Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground*, 301; and Cogan, “Is Thailand Accommodating China?,” 43.

<sup>84</sup> “Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity Fact Sheet” (fact sheet, The White House, 23 May 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>; and Strangio, *In the Dragon's Shadow*, 284–87.

<sup>85</sup> Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground*, 301–6.

dence. Building trust between partners takes time, attention, and patience. However, this foundational investment in trust and confidence is what enables unity of effort with our allies and partners in the region.<sup>86</sup> ★

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<sup>86</sup> Joint Publication 3-16: *Multinational Operations* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 1 March 2021), I3-4, <https://www.jcs.mil/>.