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**THAILAND'S FOREIGN POLICY**  
**Domestic, Institutional, and Regional Challenges in a New Era**

**Guest Editor**  
**Mark S. Cogan**  
**Kansai Gaidai University**



# JIPA

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*Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs (JIPA)*

600 Chennault Circle

Maxwell AFB AL 36112-6010

email: JIPA@au.af.edu

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# Navigating New Realities

## The Future of US–Thai Relations

AMBASSADOR SCOT MARCIEL

### Abstract

This article explores the shifting dynamics of US–Thai relations, emphasizing missed opportunities and potential areas of collaboration. Recent Thai elections could have rekindled US enthusiasm as a victory for democracy, but the conservative establishment’s actions led to a less democratic outcome. Yet, with a new Thai government and foreign minister, opportunities arise for increased cooperation. Potential areas of focus include safeguarding the Mekong River ecosystem, addressing climate change, and strengthening economic ties in mainland Southeast Asia. Additionally, this shift presents a chance for more constructive dialogue on Myanmar, especially in terms of cross-border humanitarian assistance. In the realm of defense and security, discussions on transforming U-Tapao Air Base into a regional disaster relief hub and addressing potential security concerns, such as Chinese access to Ream Naval Base in Cambodia, are on the horizon. While a return to the alliance’s heyday may seem improbable, this article argues that patience, persistence, and an acknowledgment of new geopolitical realities can pave the way for a more productive relationship between these long-standing allies.

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With the conclusion of the Cold War, Southeast Asia entered a transformative era that spanned approximately 25 years. During this period, the geopolitics of the region underwent profound changes, reshaping the foundations of regional security. Washington’s two pivotal alliances in Southeast Asia, which had been cornerstones of stability, struggled to find purpose. In the post-Cold War era, US–Philippine relations weathered a turbulent course, while the alliance between Washington and Bangkok drifted. Policy makers in Washington relegated both alliances to secondary roles in US Asian foreign policy.

However, since the inauguration of the Bongbong Marcos administration, the past year has witnessed a revitalization of the US–Philippine alliance. A series of proactive measures have been taken to strengthen defense ties, highlighted by Marcos’ successful visit to Washington and a continuous stream of high-level US officials visiting Manila. In stark contrast, US–Thai relations have continued to amble along,

characterized by senior-level visits but a conspicuous lack of momentum, leading some to question whether the relationship qualifies any longer as an “alliance.”<sup>1</sup>

### **How Did We Reach This Point?**

Numerous factors have contributed to the erosion of the alliance, which reached its zenith during the Vietnam War, driven by mutual concerns regarding communist expansionism. Rewinding to 1975, the fall of Saigon and the broader US withdrawal from the region left Thai officials bewildered, shaking their confidence in Washington. Consequently, they embarked on diversifying their international relationships, notably by establishing ties with China.

The conclusion of the Cold War severed the alliance from a shared threat or adversary, and it marked the loss of the strategic lens through which Washington had previously viewed Thailand and Southeast Asia as a whole. The United States began exerting pressure on Thailand on a wide array of issues, spanning from trade matters to democracy and human rights. Thai officials voiced discontent, asserting that they were no longer receiving the special treatment befitting an ally. Furthermore, during the 1997–1998 Asian Financial Crisis, Washington offered minimal support and encouraged Thailand to follow the International Monetary Fund’s stringent prescriptions. In stark contrast, China provided more substantial support to its new partner. This period of US policy remains a source of disappointment, if not anger, for many Thais.

Relations experienced a modest warming in the early 2000s. Washington embraced Thailand’s democratic progress, its cooperation in the Global War on Terror, and its role as a regional hub for security cooperation, humanitarian relief, and US diplomatic endeavors. The US military and American officials working closely with Bangkok highly valued Thailand’s collaboration on an array of issues. The George W. Bush administration even bestowed major non-NATO ally status upon Thailand and initiated negotiations for a bilateral free trade agreement. However, this period of the alliance paled in comparison to its former “glory days.” This was evident in the absence of a shared threat perception, the dearth of substantial personal connections between senior Thai and US officials, and the relatively limited attention Washington—outside of the Pentagon—paid to Thailand.

The downward trajectory of the relationship gained momentum in 2006 when the Thai military ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra’s government in a

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<sup>1</sup> Several authors recently have discussed this alliance versus partnership question. See, for example, Benjamin Zawacki, “U.S.-Thai Relations Have an Alliance Problem,” *Foreign Policy*, 12 May 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>; and Murray Hiebert, “The United States Makes Up Critical Terrain in Thailand,” *CSIS*, 2 September 2022, <https://www.csis.org/>.

coup. Washington denounced the coup and suspended military assistance in compliance with the law, though this reaction did not precipitate a complete breakdown in the relationship. Over the subsequent years, Thailand's deep-seated political polarization, persistent street protests by the "yellow shirts" and "red shirts," and occasional judicial interventions in electoral politics led to bewilderment and frustration among US officials.<sup>2</sup> They struggled to comprehend why the Thai establishment found it challenging to accept the outcomes of competitive elections.

The turning point came in 2014 with another military coup, which prompted a sharply critical response from the United States. This included another suspension of military aid and a deliberate distancing of the United States from the new Thai government. In response, the coup government and its conservative supporters bitterly criticized Washington, alleging double standards and a lack of understanding of the Thai situation. The government also began leaning increasingly toward China, which offered diplomatic backing, arms, and additional defense cooperation. Bangkok maintained a distinct chilliness toward the United States for several years, even initiating a brief 'investigation' of US Ambassador Glyn Davies for public comments related to the *lèse-majesté* law.<sup>3</sup>

The Trump administration, with a focus on the geopolitical rivalry with China rather than democracy and human rights, reengaged with Thailand in 2017–2018. It invited then–Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha to the White House and restored military-to-military relations following Thailand's pseudo-democratic 2019 elections. These actions stabilized bilateral relations, albeit at a less enthusiastic level than what the two countries had enjoyed for decades.

## **Where Relations Stand Today**

After a sluggish start, the Biden administration ramped up its efforts in 2022 to enhance the United States' relationship with Thailand. This included hosting Prime Minister Prayut as part of the US–ASEAN Summit, convening the inau-

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<sup>2</sup> See: Janjira Sombatpoonsiri, "Two Thailands: Clashing Political Orders and Entrenched Polarization," in *Political Polarization in South and Southeast Asia: Old Divisions, New Dangers*, ed. Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020), 67–80, <https://carnegieendowment.org/>. The red shirts initially emerged as backers of the deposed former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who faced removal in a military coup in September 2006. Over time, this support shifted to Thailand's ruling Pheu Thai party, led by Thaksin's sister, Yingluck Shinawatra. Conversely, the yellow shirts signify those who stood in opposition to Mr. Thaksin and played a pivotal role in the street protests that precipitated the 2006 coup.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Fuller, "Thai Police Investigate U.S. Ambassador on Suspicion of Insulting the King," *New York Times*, 9 December 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/>. This law makes it illegal to defame, insult, or threaten the monarch of Thailand.

gural bilateral Strategic and Defense Dialogue, dispatching Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to Bangkok for discussions on military modernization, and publicly lauding the signing of a communiqué by Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai. The communiqué was framed as an expansion of the renowned 1962 Rusk–Thanat communiqué, which had solidified the alliance half a century earlier.<sup>4</sup>

Despite these advancements, the relationship has yet to approach its previous heights for several notable reasons. Foremost, the two nations lack a shared perception of common threats. Notably, the United States perceives China as a threat, while Thailand regards China as a significant partner. Consequently, Washington has no doubt felt dissatisfaction with the deepening security ties between Thailand and China, including arms sales and joint military exercises.

Secondly, the United States has voiced its discontent with Thailand’s robust support for the Myanmar junta and its neutral stance regarding Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Thirdly, the Biden administration continues to be disappointed with the Thai conservative establishment’s employment of legal and parliamentary tactics to impede the restoration of full democracy in the kingdom. As an indication of this disappointment, the Biden administration opted not to invite Thailand to participate in its December 2021 and March 2023 Summits for Democracy. These decisions irked Thai authorities, as did President Joe Biden’s choice to skip the Thailand-hosted Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation leaders meeting in late 2022.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Washington’s recent refusal of Thailand’s request to purchase F-35 fighter jets, possibly influenced by concerns regarding Thailand’s deepening security ties with China, undoubtedly contributed to Bangkok’s frustration.<sup>6</sup>

## The Way Ahead

As previously highlighted, the current reality has prompted some to question the relevance of the US–Thailand alliance in its current form. Some wonder if it might be more accurate to reclassify the relationship as something other than a traditional alliance, considering the glaring lack of strategic alignment and Thai-

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<sup>4</sup> “Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Thai Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai Remarks to the Press” (press release, US Department of State, 10 July 2022), <https://www.state.gov/>.

<sup>5</sup> Masayuki Yuda, “Thailand Belittled Again as U.S. Ostracizes It From Democracy Summit,” *Nikkei Asia*, 9 December 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/>; and “Thailand Shut Out of U.S. Democracy Summit Again,” *Bangkok Post*, 29 March 2023, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Fulco and Chen Chuanren, “U.S.-Thai Military Alliance Is At A Crossroads,” *Aviation Week*, 19 July 2023, <https://aviationweek.com/>.

land's burgeoning closeness to China. Considering these factors, it appears that the objectives of the two nations are increasingly divergent. In fact, discreet voices in Thailand have been quietly suggesting for years that their "alliance" with the United States appears less meaningful and valuable when compared to Washington's "partnerships" with non-allies, such as Singapore and even Vietnam.

While it is true that the current state of the relationship is more aptly described as a partnership rather than a conventional alliance, this does not necessarily imply that the governments should terminate the alliance altogether. In the realm of diplomacy, such a move would inevitably be perceived as a downgrade of the relationship, regardless of any new title applied to it. It would be more prudent for both governments to focus on enhancing the substance and tone of the relationship while accepting the inherent ambiguity of being somewhat misaligned allies.

The key to strengthening these ties lies in both countries adjusting their expectations regarding each other and the relationship itself. The United States should accept that Thailand is not currently strategically aligned with Washington nor a full-fledged democracy. Nevertheless, Thailand can still play a crucial role as an important partner. This recognition, among other factors, necessitates patience concerning Thailand's domestic politics and faith that the kingdom will not fall excessively under China's influence. Instead, like Indonesia and Malaysia, it can seek to maintain positive relations with both major powers as well as numerous middle powers.

On the other hand, Thailand should realize that its relationship with Washington holds significance for its own strategic autonomy, security, and economic interests. It should strive to be a more constructive partner.

Moving forward, both nations can capitalize on the numerous strengths within their broad and deep relationship. The United States remains Thailand's leading export market and its third-largest source of foreign investment. Thailand has also aligned itself with Washington's Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. Health cooperation, notably the long-standing partnership in health research, continues to thrive. The security relationship, which has long been at the core of the alliance, remains robust, albeit less exclusive than in the past. The United States and Thailand jointly host the influential annual Cobra Gold exercise and engage in cooperation and training across various domains. Washington continues to be a key supplier of weaponry and equipment to the Thai military. The two countries also collaborate closely on law enforcement, including counternarcotics efforts. People-to-people connections, including the Peace Corps program, educational exchanges, scholarships, and various initiatives, help maintain a deep reservoir of goodwill between the two nations.



The recent Thai elections represented a missed opportunity. The establishment of a new government led by the victorious political party could have triggered a surge in US enthusiasm for the relationship, not because Washington endorsed a particular party, but because it would have marked a triumph for democracy. Regrettably, Thailand's conservative establishment obstructed that party from forming a government, resulting in a less democratic outcome.

Despite the disappointing outcome, the emergence of a new Thai government and a fresh Thai foreign minister provides an opening to strengthen cooperation between the US and Thailand on regional and subregional issues. Thailand has traditionally been influential in these areas, but its diplomacy lacked vigor during the Prayut era. This potential cooperation encompasses expanded efforts to safeguard the crucial Mekong River ecosystem, increased collaboration on mitigating and addressing climate change, and the enhancement of economic ties among mainland Southeast Asian nations.

A new government could also facilitate more constructive dialogue regarding Myanmar, offering a prime opportunity to increase cross-border humanitarian assistance. On the defense and security front, both countries should reinstate discussions on the earlier proposal to transform U-Tapao Air Base into a regional disaster relief hub. Additionally, regular dialogues on potential security concerns, such as the possibility of Chinese access to Ream Naval Base in Cambodia, are essential.

While a return to the alliance's heyday seems unlikely, a path to a more productive and robust relationship between these long-standing allies exists through patience, persistence, and a willingness to embrace new geopolitical realities. 🌟

#### **Ambassador Scot Marciel**

Ambassador Marciel is Oksenberg-Rohlen Fellow at Stanford University's Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center. Previously, he was a 2020-22 Visiting Scholar and Visiting Practitioner Fellow on Southeast Asia at APARC. A retired diplomat, he served as US Ambassador to Myanmar from March 2016 through May 2020. Prior to serving in Myanmar, Marciel served as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Asia and the Pacific at the Department of State, where he oversaw US relations with Southeast Asia, and as US Ambassador to Indonesia.

Ambassador Marciel earned an MA from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, and a BA in international relations from the University of California at Davis. He was born and raised in Fremont, California, and is married with two children.

# Characterizing Chinese Influence in Thailand

COL RYAN D. SKAGGS, USAF, PhD

COL NITUS CHUKAEW, ROYAL THAI ARMY

LCDR JORDAN STEPHENS, USN

## 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 Languepin, "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; Languepin, "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.chinathaicham.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 Deports '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. Kislenco, "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> ✪

**Col Ryan D. Skaggs, PhD, USAF**

Colonel Skaggs is a career intelligence officer currently serving as the Chief of US Indo-Pacific Command (USIN-DOPACOM) Warfighter Support for the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security. He previously served as a Director for Defense Policy and Strategy at the National Security Council and as an airpower strategist in CHECKMATE for the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations in the Pentagon where he focused on Indo-Pacific affairs. He holds a PhD in military strategy from Air University; his dissertation was on Chinese Communist Party information warfare.

**COL Nitus Chukaew, Royal Thai Army**

Colonel Chukaew is an officer in the Royal Thai Army and serves as the Deputy Director of the Training Division to the Office of Joint and Combined Exercise Planning and the Directorate for Joint Operations. He holds a master's degree in environmental sciences from the University of Colorado in Denver.

**LCDR Jordan Stephens, USN**

Lieutenant Commander Stephens is a career Supply and Logistics Naval Officer serving as the Joint Petroleum Officer to US Northern Command (USNORTHCOM). He holds a Master of Business Administration from the University of Kansas.

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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/>.

# An Unreconciled Gap

## Thailand's Human Rights Foreign Policy versus Its Lèse-majesté Crisis

DR. PAVIN CHACHAVALPONGPUN

### Abstract

The increasing use of lèse-majesté laws in Thailand against political opponents, particularly following the 2020–2021 youth-led protests, has raised concerns. By February 2023, 1,895 individuals faced political prosecution in 1,180 cases, with 233 charged under these laws, including a 14-year-old girl. This situation has influenced Thailand's foreign policy approach to human rights. This article explores how lèse-majesté laws have impacted Thailand's international relations, asserting that its human rights diplomacy is influenced by evolving global politics. Two challenges emerge: first, the regime prioritizes stability over human rights, with the United States and China tolerating rights violations for strategic gain. Second, the rise of illiberal regimes in Southeast Asia normalizes such laws, hindering criticism of human rights abuses and creating a “glass ceiling effect” where states avoid condemning abuses to avoid exposing their own inconsistencies.

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Since the Thaksin Shinawatra government's downfall in 2006, Thailand's foreign policy has appeared adrift. Subsequent regimes in Bangkok grappled with defending themselves amid escalating political divisions. These divisions deepened as the looming royal succession challenged King Bhumibol Adulyadej's political dominance, coinciding with the monarchy's decline. Political elites, traditionally reliant on the monarchy's strength, redirected their focus to domestic politics, neglecting a proactive foreign policy.

This shift contrasts sharply with the Thaksin era, marked by innovative foreign policies. The preoccupation with domestic struggles left Thailand's global engagement reactive and diminished its role in diplomacy.

Amid Thailand's declining foreign affairs, a concerning trend has emerged. The need to defend the monarchy's political position has led to a noticeable increase in the use of lèse-majesté laws against political opponents. Lèse-majesté, defined by Article 112 of the Thai Criminal Code, criminalizes defamatory, insulting, or threatening remarks about the king, queen, and regent, carrying sentences of three to 15 years in prison. For the first time in modern Thai history, the monarchy's politicization became a public issue, marked by the 2020–2021 youth-led protests advocating immediate monarchical reform. These protests challenged the long-held

tradition of refraining from open discussions about the monarchy, signaling a critical shift in Thai politics where royal power was contested.

To quell criticisms against the monarchy, the Thai state exploited the *lèse-majesté* law as a tool to ensure regime stability, resulting in devastating human rights violations. Since the 2020 and 2021 protests, the number of *lèse-majesté* cases has skyrocketed, with 1,895 people facing political prosecution in 1,180 cases by February 2023, including a 14-year-old girl.<sup>1</sup> This situation has drawn global attention and become a determinant factor in Thailand's foreign affairs.

While the deteriorating human rights situation has impacted Thailand's global position, human rights agendas remain marginalized in its foreign policy. The article argues that Thailand's emphasis on human rights diplomacy depends on shifting international politics. A Thai human rights foreign policy faces two significant challenges. Firstly, high politics, vital for the state's survival, consistently outweigh human rights concerns in Thai foreign relations. Notably, two major partners, the United States and China, prioritize their strategic interests over human rights, sustaining the *lèse-majesté* crisis.

Additionally, the rise of illiberal regimes in Southeast Asia has normalized the utilization of *lèse-majesté* laws against their own citizens. This normalization has given rise to the "glass ceiling effect," where states hosting significant human rights violations within their borders refrain from criticizing other rights abusers. This reluctance stems from the fear of exposing inconsistencies between their professed commitment to human rights protection in the region and the harsh reality on the ground.<sup>2</sup> These illiberal regimes have formed informal alliances, providing mutual support to justify their respective human rights abuses, all in the pursuit of safeguarding their regimes.

Consequently, this has resulted in the development of a reactive foreign policy concerning human rights. This study adopts a two-level game approach, considering both domestic and foreign factors, to illustrate the interconnected relationship between the formulation of human rights foreign policy and the evolving international landscape. It specifically examines the *lèse-majesté* situation from the 2020 protests onward. While this research contributes to the existing body of literature

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<sup>1</sup> "February 2023, 1,895 People Politically Prosecuted in 1,180 Cases," *Thai Lawyers for Human Rights*, 17 March 2023, <https://tlhr2014.com/>; and "14 Year-old Girl Accused of Lèse-majesté," *112WATCH*, 12 February 2023, <https://112watch.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> For example, the "glass ceiling" effect can be apparently seen in the position of Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff to justify her country's noncriticism of the notorious violations in two countries that she visited in February 2012—Venezuela and Cuba—in her capacity as head of state, because of Brazil's own poor record of human rights protection. See: Camila Lissa Asano, "Foreign Policy and Human Rights in Emerging Countries," *SUR* 19 (1 May 2013), <https://sur.conectas.org/>.

on Thailand's foreign policy, it introduces a novel perspective on Thai foreign relations, focusing on the contentious *lèse-majesté* law.

To substantiate the reactivity of Thai foreign policy, this study will analyze Thailand's statements defending its position on the *lèse-majesté* law in traditional international forums. Additionally, it will scrutinize Thailand's foreign policy activities at bilateral, regional, and multilateral levels, with the aim of disseminating information that confirms the inextricable link between the Thai state's perception of human rights and the shifting regional and global order.

Lastly, the article briefly delves into the recent Thai elections held on 14 May 2023, shedding light on the formation of a new government and providing an analysis of its stance on Article 112. This analysis offers insights into the future trajectory of Thai foreign policy and its approach to human rights, especially considering the persistent influence of geopolitical factors on Thai diplomacy.

### **Human Rights Foreign Policy in Emerging Thailand**

A substantial body of literature delves into the role of human rights in foreign policy. Much of this research centers on whether and to what extent states view the promotion of human rights beyond their borders as essential to their national interests. Within the realm of international relations, defending human rights is justified through various avenues. Human rights represent an ideational interest, distinct from material interests such as national sovereignty, territorial integrity, or economic prosperity. Ideational interests may also encompass pursuits like the advancement of peace, international cooperation, and humanitarianism. Furthermore, human rights can serve as a defining value that shapes a nation's identity, a critical lever in diplomatic endeavors.

Gareth Evans examines the foreign policies of Canada and Australia, contending that aligning with values can be a strategic means of advancing national interests. He poses a fundamental question: Why should nations, like Canadians, Australians, or others, concern themselves with issues like human rights violations, health crises, environmental disasters, weapons proliferation, or other problems afflicting distant nations when these matters do not directly impact their immediate physical security or economic well-being in the context of their traditionally defined material interests? Evans' work highlights that acting as responsible global citizens yields reputational and reciprocal-action benefits, bridging the gap between realism and constructivism, and offering realists compelling reasons to adopt con-

structuralist perspectives. In his view, values should not be optional add-ons to a state's foreign policy; they should be woven into its fabric.<sup>3</sup>

Within the diplomatic sphere, the promotion of human rights in foreign policy can contribute to fostering a positive national self-image. National self-image often aligns with a nation's political culture and can influence the roles states choose to play in international relations. In the United States, public opinion polls have shown widespread support for the protection of human rights and the advancement of democracy abroad as legitimate and even important foreign policy objectives.<sup>4</sup>

However, some states openly reject certain universal human rights as part of their political culture and self-image construction. For instance, certain Islamic states uphold cultural and national particularism, which legitimizes their rejection of universal human rights not grounded in Islam.<sup>5</sup> The example of Iran underscores the inconsistencies and challenges evident in the postures of emerging countries concerning international human rights protection.<sup>6</sup> As emerging nations aspire to assume greater international roles in an era of heightened multipolarity, their commitment to enhancing the international human rights system remains less clear. This is because some of these emerging states themselves engage in human rights violations against their own citizens. Consequently, they often abstain from supporting resolutions condemning blatant human rights abuses in multilateral forums, underscoring the intricate relationship between domestic and foreign factors and their impact on human rights foreign policy.

In the Thai context, the intermittent periods of democratic rule punctuated by military juntas have posed significant challenges to the implementation of a human rights foreign policy. Even during periods of elected governments, such as the Thaksin administration, severe human rights violations occurred, exemplified by the massacres of the Muslim minority in the southernmost provinces of Thailand

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<sup>3</sup> Gareth Evans, "Values and Interests in Foreign Policy Making." *Simon Papers in Security and Development* 53, (October 2016), 7–10.

<sup>4</sup> David P. Forsythe, "Introduction," in *Human Rights and Comparative Foreign Policy: Foundations of Peace*, ed. David P. Forsythe (Tokyo: United Nations University, 2000), 6.

<sup>5</sup> See: Ali Akbar Alikhani, "Iran's Religious Fundamentals and Principles in Interaction with the International System," in *Iran and the International System*, eds. Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Reza Molavi (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Asana, "Foreign Policy and Human Rights in Emerging Countries."

in 2004.<sup>7</sup> Notably, the strategic positioning of Thailand as a partner by certain Western powers has effectively prioritized political and economic interests over the promotion of human rights within the country.

Concurrently, successive Thai governments have selectively embraced certain international agendas to bolster the perception of their commitment to internationalism and enhance the nation's global image. For instance, during his tenure, Thaksin nominated his foreign minister, Surakiart Sathirathai, as a candidate for the position of United Nations Secretary General in 2006, symbolizing his pursuit of an internationalist foreign policy. In a paradoxical turn, Surakiart, in his 2004 address at the United Nations General Assembly, advocated for world peace, even as his government engaged in widespread human rights violations against the Muslim minority that same year.<sup>8</sup>

Although Surakiart's bid for the UN's top position ultimately failed, it did not result in complete failure for Thailand. The country managed to evade international sanctions related to the Deep South massacres. The United States, occupied with solidifying its relationship with Thailand in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, willingly downplayed human rights abuses committed by the Thai state.<sup>9</sup> A Thai alliance was crucial in the American War on Terror. This situation highlights how the Thai human rights crisis became entangled in the shifting dynamics of international power politics, a trend that continues to exert influence even in 2023.

### **The Troubled *lèse-majesté* Law**

The *lèse-majesté* law, first enacted in 1908 toward the end of King Chulalongkorn's reign (1868–1910), holds a distinct place in Thailand's constitutional monarchy. The monarchy reinforced this law in the aftermath of the Second World War. A gradual increase in *lèse-majesté* cases marked the early years of King

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<sup>7</sup> In April 2004, thirty-two gunmen took shelter in the Krue Se Mosque in Pattani. Previously, more than 100 Islamic militants conducted attacks on 10 police outposts across Pattani, Yala, and Songkla provinces. After a standoff lasting several hours, soldiers attacked and killed all 32 gunmen. In October of the same year, another tragedy took place. Around 1,500 people demonstrated in front of a police station in Tak Bai (a district in Narathiwat province), calling for the police to release their detained friends. Many demonstrators were arrested and transported to an army camp in Pattani. They were handcuffed and stacked atop one another in trucks. Five hours later, when the trucks arrived at the camp, 78 detainees had died from suffocation and organ collapse. The two incidents—Krue Se and Tak Bai—effectively renewed a profound mistrust between the Muslim community and the Thai state. See: Duncan McCargo, *Rethinking Thailand's Southern Violence* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007), 4–5.

<sup>8</sup> Statement by H.E. Dr. Surakiart Sathirathai, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, at the 59th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 27 September 2004, 4, <https://www.un.org/>.

<sup>9</sup> The United States went ahead with the Cobra Gold military exercise with Thailand in May 2004, a month after the massacre in the Krue Se Mosque.

Bhumibol Adulyadej's reign (1946–2016). However, the situation escalated significantly in the twilight years of Bhumibol's reign, driven by political elites' concerns over the impending end of an era and its potential impact on their political interests. Thailand gained international notoriety for having the world's most stringent *lèse-majesté* law during this period.<sup>10</sup>

The uncertainty surrounding the royal transition amplified anxiety among the elites. To manage this anxiety, the *lèse-majesté* law became an instrument used to secure loyalty to the monarchy and quash opposition. Over time, this not only indicated a weakening of the rule of law but also severely tarnished the country's image and reputation as a champion of human rights.<sup>11</sup>

Since the ascension of King Vajiralongkorn to the throne in 2016, the *lèse-majesté* policy has grown increasingly unpredictable. Following a meeting with Vajiralongkorn in 2018, social critic Sulak Sivaraksa disclosed that the king expressed his desire to see no new *lèse-majesté* cases filed. Sulak stated, "He is very concerned with the survival of the monarchy, and about whether this country could be democratic."<sup>12</sup> While it is true that the *lèse-majesté* law fell into disuse in late 2017, it resurfaced in November 2020 in response to the anti-monarchy sentiment that blossomed during the 2020–2021 protests (see table 1).

The recent youth-led protests effectively shattered a long-standing taboo against openly criticizing the monarchy in Thailand. Many core protest leaders faced *lèse-majesté* charges, resulting in some detentions and others fleeing the country.<sup>13</sup> Among those charged was Thanalop Phalanchai, who faced *lèse-majesté* accusations at the tender age of 14. Surprisingly, the human rights crisis in Thailand has failed to elicit substantial international responses. The European Union (EU) has refrained from direct intervention in the *lèse-majesté* situation within Thailand. In December 2022, the EU solidified its relations with Thailand through a cooperation and partnership agreement, a move seen as lending legitimacy to General Prayuth Chan-ocha's government, the leader of the 2014 coup. An EU representative justified this partnership by stating, "This is an excellent opportunity for the EU to push for higher standards of human rights in Thailand, including the demand

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Kelly Connors, *Democracy and National Identity in Thailand* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 134.

<sup>11</sup> David Streckfuss, *Truth on Trial in Thailand: Defamation, Treason and Lèse-majesté*, (London: Routledge, 2011), 293.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Ruffles, "Lèse-majesté is Dead. Long Live Lèse-majesté." *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 November 2018. <https://www.smh.com.au/>.

<sup>13</sup> Reuters, "Police to Charge Protest Leaders with Lese Majeste," *Bangkok Post*, 24 November 2016m <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

to abolish Thailand’s draconian lèse-majesté law.”<sup>14</sup> The author conducted interviews with two members of the European Union External Action, who acknowledged the sensitivity of the lèse-majesté issue and the need for the EU to balance its overall interests with its support for human rights in Thailand.<sup>15</sup>

**Table 1. Lèse-majesté cases filed in Thailand from 2007–2022**

Year	Number of Cases
2007	36
2008	55
2009	104
2010	65
2011	37
2012	25
2013	57
2014	99
2015	116
2016	101
2017 (first 9 months)	45
2020 (last 2 months)	38
2021	145
2022	70
2023 (until May)	19
<b>Total:</b>	<b>1,012</b>

(Source: “List of Individual Charged with Article 112 of the Criminal Code (Lèse-majesté),” *iLaw Freedom*, 22 July 2018, <https://freedom.ilaw.or.th/>; and สถิติผู้ถูกดำเนินคดีมาตรา 112 “หมิ่นพระมหากษัตริย์ไทย” ปี 2563–66, Thai Human Rights Lawyers, 2 May 2023, <https://tlhr2014.com/>.)

However, certain individual European nations and political parties have taken a more assertive stance regarding the monarchy issue in Thailand. For instance, in October 2020, Frithjof Schmidt, a member of Germany’s Green Party, raised the question of whether King Vajiralongkorn engaged in political activities under German sovereignty in the parliament.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, Georg Schmidt, the German Ambassador to Bangkok, ventured out of his embassy to receive a letter from

<sup>14</sup> David Hutt, “Thailand: MEPs Call for Reform of ‘Draconian’ Lèse-majesté,” *Deutsche Welle*, 18 April 2023, <https://www.dw.com/>.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with two members (names withheld) of the European Union External Action, Brussels, 1 March 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Frithjof Schmidt, interview with the author, via Zoom, 20 October 2020. Also see: Giulia Saudelli, “Thai King should not Reign from German Soil, Berlin Says,” *Deutsche Welle*, 16 October 2020, <https://www.dw.com/>.



the protestors, urging the German government to investigate whether Vajiralongkorn wielded his power on German soil.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, the sole communication from Washington came in the form of a statement from Jake Sullivan, National Security Advisor, who affirmed that “United States’ commitment to the long-standing United States–Thailand alliance based on our shared commitment to peace and stability, but also expressed concern over both recent arrests of Thai protestors and several lengthy *lèse-majesté* sentences in recent weeks.”<sup>18</sup> Despite Thailand’s exclusion from the Summit for Democracy in both 2021 and 2023, it remained unclear whether this exclusion resulted from its human rights crisis.<sup>19</sup>

It is worth noting that the United States has maintained an ambivalent stance concerning the Thai monarchy, partly due to its strategic calculations in response to the warming relations between Thailand and China. As for China and the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), they have remained conspicuously silent regarding the excessive use of the *lèse-majesté* law in Thailand. The rise of authoritarianism in the region has contributed to a high level of tolerance for human rights violations by countries in this part of the world.

### **The Determining External Factors**

As mentioned earlier, this study employs a two-level approach to analyze the relationship between the human rights agenda in Thailand and external circumstances, using the *lèse-majesté* crisis as a case study. Due to the state’s politicization of the *lèse-majesté* law, Thailand not only failed to uphold human rights but also actively engaged in human rights abuses. This situation has placed Thailand in contradiction with its diplomatic aspirations in an era marked by global awareness of human rights.

Nevertheless, Thailand has persisted in justifying the existence of the draconian *lèse-majesté* law by citing regional and international contexts. The two most influential powers for Thailand, the United States and China, have engaged in ongoing hegemonic struggles, providing the country with a rationale for its mishandling of human rights. Additionally, the worsening illiberal climate in the region has further

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<sup>17</sup> “Royalists Rally at German Embassy, Submit Letter,” *Bangkok Post*, 28 October 2020, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

<sup>18</sup> “Statement by NSC Spokesperson Emily Horne on National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan’s Call with Secretary General Natthaphin Narkphanit of the Thai National Security Council” (press release, The White House, 8 February 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

<sup>19</sup> “Thailand Shut out of US Democracy Summit again,” *Bangkok Post*, 29 March 2023, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

emboldened the Thai state in its disregard for human rights within its borders. This has effectively created a sense of Thai immunity against intrusive international human rights norms and practices.

### ***US–China Rivalry***

In recent decades, China's ascent has significantly reshaped the world order, challenging American hegemony. This rivalry between the United States and China has had palpable effects on Southeast Asia, where China has traditionally considered the region as its sphere of influence due to historical ties, geographical proximity, shared cultures, and extensive economic interactions. Consequently, China's relations with Southeast Asian nations have been complex, marked by occasional disputes and an often-described unequal dynamic.

During the Cold War, China was viewed as a communist threat in Southeast Asia. However, after the Cold War, China embarked on an image transformation to improve its relations with its Southeast Asian neighbors. China's economic ascent played a pivotal role in this image makeover, as it established strong economic ties with Southeast Asian nations, particularly evident in countries like Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos, which share land borders with China. Thailand normalized diplomatic relations with China in 1975, coinciding with the US withdrawal following the Vietnam War. Bilateral relations flourished, driven by the absence of territorial conflicts and close connections between the political leadership and armed forces of both countries. Following the 2014 coup, which drew condemnation from Western governments, the Thai junta found solace in its relationship with China. China's consistent noninterference stance toward Thailand was well-received by Thai leaders, signaling Chinese recognition of the political regime in Bangkok.

On the other hand, Thailand's relationship with the United States has been multifaceted. The United States is arguably one of Thailand's most important partners, cemented by a military treaty. During the Cold War, the United States collaborated closely with the Thai military to counter the communist threat and bolster military influence in politics. Despite experiencing a new wave of democratization post-Cold War, US policy toward the Thai military remained largely unchanged. The annual Cobra Gold military exercise, initiated in 1982, served as a cornerstone of Thai-US relations. Following the 9/11 attacks, Thailand earned the designation of the United States' major non-NATO ally. In response to the two military coups in 2006 and 2014, the United States was obligated to impose sanctions on Thailand as mandated by US law. However, Cobra Gold exercises continued despite sanctions, highlighting inconsistencies in US policy toward

Thailand. Today, these inconsistencies deepen as the United States competes with China to maintain its political influence in Thailand.

On one hand, the United States has made democracy promotion a central goal in its foreign policy, occasionally intervening in Thai politics under the banner of supporting democracy.<sup>20</sup> However, with Thai politics heavily influenced by the military, US interventionist efforts have largely been rebuffed. Thai military leaders have explicitly stated, “Thailand is not a colony of the United States.”<sup>21</sup> Some voices in Thailand have even called for boycotting US products.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, the push for Thai democracy has produced counterproductive effects on US–Thai relations, pushing Thailand further into China’s sphere of influence. This situation has created an awkward reality where the United States, while competing with China for influence in Thailand, remains conspicuously silent on the issue of *lèse-majesté* in Thailand. Reports suggest that the US government may acknowledge the growing human rights violations stemming from the *lèse-majesté* law against monarchy critics but displays limited interest in intervening due to the desire to nurture its long-established relationship with Thailand.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Illiberal Trend in the Region***

Thailand is not the sole country in Southeast Asia experiencing the rise of illiberalism. Across the region, an illiberal trend is reshaping national politics. Myanmar’s political landscape has long been characterized by militarism, a trend that was reinforced by the 2021 coup, which ousted the elected government of the National League for Democracy. In Cambodia, Prime Minister Hun Sen’s political monopoly has been maintained through harsh tactics against the opposition. Notably, Cambodia followed Thailand’s lead in enacting its own *lèse-majesté* law in 2018, using it as a tool against political adversaries. Laos and Vietnam, despite differing levels of openness, remain communist states. Singapore has embraced one-party rule, and Brunei continues to thrive as an absolute monarchy.

Within ASEAN, progress in promoting democracy and protecting human rights has been sluggish. This is primarily because member states often have poor human

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<sup>20</sup> Marian I. Lawson and Susan B. Epstein, *Democracy Promotion: An Objective of U.S. Foreign Assistance* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 4 January 2019), <https://sgp.fas.org/>.

<sup>21</sup> Pravit Rojanaphruk, “No, Thailand is not a Colony of the US. Nor the Junta, for that Matter,” *Khaosod English*, 28 May 2016, <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/>.

<sup>22</sup> “Nak Wichakarn Ruan Pankrasae Boycott Sinka Makan Kratop Thai Eng” [Scholar Warns that Inciting a Boycott Measure against the United States will Affect Thailand], *Siam Rath*, 29 October 2019, <https://siamrath.co.th/>.

<sup>23</sup> Pavin Chachavalpongpun, “My Attacker Has Been Jailed. But Who Was Pulling the Strings?,” *Washington Post*, 9 June 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

rights records of their own, rendering them vulnerable to international scrutiny. Autocratic regimes within the region have informally collaborated, seemingly to legitimize each other in the face of Western disapproval. For instance, Supreme Commander Senior General Min Aung Hlaing visited Bangkok shortly after the 2014 coup to express support for the Thai junta, which reciprocated by endorsing the 2021 coup in Myanmar. Interestingly, Myanmar later sought Thailand's assistance in restoring democracy.<sup>24</sup>

Over time, the political interests of Thailand and its autocratic neighbors have converged, particularly with the backing of China. These Southeast Asian autocratic states have increasingly appeared as a substantial “dark hole” with the potential to undermine democracy in the region. However, this collaboration is not unique to Southeast Asia; it is part of a broader global trend of democracy facing reversals. Democratic decline is no longer confined to one region or continent, encompassing a wider array of nations from various parts of the world. This trend is unlikely to be halted.

Joshua Kurlantzick argues that with authoritarian states like China wielding more power and established democracies in the West and the developing world showing reluctance to stand up for their values or employing democracy promotion strategies that often focus solely on rhetoric and elections, the international environment has become increasingly complex and challenging for democracy.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the concerning human rights situation, ASEAN as an organization has never issued an official statement on the *lèse-majesté* situation in Thailand. In practice, many Southeast Asian states do not prioritize human rights protection as it could jeopardize regime stability. Additionally, ASEAN's fundamental principle of noninterference has hindered any meaningful discussion on human rights crises in member states. This principle has not only become an organizational norm but also a prevailing political culture in the region.

In February 2023, ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR) called on the Thai government to establish communication channels with Thai protestors to address issues related to amending the *lèse-majesté* law. This call coincided with the start of a hunger strike by two young female protestors, Tantawan Tuatulanon and Orawan Phupong, who demanded reforms in the Thai justice system, the release of political prisoners, and the abolition of the *lèse-majesté* law.<sup>26</sup> However,

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<sup>24</sup> “Myanmar Junta Leader Asks Thai Counterpart for Help on Democracy,” *Reuters*, 10 February 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

<sup>25</sup> See: Kurlantzick, *Democracy in Retreat*.

<sup>26</sup> “Southeast Asian MPs Urge the Thai Government to Listen to Hunger Strikes, Amend the *Lèse-majesté* Law,” *ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights*, 10 February 2023, <https://aseanmp.org/>.

the APHR's call faded without significant impact, lacking an enforcement mechanism to address human rights issues in the region. Thailand has continued to handle its *lèse-majesté* issue without substantial pressure from its key partners and fellow ASEAN members.

### **The Thai Human Rights Stance in the World**

As a member of the United Nations, Thailand bears certain obligations to fulfill in order to align with its desired international role. However, the deteriorating *lèse-majesté* situation, driven by the state's crackdown on critics of the monarchy, has cast ambiguity over Thailand's commitment to improving the international human rights system within the UN framework. The *lèse-majesté* issue has essentially held Thailand's human rights stance hostage on the global stage. In multilateral meetings, Thailand frequently abstains from supporting resolutions condemning blatant human rights abuses.

For instance, in April 2022, Thailand abstained from a vote to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) during the UN General Assembly in New York. Indonesia and Malaysia within ASEAN also abstained, while Laos and Vietnam voted against the suspension. Thailand's Permanent Representative to the UN, Suriya Chindawongse, explained that the abstention was due to the importance attached to maintaining a "transparent, impartial and inclusive approach in the multilateral regime."<sup>27</sup> Thailand's ambiguous stance could be viewed as a defensive maneuver to obscure its deteriorating human rights situation. It's worth noting that Russia is one of Thailand's significant trading partners, having sold \$50 million worth of arms to Thailand between 2015 and 2021.<sup>28</sup> In October of the same year, Thailand also abstained from the UN resolution rejecting Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territories, raising doubts about Bangkok's commitment to human rights.<sup>29</sup>

At the UNHRC in Geneva, the spotlight illuminated human rights issues in Thailand during the third Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on November 10, 2021. The international community, comprising Western governments and some Asian and developing countries—Afghanistan, Japan, Mongolia, South Korea, and

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<sup>27</sup> "Thailand Abstains in Vote to Suspend Russia from UN Human Rights Council," *Thai PBS World*, 8 April 2022, <https://www.thaipbsworld.com/>.

<sup>28</sup> David Hutt, "Why Southeast Asia Continues to Buy Russian Weapons," *Deutsche Welle*, 5 April 2022, <https://www.dw.com/>. Also see: Siemon, T. Wezeman, *Arms Flows to Southeast Asia* (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2019), 40.

<sup>29</sup> Ian Storey, "When Abstention Speaks Volumes: Thailand's Turnaround in the UNGA," *Fulcrum*, 14 October 2022, <https://fulcrum.sg/>.

Timor-Leste—emphatically and vocally called for Thailand to reform the *lèse-majesté* law. Beyond addressing the *lèse-majesté* law, the UPR on Thailand encompassed a broad spectrum of human rights concerns. These included freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association, protection of human rights defenders from harassment, attacks, and Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP), as well as matters related to enforced disappearances and torture. Notably, 12 countries recommended modifications to the *lèse-majesté* law: Luxembourg, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the United States, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, and Germany.<sup>30</sup>

These recommendations from various countries can be categorized into three primary themes. Faced with substantial international pressure, the Thai government mounted a vigorous defense of the *lèse-majesté* law during its responses to the interactive dialogue. The government cited the monarchy's central role as the "main pillar of the nation," highlighting its revered status among the Thai people.<sup>31</sup>

The Thai Foreign Ministry argued that not all complaints had resulted in formal charges and prosecution, emphasizing the need for due diligence by law enforcement authorities. The final decision on whether to prosecute cases rested with the Attorney General. The Thai government also asserted, "Appeals are often invoked and if the accused do not pose a risk of committing further violations of the law, their bail requests would also be granted. Like in many other countries, any review of the law is an issue for the Thai people to decide. Current discussions reflect the functioning of relevant parliamentary and constitutional mechanisms that allow different voices to be heard in the consideration of this very important law."<sup>32</sup>

Following the UPR process, in March 2022, the Thai government officially responded to the recommendations, staunchly maintaining its position. Thailand rejected all recommendations related to the reform of the *lèse-majesté* law.<sup>33</sup> This strong defense of the law underscored Thailand's disregard for international human rights norms and revealed inconsistencies in its human rights foreign policy. Intriguingly, six months after rejecting the UNHRC members' recommendations for *lèse-majesté* law reform, Thailand announced its bid to become a member of the UNHRC for the 2025 cycle, further highlighting the inconsistency in its human

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<sup>30</sup> Pavin Chachavalongpun, "Countries which support the reform of Article 112," *112 Watch*, 10 November 2021, <https://112watch.org/>.

<sup>31</sup> Reuters, "Thailand defends its strict royal insults law at UN rights review," *Straits Times*, 10 November 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/>.

<sup>32</sup> "The Third Universal Periodic Review (UPR)," *112 Watch*, 12 November 2021, <https://112watch.org/>.

<sup>33</sup> "Thailand: Statement for the Outcome of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR)," *International Federation for Human Rights*, 24 March 2022, <https://www.fidh.org/>.

rights stance.<sup>34</sup> A significant gap persists between Thailand's actual human rights situation and its diplomatic aspirations as articulated through its human rights policy.

## **Conclusion**

Thailand's much-anticipated May 2023 elections were anticipated as an opportunity to break the political stranglehold of the military, which had staged a coup in 2014. The pro-reform Move Forward Party emerged victorious, winning the most seats, potentially positioning its leader, Pita Limjaroenrat, as the next prime minister. This party was the sole advocate for amending the *lèse-majesté* law. In a surprising twist, the conservative establishment employed parliamentary means to thwart the Move Forward Party's ambitions.<sup>35</sup>

The military-appointed Senate blocked Pita's premiership, effectively sabotaging its bid for political power. Meanwhile, the second-place Pheu Thai Party rapidly shifted its stance, pledging to leave the *lèse-majesté* law untouched while reaching out to other conservative parties to form a coalition government. This strategic maneuver paid off, and Thaksin, who had been in exile for 15 years, returned to Thailand with the potential to re-enter politics. Srettha Thavisin from the Pheu Thai Party was approved as the thirtieth prime minister of Thailand. Although the nature of Srettha's government remains uncertain, his party's announcement that it would not consider reforming Article 112 suggests that human rights foreign policy may remain elusive. The composition of the current government, a mix of politicians from the previous regime, reinforces the belief among the Thai public that human rights will have a low priority on the foreign policy agenda.

The future of Thailand's human rights foreign policy appears grim. The United States has already congratulated the new Srettha government and expressed a commitment to enhancing bilateral relations.<sup>36</sup> However, the United States remains hesitant to engage in discussions regarding the future of Thai democracy and the state of human rights, particularly given the government's newfound partnerships with entities known for human rights violations. American interests, particularly concerning the monarchy and *lèse-majesté* law, are deemed non-negotiable, influencing Washington's strategic calculus.

In the case of China, noninterference in Thailand's domestic affairs aligns with its efforts to cultivate ties with Thai conservative elites. Ultimately, the Thai po-

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<sup>34</sup> Yawee Butrkrawee, "Bid for UNHRC Seat Needs Care," *Bangkok Post*, 13 October 2022, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

<sup>35</sup> Pavin Chachavalpongpun, "Everybody Wins in Thailand's Election Except the Voters," *New York Times*, 2 August 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

<sup>36</sup> "US Congratulates Thailand's New PM," *Thai PBS*, 24 August 2023, <https://www.thaipbsworld.com/>.

litical deadlock aligns with the broader illiberal trend in Southeast Asia, with Myanmar's military maintaining its grip on power, and Cambodia's Hun Sen transferring his premiership to his son, Hun Manet, further solidifying dynastic politics.<sup>37</sup> The defeat of the Move Forward Party underscores the challenges facing Thai democracy. Consequently, the rise of illiberalism is poised to exacerbate the human rights situation, and major powers appear reluctant to address it comprehensively. ✪

**Dr. Pavin Chachavalpongpun**

Dr. Chachavalpongpun is a notable Thai academic and political exile residing in Japan. He earned his bachelor's degree from Chulalongkorn University and his PhD from the University of London. Pavin worked as a diplomat in Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs for over a decade before transitioning to academia as a professor at Kyoto University. There, he serves as editor-in-chief of the *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*. Pavin is the author of several acclaimed books on Thai politics and society, including *A Plastic Nation: The Curse of Thainess in Thai-Burmese Relations* (2005) and *Coup, King, Crisis: A Critical Interregnum in Thailand* (2020). His pointed criticisms of the Thai monarchy forced him into exile in Japan, where he continues his scholarship and advocacy.

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<sup>37</sup> Shaun Turton, "Hun Manet Appointed by King as Cambodia's Next PM," *Nikkei Asia*, 7 August 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/>.



# Creating Balance

## The Evolution of Thailand's Defense Diplomacy and Defense Relations

DR. PAUL CHAMBERS

### Abstract

*Defense diplomacy* is the use of defense resources by military/defense officials to promote trust and cooperation with other countries. This study focuses on the defense diplomacy and foreign relations of the Thai defense establishment, a matter of significance in Thailand, a middle power—more than a peripheral state but less than a great power—in Southeast Asia, due to the military's enduring prominence in the political landscape. In parallel with Thailand's historical foreign policy—which initially exhibited a pattern of “bending with the wind” before transitioning to a strategy of balance-seeking (hedging) between the United States and China to safeguard nationalist interests and preserve the monarchy—various forms of defense diplomacy have played a pivotal role in shaping the ideas, discourse, and deliberations within the Thai defense establishment. Adopting a novel approach in the form of discursive institutionalism, this study argues that a policy centered on hedging-based defense diplomacy has often proven beneficial for Thai defense relations, albeit with certain limitations. With direct implications for US operational forces, this research delves into the historical trajectory of Thailand's defense relations and defense diplomacy, encompassing developments up to the year 2023.

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In September 2023, Prime Minister Srettha Thavasin, in anticipation of his inaugural foreign trip, made a pivotal choice by including Armed Forces Supreme Commander General Songwit Noonpakdi in his official delegation. This decision underscored the enduring significance of the military within Thai politics—and in the political context of a newly elected civilian Prime Minister. Yet, it held a deeper implication. As emphasized by Thai military expert Dr. Ukrist Pathmanand, “Defense diplomacy matters in international relations these days.”<sup>1</sup> This reflected Thailand's contemporary strategic environment—the rapid ascent of China and its growing military influence in Southeast Asia astride the continuing influence of the United States and Japan in the region.

Indeed, adept statecraft plays a pivotal role in any nation's foreign policy toward other states. Traditionally, statecraft was the domain of foreign ministry profes-

<sup>1</sup> Cited in “Will new foreign policy tilt away from China towards the West?,” *Thai PBS World*, 8 September 2023, <https://www.thaipbsworld.com/>.

sionals, who engaged in the art of fostering cooperation with bilateral and multi-lateral counterparts on the global stage. In those bygone days, the military was predominantly an instrument of foreign policy elites. While during the Cold War, activities such as joint military exercises, military aid, and training served as pragmatic tools to counterbalance adversaries from a realist perspective, the landscape evolved in the early 1990s. Armed forces institutions and defense ministry officials began to take on more active roles in establishing and nurturing cooperative relationships, fostering bilateral and multilateral trust. These defense diplomacy initiatives encompassed endeavors to (1) enhance cooperation with former or potential adversaries (strategic engagement); (2) fortify democratic civilian oversight; and (3) collaborate with states to bolster their capacity for international peacekeeping.<sup>2</sup>

The concept of defense diplomacy emerged in the post-Cold War era, driven by Western interests in demilitarization, military collaboration, security-sector reform, and human security. Initially coined as a distinct term in the United Kingdom in 2000, most of the literature on defense diplomacy predominantly centered on Europe and the Western world. Only recently, with Asia's growing importance in global affairs, has the study of defense diplomacy in Asia gained momentum. Nonetheless, the relevance of defense diplomacy in Southeast Asia remains relatively underexplored, with Thailand being particularly underrepresented in the existing literature.<sup>3</sup>

This study serves a crucial purpose by addressing this void, offering a much-needed examination of Thai defense diplomacy. Specifically, it employs the lens of discursive institutionalism to analyze the role of ideas, discourse, and deliberation in shaping political dynamics. These elements, when channeled through defense diplomacy, can instigate institutional changes in defense-related policies, programs, and philosophies, which in turn underpin Thailand's broader foreign relationships. Therefore, defense diplomacy, as an embodiment of Thailand's soft power, holds the potential to positively influence the strategic thinking of other states.<sup>4</sup>

Thailand's significance is amplified by its status as a *middle power* in Southeast Asia, a classification between a peripheral state and great power, defined by Robert O. Keohane as "a state [which considers] that it cannot act alone effectively but may be able to have a systemic impact in a small group or through an international

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Cottey and Anthony Forster, *Reshaping Defence Diplomacy: New Roles for Military Cooperation and Assistance*, Adelphi Paper 365 (London: Routledge, 2004), 7–8.

<sup>3</sup> Evan A. Laksmana, "Regional Order by Other Means? Examining the Rise of Defense Diplomacy in Southeast Asia," *Asian Security* 8, no. 3 (2012): 251–70.

<sup>4</sup> Gregory Winger, "The Velvet Gauntlet: A Theory of Defense Diplomacy," *IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conference Proceedings* 33 (2014), 1, <https://files.iwm.at/>.

institution.”<sup>5</sup> Realism, which focuses on power politics among states, perceives Thailand as a unitary middle power in mainland Southeast Asia, actively pursuing the maximization of its economic and military interests.<sup>6</sup>

This study delves into the various forms of defense diplomacy that have played a pivotal role in guiding the decisions of Thai political and military leaders. Such diplomacy has left an indelible imprint on the ideas, discourse, and deliberations within the Thai defense establishment. It views defense diplomacy as a reflection of Thailand’s overarching realist policy of hedging, seeking a delicate balance among great powers and, at times, among Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states.

Thai defense diplomacy differs greatly from that of its regional neighbors (e.g., Burma/Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam) or other middle powers (South Korea). Indeed, its unique aspects include the fact that it undergirds a limited democracy dominated by monarchy and military and seeks not to attach itself to any single great power but instead build balance or “hedge.”

The study contends that while defense diplomacy centered on hedging has often proven advantageous to Thai defense relations, it also highlights certain limitations. It delves into the essentiality of defense diplomacy within Thailand’s broader foreign policy and the extent to which the two have remained aligned. What are the benefits and constraints of Thai defense diplomacy? These are the questions this study endeavors to answer.

## Framework of Analysis

The term *defense diplomacy* originated in the United Kingdom, where it held a broad definition as the peaceful utilization of defense resources to achieve positive objectives in cultivating bilateral or multilateral relations with a specific country.<sup>7</sup> However, this study takes a more refined approach to characterizing defense diplomacy. Here, it is defined as a diplomatic instrument wielded by senior military or defense ministry officials, with the primary objective of fostering bilateral or multilateral cooperation, emphasizing the promotion of trust while mitigating hostilities and suspicions. Andrew Cottey and Anthony Forster initially examined

<sup>5</sup> Robert O. Keohane, “Lilliputians’ Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics,” *International Organization* 23, no. 2 (1969), 296, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Chambers and Poowin Bunyavejchewin, “Complex Positioning: Thailand’s Role in the Context of ASEAN ‘Centrality’ and Indo-Pacific Security,” in *ASEAN and Regional Actors in the Indo-Pacific*, ed. Sueo Sudo and Chosein Yamahata (Singapore: Springer, 2023), 17–37, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>7</sup> Tom Dodd and Mark Oakes, *The Strategic Defence Review White Paper*, Research Paper 91 (London: House of Commons, 1998), 22.

ten dimensions of defense diplomacy, primarily in the context of larger powers such as the United States.<sup>8</sup> Given Thailand's status as a recipient of defense aid, this study distills these ten dimensions into six, specifically relevant to understanding Thai defense diplomacy (see table 1).

**Table 1. Thai defense diplomacy dimensions**

1	Reception of Foreign Defense Aid
2	Joint Defense Exercises
3	Defense Education with International Partners
4	Defense-related International Agreements
5	Participation in International Peacekeeping Missions
6	Senior Defense Personnel Contacts

The article subsequently examines four of these areas. To comprehend the trajectory of Thai defense diplomacy, this study employs discursive institutionalism (DI) to underscore the significance of ideas, discourses, and deliberations in shaping state interests and perspectives. DI serves as a framework that highlights how ideas, discourse, and interactive communication within the realm of policy coordination can catalyze institutional changes in policies, programs, and philosophies. Ultimately, DI underscores the social construction of policy and/or policy making.<sup>9</sup> DI plays a crucial role in elucidating the development of defense diplomacy. It accomplishes this by examining the progression of ideas and discourse within institutional settings and demonstrating how they transform into defense diplomacy policies. These policies are formulated with the aim of enhancing various forms of soft power to foster trust and cooperation. The evolution of such ideas and discourse can lead to institutional changes geared towards defense diplomacy. This transformation can be brought about through mechanisms like increasing returns or significant junctures such as regime change, ultimately resulting in the establishment of new defense partnerships.

According to Gregory Winger, "Military diplomats, officer exchanges, training programs, joint exercises, and ship visits are not merely peaceful means of using military force, but efforts to directly communicate the ideas, worldviews, and policy

<sup>8</sup> Cottey and Forster, *Reshaping Defence Diplomacy*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Vivien Schmidt, "Taking Ideas and Discourse Seriously: Explaining Change Through Discursive Institutionalism as the Fourth 'New Institutionalism'," *European Political Science Review* 2, no. 1 (March 2010), 21–22, <https://doi.org/>.

preferences of one country to another.”<sup>10</sup> Ideas and discourse possess the capacity to either impose constraints or offer opportunities that influence institutional resilience or transformation. Defense diplomacy, stemming from defense strategies, has witnessed its agenda and interests undergoing institutional evolution over time. This evolution is a result of the perceptions of defense officials who respond to the shaping and reshaping of defense diplomacy practices.

### Thai Defense Relations until 2023

In Thailand, interactions at the military and defense ministry levels have consistently held a central role in the nation’s diplomatic endeavors. This role gained even more prominence, especially after the overthrow of Siam’s monarchical absolutism in 1932, which saw the military emerge as the predominant political actor until 1980.

Thailand’s foreign policy has been deeply rooted in an ideological commitment to a kingdom that has never been colonized. Consequently, Thai foreign policy has often been a product of the dual forces of upholding a Thai “royalist-nationalist” narrative and the pragmatic strategy of “bending with the wind.” These two facets have historically complemented each other. The royalist-nationalist (*rachachatniyom*) discourse venerates the Siamese/Thai monarchy as the heroic guardian, guide, redeemer, preserver, and embodiment of the Thai nation and identity. Central to royalist-nationalism is an irredentist pride in *Thainess*, particularly emphasizing the monarchy since 1957.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, “bending with the wind,” a policy dating back to 1851, involves temporary alignments with prevailing foreign powers in Southeast Asia at different junctures.

After the end of the Cold War (1992–2006), Thailand pursued a more calculated foreign policy approach, aiming to maintain independence from superpowers and adopting a realist strategy of hedging to underpin royalist-nationalism. Bangkok transformed into a relatively stable, quasi-democratic partner for major countries and a significant contributor to the ASEAN. During this period, Thai defense diplomacy consistently served as a dependable and supportive pillar of overall Thai foreign policy objectives.

However, the period from 2006 to 2023 witnessed significant transformations. During this timeframe, several pivotal developments occurred: (1) Thailand expe-

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<sup>10</sup> Winger, *The Velvet Gauntlet*, 9–10.

<sup>11</sup> Based upon: Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994); Pavin Chachavalongpong, *Reinventing Thailand: Thaksin and His Foreign Policy* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2010); and Shane Strate, *The Lost Territories: Thailand’s History of National Humiliation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2015).

rienced multiple changes in government, including two coups; (2) China rose as a major global power; (3) heightened geopolitical rivalry between China and the US in Southeast Asia became evident; (4) Thai-US relations experienced fluctuations, including periods of friction and thaw; (5) the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded; and (6) ASEAN's influence waned. Throughout these years, defense diplomacy remained a crucial component of Thai foreign policy, at times reinforcing it. For instance, in 2023, Army Commander General Narongphan Jitkaewthae, in a meeting with the Chinese defense minister, expressed Thailand's support for China's role in regional security and stability.<sup>12</sup> However, defense diplomacy was also employed to express displeasure, as illustrated by then-junta leader General Prayuth Chan-ocha's response to US criticism of his 2014 military coup: "It saddens me that the United States does not understand the reason why I had to intervene and does not understand the way we work, even though we have been close allies for years."<sup>13</sup>

Thai defense diplomacy has always been intricately tied to civil-military relations. When the military aligns with the foreign policy of the sitting government, defense diplomacy has played a stabilizing role in Thai foreign policy. However, on at least four occasions, civilian and military perspectives on foreign policy have diverged, leading to confusion in external relations. This is not surprising given Thailand's history of experiencing 14 successful military coups since 1932.

First, in 1976, the Thai military did not support the civilian government's preference for accommodation with Vietnam. Second, in 1988, Thailand's pro-Khmer Rouge military did not endorse Prime Minister Chatchai Choonhavan's settlement with Vietnam, which was occupying Cambodia. Third, in 2002-2003, PM Thaksin Shinawatra actively supported the military regime in Burma/Myanmar, while then-Army Commander General Surayud Chulanond did not. Fourth, in 2008, pro-Thaksin PM Samak Sundaravej sought to negotiate a defined boundary with Cambodia, while the Thai military leaned toward demanding border concessions from Phnom Penh.<sup>14</sup> In these instances, defense diplomacy, when at odds with the nation's overall policy direction, led to ambiguity among Thai defense partners regarding the country's true policy stance. However, when Thai defense diplomacy aligns firmly with the nation's foreign policy, it provides a stable indicator of the overall direction of external relations.

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<sup>12</sup> South China Morning News, "China and Thailand to expand military ties amid Asia-Pacific 'security challenges,'" *Bangkok Post*, 11 June 2023, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

<sup>13</sup> Amy Sawitta Lefevre, "Thailand Warns US to Mind its own Business over Politics," *Reuters*, 28 January 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Chambers, *Praetorian Kingdom: A History of Military Ascendancy in Thailand* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2024, forthcoming).

In 2023, the Thai military leadership views defense diplomacy and alignments in terms of safeguarding the monarchy, ensuring border security, managing military relationships, maintaining a level of skepticism towards elected civilian Thai governments, acknowledging the swift ascent of a militarily potent China, and holding the belief that the United States can provide only partial assurance in counterbalancing China's expanding influence in Southeast Asia.

## Four Areas of Thai Defense Diplomacy

### *Joint Military Exercises*

One of the most apparent manifestations of defense diplomacy lies in bilateral and multilateral military exercises. In the context of Thailand, these exercises have historically served at least one of four key purposes: (1) indicating political tilt; (2) demonstrating bilateral or multilateral cooperation; (3) displaying available military hardware and the ability to use it; and (4) efforts to simply improve military capacities in conjunction with other countries. This section delves into military exercises involving the United States, China, and ASEAN.

**United States–Thai Military Exercises.** Close Thai–US relations have a historical backdrop that extends back to 1950, a period marked by shared anticommunist Cold War interests. Joint exercises between the two nations commenced in 1954, even before Washington deployed US troops to Thailand in 1962, a presence that endured until 1976. In 1982, Thailand and the United States launched Operation Cobra Gold, an annual bilateral military exercise that has since evolved into a multilateral event. Over time, this exercise expanded to include participation from various other countries.

By 2023, Operation Cobra Gold brought together soldiers from 30 countries, including 3,000 from Thailand and over 6,000 from the US military.<sup>15</sup> Another significant event, the annual Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) joint naval exercises, was initiated in 1995. While CARAT typically involves bilateral cooperation between Thailand and the United States, other nations like Singapore have occasionally taken part. In 1997, the Cope Tiger exercises began, held annually in Thailand and featuring the air forces of the United States, Thailand, and Singapore, with aircraft from the US Marine Corps and Navy also participating.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Francesca Regalada, "Thailand, U.S. resume Cobra Gold military exercise at full scale," *Nikkei Asia*, 28 February 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/>.

<sup>16</sup> United States Department of Defense, "Cope Tiger," 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/>.

In 2023, Thailand hosted more than 40 different types of defense drills with the United States. These exercises were coordinated and overseen by the Joint US Military Advisory Group Thailand (JUSMAGTHAI), which was established in 1953. Notably, JUSMAGTHAI functions independently of the US Embassy in Bangkok, effectively serving as the US Embassy to the Royal Thai Armed Forces.<sup>17</sup> Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2022, the United States conducted more than 400 military-to-military engagements and exercises with Thailand on an annual basis. With the pandemic's conclusion, by 2023, there were once again approximately 400 annual Thai–US military engagements and exercises.<sup>18</sup>

**China–Thai Military Exercises.** Over the past two decades, mirroring Bangkok's expanding hedging policy in its defense relations, Thailand has displayed a strong inclination toward participating in military exercises with China. Notably, Thailand has engaged in a more extensive series of exercises with Beijing's People's Liberation Army (PLA) than any other Southeast Asian country.<sup>19</sup> Since 2005, the Thai military has been involved in over 20 bilateral and more than 20 multilateral exercises with the PLA. In 2007, Thailand and China inaugurated their first Strike exercise, which focuses on special forces engagements. From 2010 onward, the two countries have conducted semi-annual or annual Blue-Strike joint naval exercises. Similarly, since 2015, semi-annual or annual Falcon Strike joint air force exercises have become a regular occurrence.<sup>20</sup>

While these joint exercises experienced a temporary suspension in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they resumed in 2022.<sup>21</sup> In 2023, the Strike, Blue-Strike, and Falcon Strike were held in the same year, with plans for such synchronized scheduling in the future. Notably, China has been an observer at the US–Thai-led Cobra Gold exercises since 2002. In 2014, China's PLA was permitted to participate in Cobra Gold humanitarian training, although it faced objections from Washington regarding China's involvement in Cobra Gold field training.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Halloran, "Thailand's Pivot," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 1 September 2013, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/>.

<sup>18</sup> *US Security Cooperation with Thailand* (Washington, DC: US Department of State, 31 October 2022), <https://www.state.gov/>.

<sup>19</sup> Ian Storey, "Thailand's Military Relations with China: Moving from Strength to Strength," *ISEAS Perspective* 2019, no. 43 (27 May 2019), <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/>.

<sup>20</sup> Rachaya Tiampracha "จีนในทัศนะของทหารไทย ทัศนะของทหารไทย: ภาพสะท้อนจากเอกสารอันจากเอกสารวิจัยวิทยาลัยป้องกันราชอาณาจักร อาณาจักร [China from the Perspective of Thai Soldiers]" (thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 2022), <https://digital.car.chula.ac.th/>.

<sup>21</sup> Reuters, "Thailand, China to resume air force exercises after pandemic pause," *Euronews*, 8 September 2022. <https://www.euronews.com/>.

<sup>22</sup> Storey, "Thailand's Military Relations with China," 9.



**Thai Participation in ASEAN Military Exercises.** Thailand has played a pivotal role in advocating for military exercises within the ASEAN framework. Additionally, even before the inception of ASEAN, dating back to 1954, Thailand actively supported and hosted military exercises associated with the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), which preceded ASEAN.<sup>23</sup>

Unlike SEATO, which was dissolved in 1977, ASEAN had not initially prioritized regional defense cooperation, including regional military exercises. However, by 1994, there had been 25 intra-ASEAN bilateral military exercises.<sup>24</sup> It was only in 1992 that security cooperation, including intra-ASEAN military exercises, was formally integrated into the institutional agenda of ASEAN during its fourth summit.

This inclusion of security on the agenda did not significantly accelerate multilateral cooperation and military exercises within ASEAN. Subsequently, in 2010, the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM)-Plus was established “as a platform for ASEAN and its eight Dialogue Partners Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Russia and the United States (collectively referred to as the “Plus Countries”), to strengthen security and defense cooperation for peace, stability, and development in [Southeast Asia].”<sup>25</sup>

Five years later, the ASEAN Community was established, encompassing the ASEAN Political-Security Community, within which ASEAN military exercises could be organized. However, due to political divergences and other related challenges within ASEAN, multilateral military exercises remained in the planning stage. Consequently, ASEAN’s defense diplomacy, as reflected in cooperative drills and exercises to address security challenges, had not yet fully realized its potential in creating an effective ASEAN defense community.<sup>26</sup>

Indonesia and Thailand have played significant roles in advancing ASEAN’s efforts to establish intra-ASEAN multilateral military exercises. These exercises, which involved all 10 ASEAN member states, predominantly focused on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.<sup>27</sup> Yet, with the increasing focus of geopo-

<sup>23</sup> Office of the Historian, US Department of State, “Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), 1954,” *Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations*, n.d., <https://history.state.gov/>.

<sup>24</sup> Bhubhingdar Singh and See Seng Tan, “Introduction: Defence Diplomacy and Southeast Asia,” in *From ‘Boots’ to ‘Brogues’: The Rise of Defence Diplomacy in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 1 January 2011), 7, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

<sup>25</sup> ASEAN, “About the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus,” 2023, <https://admm.asean.org/>.

<sup>26</sup> See: Rodon Pedrason, “ASEAN’s Defence Diplomacy: The Road to Southeast Asian Defence Community?” (PhD thesis, Heidelberg University, 2017), <https://d-nb.info/>.

<sup>27</sup> Ektewan Manowong, Darmp Sukontasap, and Witchayanee Ocha, “Investigating the Contributions of Thailand’s Defence Diplomacy for ASEAN Community Integration,” *Rangsit Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 4, no. 1 (January–June 2017): 17–33, <https://jcs.h.rsu.ac.th/>.

litical rivalry between Washington and Beijing in Southeast Asia, rival ASEAN military exercises centered on maritime security involving all 10 ASEAN states became prominent.

The first ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise in 2018 aimed to enhance defense cooperation and maritime security between China and ASEAN, taking place in China in October 2018.<sup>28</sup> Subsequently, in September 2019, the first ASEAN-US Maritime Exercise (AUMX) was conducted. These exercises began in Thailand, traversed portions of the South China Sea, claimed by some ASEAN members, China, and Taiwan, and concluded in Singapore.<sup>29</sup>

China is planning a multilateral military exercise with ASEAN in late 2023, titled “Aman Youyi” (Peace and Friendship), involving five ASEAN states: Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, in September 2023, ASEAN organized its first all-ASEAN military exercise, with a focus on humanitarian relief. Led by Indonesia, this exercise included all 10 ASEAN member states, with Myanmar as an observer, and also East Timor. It was named the “ASEAN Solidarity Exercise (ASEX 23)” and was showcased as a testament to ASEAN Centrality.<sup>31</sup>

Thailand has actively supported both bilateral and multilateral ASEAN military drills, and the kingdom has demonstrated a keen interest in participating in ASEAN military exercises involving both China and the United States.

In the post-Cold War era, owing to Bangkok’s strategic hedging policy between the United States and China, Thailand in 2023 maintains a position that is not explicitly aligned with either Beijing or Washington. Furthermore, there exists an element of skepticism within the Thai military regarding China’s intentions in Southeast Asia. Consequently, Thailand’s military exercises, integral to its defense diplomacy, have been characterized by a balanced and comprehensive approach that spans the political spectrum. This approach allows Bangkok to utilize these defense drills as a means of projecting soft power, facilitating the communication of military cooperation with both China and the United States, as well as other countries, including Japan, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and Russia.

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<sup>28</sup> Li Wenfang, “China, ASEAN Begin Joint Naval Drill,” *China Daily*, 23 October 2018, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/>.

<sup>29</sup> Agence France-Presse, “US and 10 ASEAN Navies Begin First Joint Military Exercises in Southeast Asia,” *Defense Post*, 2 September 2019, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/>.

<sup>30</sup> Muhammed Estiak Hussain, “ASEAN-China Defense Cooperation: Recent Developments,” *The Geopolitics*, 20 July 2023, <https://thegeopolitics.com/>.

<sup>31</sup> Kate Mayberry, “‘Baby steps’ for ASEAN as it wraps up first-ever joint military drills,” *Aljazeera*, 25 September 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/>.

It is worth noting that Thailand's exercises with the United States are distinguished by their size, frequency, and sophistication, surpassing those conducted with China. China appears to favor bilateral exercises and places a premium on the performative and symbolic aspects rather than substantive engagement.<sup>32</sup>

### ***Defense Education with International Partners***

In the initial years of Siam's military development after 1852, the kingdom enlisted the expertise of advisors from various European countries, including Britain, Italy, and Denmark, to oversee defense training. Over time, Siam established two military academies, one following a German curriculum and the other based on the French model.<sup>33</sup> As the twentieth century dawned, a significant number of Siamese cadets pursued professional military education (PME) abroad. Most of these cadets opted for Germany, while others traveled to France, and some even ventured to Japan.

Following the conclusion of World War II, the United States emerged as Thailand's favored destination for PME. In the post-Cold War era, Thailand has maintained PME programs with countries spanning the entire political spectrum. Notably, key partners have included the United States, China, Russia, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Israel. In 2023, the top two collaborators in PME for Thailand are the United States and China.

**US Military Education.** One of the longest-running and most extensive PME programs is the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program, sponsored by the United States. This initiative provides funding for Thai military officials to participate in educational programs conducted at the 23 PME institutions in the United States. The IMET program is guided by several core objectives: to promote regional stability through fostering effective and mutually beneficial military-to-military relations, leading to enhanced understanding and defense cooperation between the United States and foreign nations; to deliver training that enhances the capabilities of participating countries' military forces, enabling them to support joint operations and achieve interoperability with US forces; and to increase the capacity of foreign military and civilian personnel to uphold and up-

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<sup>32</sup> Ian Storey, "China's Military Exercises in Southeast Asia Belie a Lack of Trust," *ISEAS Fulcrum*, 8 September 2023, <https://fulcrum.sg/>.

<sup>33</sup> Napisa Waitoolkiat and Paul Chambers, "Khaki Veto Power: The Organization of Thailand's Armed Forces," in *Knights of the Realm: Thailand's Military and Police, Then and Now*, ed. Paul Chambers (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2013).

hold democratic values and protect internationally recognized human rights within their governments and armed forces, as outlined by the US State Department.<sup>34</sup>

IMET aims to familiarize students with US-endorsed concepts of military professionalism and the oversight of the military by civilians. The program acquaints participants with “institutions and elements of US democracy such as the judicial system, legislative oversight, free speech, equality issues, and commitment to human rights.”<sup>35</sup> The Expanded IMET (e-IMET), introduced as a subset of IMET in 1990, places particular emphasis on civilian control of the military. It does so by exposing students to the American military justice system and highlighting how the US military collaborates with civilian bureaucrats and legislators. Additionally, the US Field Studies Program, another component of IMET, immerses students in American civic culture, underscoring the significance of democratic values, human rights, and the belief in the rule of law.<sup>36</sup>

Since 1952, thousands of Thai military officers have received such training, with IMET formally established in 1976. A substantial proportion of Thai military personnel, spanning the army, navy, air force, supreme command, and defense ministry, have undergone training in the United States through IMET. Notably, Thailand’s coups in 1991, 2006, and 2014 led to the suspension of US IMET aid until after elections took place in September 1992, December 2007, and March 2019, respectively. In 2022, the Biden administration approved USD 2.7 million in IMET funding for Thailand for 2021, with an additional USD 2.2 million allocated for 2022.<sup>37</sup>

**Chinese Military Education.** China has emerged as an increasingly viable alternative for Thai PME. With nearly 70 military academies in China, approximately half of them cater to foreign military personnel. Notably, these programs differ from the normative approach seen in the United States, as they do not aim to instill values related to democracy or civilian control. Instead, the primary focus

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<sup>34</sup> Office of Security Assistance, US Department of State, “Key Topics—Office of Security Assistance,” 2023, <https://www.state.gov/>.

<sup>35</sup> Office of Security Assistance, *International Military Education and Training Account Summary* (Washington, DC: US Department of State, 2023), <https://www.state.gov/>.

<sup>36</sup> “Chapter 14: International Training,” in *Security Cooperation Management, Fiscal Year 2022* (Arlington, VA: Defense Security Cooperation University, 2022), <https://www.dscu.edu/>. This publication is often referred to as *The Green Book*, and this is considered edition 42 of that series. Also see: Defense Security Cooperation Agency, “Request for Certification or Re-Certification of E-IMET Courses,” 2023, <https://samm.dsca.mil/>.

<sup>37</sup> Emma Chanlett-Avery and Ben Dolven, “Thailand: Background and US Relations,” *In Focus* (Congressional Research Service), 19 July 2023, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/>.

lies in defense diplomacy—promoting a positive international image of China and its military while concurrently fostering military-to-military connections.<sup>38</sup>

China's PME initiatives for Thailand gained momentum in 2001. However, in response to the US aid cutoff following the 2006 coup, the number of Thai military officials undertaking courses at Chinese military academies saw a significant increase.<sup>39</sup> Following the 2014 coup, when US aid was again suspended, Thailand turned more comprehensively to Chinese academies. This shift was partly a response to Washington's actions and partly due to the cost-effectiveness of Chinese training programs. As a result, the number of Thai military officials enrolled in Chinese military courses grew to approximately "30-50 per year . . . about half the number of Thai military personnel who study in the United States on non-IMET funded courses." It's important to note that Thai military personnel still predominantly favor long-standing US PME over that provided by China.<sup>40</sup>

Following President Donald Trump's invitation of Prime Minister Prayuth to Washington in 2017, there was a rapprochement between Thailand and the United States. Consequently, fewer Thai military officials pursued education in China. However, as the Thai military increasingly employs Chinese military hardware, the demand for Chinese training on its utilization also grows. Moreover, increased reliance on Chinese PME might affect the willingness of the United States to entrust Thailand with its most advanced weaponry, such as the F-35 fighter jet.

In 2023, the United States and China continue to be the top international partners providing PME for Thai military officials. Although the United States maintains a lead in this realm, owing to its long-standing ties and preferences, China closely trails as a strong second option.

### ***Bilateral/Multilateral Peacekeeping Operations***

Participation in peacekeeping operations with partner countries has played a pivotal role in Thailand's defense diplomacy. Both bilateral and multilateral defense and police operations conducted in support of Thailand's allies and/or the United Nations have been integral to defense diplomacy, a practice dating back to 1917. However, it's worth noting that Thai troops began participating in specific United Nations peacekeeping missions only after the end of the Cold War in 1989. By 2014, it was estimated that Thailand had deployed over 20,000 military and police

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<sup>38</sup> John S. Van Oudenaren and Benjamin E. Fisher, "Foreign Military Educations as PLA Soft Power," *Parameters* 46, no. 4 (2016), <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/>.

<sup>39</sup> Ian Storey, "China and Thailand: Enhancing Military-Security Ties in the 21st Century," *China Brief* 8, no. 14 (3 July 2008), <https://jamestown.org/>.

<sup>40</sup> Storey, "Thailand's Military Relations with China."

personnel to serve in more than 20 UN peacekeeping missions worldwide since 1950.<sup>41</sup> These figures have since increased in 2023.

In terms of the history of United Nations peacekeeping in 2023, Thailand ranks 45th out of 124 in the list of uniformed personnel-contributing countries. This ranking encompasses experts on mission, formed police units, individual police, staff officers, and troops.<sup>42</sup> Simultaneously, Thailand has collaborated with other ASEAN member states on defense diplomacy through the ADMM to establish an ASEAN Peacekeeping Centers Network and promote ASEAN Defense Collaboration. However, despite Thailand and Indonesia co-sponsoring a concept note on this initiative in 2011, no ASEAN peacekeeping operation has been conducted to date.<sup>43</sup>

In 2000, the Thai armed forces established the Peace Operations Division Department of Military Operations, with its primary responsibility being the supervision, coordination, and assistance in deploying forces for peacekeeping missions. Over time, the unit's structure expanded, and on 1 October 2006, it was renamed the Peace Operations Center. In 2023, the center consists of an operations division, a training and education division, a planning and project division, and an administrative department.<sup>44</sup> Notably, the Royal Thai Police coordinate the participation of Thai police in peacekeeping missions. Table 2 presents an overview of Thai troop involvement in external support and United Nations efforts.

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<sup>41</sup> "Thailand, the Land of the Free, and its International Peacekeeping Efforts," *Asia Society*, 29 October 2014, <https://asiasociety.org/>.

<sup>42</sup> United Nations, "Uniformed Personnel Contributing Countries by Ranking: Experts on Mission, Formed Police Units, Individual Police, Staff Officer, and Troops As of: 28/02/2023," <https://peacekeeping.un.org/>.

<sup>43</sup> Manowong, Sukontasap, Ocha, "Investigating the Contributions of Thailand's Defence Diplomacy," 22.

<sup>44</sup> Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters, "Peace Operations Centre, Directorate of Joint Operations," 2023, <https://j3.rtarf.mi.th/>.

**Table 2. Thai involvement in external support/United Nations peacekeeping missions (1950–2023)**

Mission	Period	# of Military/ Police Troops
Sending troops to France in support of Allies during World War I (Siamese Expeditionary Forces)	1917–1919	1,284
United Nations Command (defending South Korea from North Korea)	1950–1955	11,786
United Nations Observation Group in Lebanon (UNOGI)	June–December 1958	?
Free World Military Assistance Forces (FWMAF) to South Vietnam	1965–1972	37,644
United Nations Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) in Namibia	1989–1990	5
United Nations Iraq-Kuwait Observation Mission (UNIKOM)	1991–2002	5-7
United Nations Guard Contingent in Iraq (UNGCI)	1991–1994	50
United Nations Transnational Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC)	1992–1993	705
United Nations Observer Mission in South Africa (UNOMSA) in South Africa	1992–1994	5
United Nations Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina (UNMIBH) in Bosnia and Herzegovina	1995–2002	?
United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL)	1999–2005	5
United Nations Electoral Observation Mission for the Fijian Electoral Mission in August 2001 (UNFEOM)	2001	?
US-led Operation Enduring Freedom	2001–2014	130
International Forces INTERFET (Peace Operations): 1999–2000 United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor: UNTAET: 2000–2002 United Nations Missions of Support in East Timor: UNMISIT	2002–2005	1581
United Nations Operations in Burundi (ONUB): 2004–2006	2004–2006	177
Multinational Force: Iraq	2003–2004	450 (medics, engineers)
United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIS)	2006–2010	15
United Nations Political Mission in Nepal (UNMIN)	2007–2008	7
African Union – United Nations Hybrid Operations in Darfur (UNAMID) 2007–2010	2007–2010	800
United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti	2004–2017	20
United Nations Mission to Liberia (UNMISIL)	2003–2018	7
United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP)	1949–Present	6
United Nations Mission to South Sudan (UNMISS)	2018–Present	268
United Nations Mission to the Central African Republic	2014–Present	?

(Source: compiled from Peace Operations Centre, Directorate of Military Operations, Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters. *The Role of the Thai Armed Forces in Peace Operations* (in Thai), 2023, <https://j3.rtarf.mi.th/>. See also Keokam Kraisoraphong and Brendan Howe, “Thailand’s Participation in un Peacekeeping Missions,” *Journal of International Peacekeeping* 18, no. 3–4 (2014): 236–55, <https://doi.org/>.

Thai participation in peacekeeping missions has increased in both the number of missions and the number of soldiers involved since 1989. This reflects the kingdom's commitment to maintaining international peace and security, as well as promoting regional cooperation. This ideological perspective aligns with the discursive institution of socially constructed collaboration.

### ***Senior Defense Personnel Contacts/ Visits***

The most fundamental and traditional form of defense diplomacy involves the use of defense attachés in foreign countries and the visits of senior military personnel to nations abroad. These practices were previously known as *military diplomacy* before being encompassed within the broader term *defense diplomacy*.<sup>45</sup> In the United Kingdom, defense attachés have the responsibility of promoting discourse and ideation. They work to enhance “UK Defense credibility and capability” while also fostering “close and effective bilateral relationships and regional awareness.”<sup>46</sup>

Four methods to indicate the importance of sending defense attachés to host countries include:

1. whether defense attachés are sent to the host country;
2. the number of defense attachés sent to the host country;
3. the duration for which defense attachés have been sent to the host country; and
4. the military rank of the defense attachés.

While some of Thailand's earliest defense attaché relations were with Britain and Germany, the kingdom currently maintains defense attaché relations with 26 countries, including the United States, China, Germany, the UK, Japan, Russia, Australia, India, and Thailand's immediate neighbors.<sup>47</sup>

Regarding Thai–US relations, Thailand has deployed defense attachés to Washington since 1945. In 1953, the number of attachés at the Thai embassy in Washington began to increase. In 2023, the largest contingent of Thai attaché officials is in Washington, including the defense and military attaché, the air attaché, and the navy attaché. Each attaché has their own staff of lower-ranking officers (for

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<sup>45</sup> Lech Drab, “Defence diplomacy—an important tool for the implementation of foreign policy and security of the state,” *Security and Defence Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (2018): 57–71, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>46</sup> UK Parliament, “Defence Diplomacy: A Softer Side of UK Defence,” 7th Report of Session 2022–2023, <https://publications.parliament.uk/>.

<sup>47</sup> Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters, “ทำเนียบ ผชท.ทหารไทย ณ ต่างประเทศ [Directory of the Thai Military Commander Abroad], 2023, <https://j2.rtarf.mi.th/>



example, the navy attaché had five officers serving under him in 2023).<sup>48</sup> Prior to 1987, the rank of Thai attachés was lieutenant colonel (or naval commander or air force wing commander). In 1987, the rank was raised to colonel—or its equivalent in the Navy (captain) and Air Force (group captain).

Meanwhile, US defense attachés, navy attachés, and air attachés in Thailand (and their service teams) have consistently held the rank of colonel. In 1953, US attachés have had the luxury of having offices at the JUSMAGTHAI in Bangkok—separate from the US embassy.<sup>49</sup> JUSMAGTHAI attachés are responsible for overseeing all aspects of US military procurement for and US defense drills with Thailand.

As for Thailand and China, the two countries have maintained attaché relations since the mid-1980s. In 2019, Beijing upgraded its defense attaché to Thailand from a one-star to a two-star general, its highest-ranked military attaché in Southeast Asia. The high ranking for its attaché was significant, especially for China, as it only posts two-star generals in prominent countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and India.<sup>50</sup> China also maintains a police attaché from Beijing's Ministry of Public Security (MPS) in Bangkok, who is also a two-star police general. This two-star general regularly receives intelligence from Thailand's Department of Special Investigations (DSI).<sup>51</sup> There is concern that the Chinese police attaché has a task beyond simple diplomacy. Indeed, amid growing information about the MPS running illegal overseas police stations in countries throughout the world, some Chinese political exiles living in Thailand have been apprehended by MPS agents and taken back to China. For example, in 2015, Minhui Gui, an ethnic Chinese who had published books critical of Chinese communist leaders and was a naturalized Swedish citizen, was kidnapped by the MPS from his vacation home in Thailand. He later appeared on state television in China, confessing to crimes against the Chinese state, and was imprisoned. The Thai government denied any knowledge of the MPS kidnapping on Thai soil.<sup>52</sup>

Another form of defense contact occurs when senior military officials undertake visits abroad. While US senior military and intelligence officials had supported the Seri Thai resistance during World War II, they began making formal visits to

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<sup>48</sup> Office of the Naval Attaché, Royal Thai Embassy to the United States, "About the Office," 10 September 2015, <https://www.attachewashington.navy.mi.th/>.

<sup>49</sup> Joint United States Military Advisory Group Thailand, "What Is JUSMAGTHAI?," 2023, <http://www.jusmagthai.com/>.

<sup>50</sup> Storey, "Thailand's Military Relations with China."

<sup>51</sup> "Chinese Counsellor and Police Attache Visited DSI" (press release, Department of Special Investigation (Thailand), 11 November 2020), <https://www.dsi.go.th/>.

<sup>52</sup> Jordan Link, "The Expanding International Reach of China's Police," *Center for American Progress*, 17 October 2022, <https://www.americanprogress.org/>.

Thailand in 1950.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, one of the earliest visits by China's Army General Chief of Staff to Thailand was in 1983.<sup>54</sup> More recently, Army Commander General Narongphan Jitkaewthae led a delegation of senior military officials to China in June 2023.<sup>55</sup> The previous month, Narongphan had visited the United States, attending the Land Forces of the Pacific Conference in Hawaii.<sup>56</sup>

In summary, as demonstrated in the cases of the United States and China, defense attachés and military visits have been integral to Thai defense diplomacy, whether involving foreign attachés in Thailand or Thai attachés abroad. Indeed, attachés have represented the most fundamental and personalized form of soft power available in Thai defense relations.

## Conclusion

This study has delved into the often-overlooked realm of defense diplomacy, specifically within the context of a middle-power nation in Southeast Asia—Thailand. Through the lens of DI, the article uncovered how the structures of ideas, discourse, and political deliberations are harnessed to effect institutional changes in defense policies, programs, and the broader philosophies of defense relations, which in turn underpin Thailand's wider foreign engagements. Defense diplomacy, as an embodiment of Thailand's soft power, serves as a conduit to align strategic perspectives with other nations.

Nonetheless, Thailand's defense diplomacy is inherently woven into the nation's overarching realist foreign policy of hedging, which seeks equilibrium among great powers and fellow ASEAN member states. However, this study has articulated that this policy of hedging-driven defense diplomacy, while often valuable for defense relations, comes with limitations. It is circumscribed by the fact that the Thai military, which retains a degree of autonomy from civilian control, does not consistently align with the foreign policy agenda of elected civilians.

At the outset of this exploration, two fundamental questions were posed. Firstly, the article inquired about the significance of defense diplomacy in Thailand's overall foreign policy and whether these two facets have consistently harmonized. Secondly, it examined the advantages and constraints of Thai defense diplomacy.

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<sup>53</sup> Office of the Historian, US Department of State, "The Secretary of State to Certain Diplomatic and Consular Offices" (circular telegram, 24 February 1950), <https://history.state.gov/>.

<sup>54</sup> "Kampuchea's Agony," *Canberra Times*, 8 February 1983, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/>.

<sup>55</sup> "Chinese defense minister meets Thailand's army chief," *Xinhua News*, 10 June 2023, <https://english.news.cn/>.

<sup>56</sup> Wassana Nanuam, "Army Chief Visiting US," *Bangkok Post*, 15 May 2023, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

In response to the first question, it is apparent that, like any nation, defense diplomacy plays a pivotal role in reinforcing and affirming the defense dimension of statecraft, aligning it with the nation's comprehensive foreign policy. This is especially significant in Thailand's case, considering the country's history of military coups, where defense diplomacy has not always seamlessly supported overall foreign policy objectives. Where Thai defense diplomacy has steadfastly endorsed the nation's foreign policy, it has served as a reliable barometer for the direction of Thailand's external relations.

Addressing the second question, Thai defense diplomacy offers the benefit of elucidating the international community and domestic stakeholders regarding the military's commitment to overall civilian control over foreign policy. Moreover, it functions as a soft-power adhesive that bolsters defense ties, fostering bilateral relationships with both major and minor powers, and enhancing collaboration among the defense institutions of ASEAN. Nevertheless, the limitations of Thai defense diplomacy become evident in its occasional symbolism and its tendency to deviate from civilian-led foreign policy. Given the military's relative autonomy in relation to elected civilians, there remains a pressing need to harmonize Thai defense diplomacy with the country's broader foreign policy.

Thai defense diplomacy holds significant implications for the United States and its regional strategy in safeguarding American interests. Washington must understand that Thai defense officials highly prioritize cooperation with the United States, its role in Thailand's security, and the enduring trust in defense relations cultivated since 1950. Simultaneously, Washington must acknowledge that Thailand cannot overlook the rise of a powerful China in close proximity, which also seeks to forge strong security connections. In essence, while the United States remains Thailand's preferred partner compared to other nations, Washington should not take Thailand's alliance for granted.

When Thailand employs defense diplomacy to enhance its perceived security needs and strengthen ties with the United States, Washington should respond positively. A case in point is Washington's recent refusal to allow Thailand to purchase F-35 fighter jets. Such actions may lead Thailand to explore alternative options or potentially pivot closer to China. To foster stronger Thai-US defense relations, the United States should make more effective use of its own defense diplomacy tools, including professional military education exchanges, military exercises, interactions with defense attachés, and even military hardware agreements.

It is worth noting that the long-standing history of close military ties between Thailand and the United States, combined with Washington's ability to offer advanced military exercises and professional military educational exchanges, provides the United States with a unique advantage in its relationship with Thailand com-

pared to other countries. Nevertheless, there are limitations to consider, such as the conditions imposed by Congress on US military aid, past criticisms of the Thai military by the United States that influenced some Thai military officials to shift away from the United States, and Washington's other defense commitments.

Looking ahead, Thailand's defense diplomacy is poised to further institutionalize itself with foreign militaries and nations. However, it is vital for the international community and US operational forces to recognize that the future effectiveness and transparency of this policy hinges on the civil-military dynamics between the recently elected civilian government led by Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin and the military establishment. This is because Thailand's military remains ultimately accountable to the king, rather than the elected government under which it operates. 🌟

**Dr. Paul Chambers**

Dr. Chambers earned his PhD at Northern Illinois University in 2003 and currently serves as Lecturer and Advisor for International Affairs at the College of ASEAN Community Studies, Naresuan University, Thailand. He is also research fellow at both the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore and the German-Southeast Asian Centre for Public Policy and Good Governance. Finally, he is editor of the *Journal Asian Affairs: An American Review*. His research focuses upon civil-military relations, security-sector reform, and democratization in Southeast Asia.

# Hedging, Alignment, and Unintended Consequences

## The Geopolitical Meaning and Outcomes of Thailand's Procurement of Chinese Submarines

DR. GREG RAYMOND

### Abstract

Thailand's potential acquisition of three *Yuan*-class submarines from China has sparked discussions, prompting some to view it as a strategic shift toward China. This article assesses this procurement decision within the context of Thailand's governance challenges in defense procurement and its modest maritime security goals. The article reveals that while the 2014 junta intended this purchase as a strategic message, two factors temper its significance. Firstly, Thailand maintains a unique perspective on its alliance with the US, striving for equidistant positioning among great powers. From this standpoint, obtaining Chinese submarines served as a short-term diversion of pressure, rather than a substantial realignment. Secondly, Thailand assigns relatively low priority to seapower in its military planning, mitigating the submarine purchase's automatic implication of trust in China. However, it is emphasized that Thailand does not fully control the risks stemming from efforts to maintain strategic ambiguity, such as bolstering China's logistical presence in Thailand, leading to unintended outcomes, including the weakening of the Thai–United States military alliance.

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The Cold War marked the acme of Thai–United States strategic cooperation, with US military infrastructure development in Thailand serving as a crucial indicator of trust. Between 1961 and 1963, the United States initiated the construction of contingency-related facilities at the Sattahip naval base. This endeavor also included the construction of a strategic road linking Sattahip to the northeastern city of Korat, enhancing Thailand's ability to swiftly deploy military forces in response to potential threats from China or North Vietnam through Laos. The enhancements comprised landing ship ramps, piers, a breakwater, and a dredged harbor.<sup>1</sup>

Fast forward to 2022, and the Thai Navy openly acknowledges a significant development: the state-owned enterprise China Shipbuilding and Offshore Inter-

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<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Muscat, *Thailand and the United States: Development, Security and Foreign Aid* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

national Co Ltd (CSOC) will be responsible for constructing a THB 950-million (USD 26.4-million) submarine base at Sattahip, in preparation for the three Yuan S26T submarines Thailand is procuring from China.<sup>2</sup> The question arises: Is Thailand now gravitating toward China's sphere of influence in a manner similar to its previous alignment within the US alliance fraternity? Recent years have witnessed growing speculation about Thailand's use of arms procurement to signal its geopolitical alignment.

This speculation gained momentum after the military government of General Prayuth Chan-ocha confirmed Thailand's intent to proceed with the purchase of submarines from China,<sup>3</sup> a move many interpreted as signaling discontent with US criticism of the coup and the Congressional suspension of USD 4.7 million in defense aid.<sup>4</sup>

This article delves into Thailand's 2017 decision to acquire Chinese submarines, asking whether it was evidence of a major realignment in the context of US–China rivalry. The article analyzes the decision from two vantage points: the organizational and politico-military. This approach aids in addressing the pivotal questions. First, was there an intent to convey a geopolitical message through this purchase? Second, if such an intent existed, what did this signal signify? Was it a major strategic shift or was it more a warning shot to the United States not to take Thailand for granted?

To tackle the first question, the article employs an organizational perspective, keeping in mind Graham Allison's insight that "a government is not an individual. . . . It is a vast conglomerate of loosely allied organizations, each with a substantial life of its own."<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the article explores the extent to which this decision was a product of Thailand's navy as opposed to the executive branch. Here, the article posits that the Thai Navy had substantial reservations about the quality of Chinese armaments but ultimately yielded to Prime Minister Prayuth's choice.

On the second question, the article contends that the decision to strengthen ties with Beijing following the harsh US condemnation of Thailand's 2014 coup was indeed intended as a signal to caution Washington against applying additional pressure. However, the article asserts that this signal was intentionally subdued, as

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<sup>2</sup> "The Navy explains the allegations. In the case of procuring a submarine and a submarine dock" [กองทัพเรือชี้แจงต่อข้อกล่าวหา กรณีการจัดหาเรือดำน้ำและท่าจอดเรือดำน้ำ] (press release, Royal Thai Navy, 13 April 2022), <https://www.navy.mi.th/>.

<sup>3</sup> Thitinan Pongsudhirak, "The submarine deal that won't go away," *Bangkok Post*, 12 May 2017, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>; and "US frozen out of defence deals," *Bangkok Post*, 23 May 2016.

<sup>4</sup> "China may gain from Thai-US Cobra Gold spat," *The Nation*, 25 June 2014, <https://www.nationthailand.com/>.

<sup>5</sup> Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd ed. (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1999), 142.

Thailand's foreign policy establishment remained committed to maintaining equidistance in relations with major powers.

This article unfolds in four distinct sections. The subsequent segment introduces a theoretical framework situating Thailand's foreign policy preferences within the context of recent literature on small state hedging, denoting the act of maintaining ambiguity regarding alignment amid great-power competition. The second part scrutinizes the nature of Thailand's defense procurement and evaluates the evidence surrounding whether the decision to procure submarines from China was initiated by the Thai Navy or the executive government. This analysis is instrumental in determining the case for the existence of a geopolitical signal. The third segment examines the substance and significance of this signal within the backdrop of Thailand's enduring politico-military preferences. Before concluding, the article assesses the potential long-term consequences of this decision, particularly its impact on the health of Thailand's alliance with the United States.

It should be noted that the most recent development in the submarine procurement has rendered the future uncertain. The newly-elected Thai government in 2023 has requested China to exchange the submarines for frigates and to temporarily postpone the submarine deal. This recent decision comes after protracted deliberations and significant uncertainty regarding the potential cancellation of the deal and the compensation that might be pursued. This was due to Germany's restriction on exporting MTU396 diesel engines to China, a result of the European Union's arms embargo. At the time of writing, China has not accepted the replacement proposal.

### **Temporal Hedging, Dominance Denial and Thai Foreign Policy**

In their 2015 paper discussing the strategic hedging of secondary states in the Asia Pacific region amid the rivalry between the United States and China, Darren Lim and Zack Cooper offered a definition of *hedging*. They characterized hedging as behavior primarily confined to the security realm, with the intention of fostering ambiguity regarding alignment.<sup>6</sup> This ambiguity, from the perspective of the hedging state, serves to obscure its potential alignment choice in the event of a conflict between the two major powers. This posture of waiting has also been termed *temporal hedging*.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Darren J. Lim and Zack Cooper, "Reassessing Hedging: The Logic of Realignment in East Asia," *Security Studies* 24, no. 4 (2015): 696–727.

<sup>7</sup> Mohammad Salman, Moritz Pieper, and Gustaaf Geeraerts, "Hedging in the Middle East and China-U.S. Competition," *Asian Politics & Policy* 7, no. 4 (2015), 579, <https://doi.org/>.

Thailand has demonstrated a historical pattern of temporal hedging during significant moments in its modern Westphalian statehood. During World War I, it formally embraced neutrality until 1917 when it declared war on the Central Powers. While there were substantial identity-driven motives for Thailand's desire to conform to Western norms concerning warfare, there were also practical realist reasons. One of King Vajiravudh's ministers succinctly articulated this perspective, noting that justice would be determined by the strongest power, regardless of international law.<sup>8</sup>

In World War II, Thailand once again delayed its decision making. It chose to align with Japan only when confronted with the fait accompli of Japanese invasion and occupation in December 1942. This decision came after unsuccessful attempts to secure security guarantees from Britain in the lead-up to the conflict. It is entirely plausible that Thailand is presently adopting a temporal hedging strategy in response to the escalating competition between the United States and China, with the aim of postponing its alignment choice, either indefinitely or until the last possible moment.

Lim and Cooper also highlight the intricate balancing act that a hedging secondary state must perform. It must engage with, manage risks, and reassure both major powers simultaneously, underscoring its goodwill.<sup>9</sup> This intricate management of relations with multiple powers aligns with Kuik's concept of *dominance denial*, wherein smaller states aim to safeguard their autonomy by conveying the message that they can pivot toward other powers if any one exerts excessive pressure.<sup>10</sup>

Thailand's adept accommodation of multiple great powers serves to safeguard its autonomy by capitalizing on the competition among these powers for influence. This approach echoes the legacy of King Chulalongkorn, who shielded Thailand from colonialism in the late nineteenth century through a similar strategy. Among Thailand's royalist officials, King Chulalongkorn's foreign policy is highly esteemed and viewed as a blueprint for navigating the contemporary multipolar strategic environment. In 2010, Thailand's former Foreign Minister Dr. Surakiart Sathirathai gave a speech to members of Thailand's foreign policy audience stating that:

[T]he thing that we should know and apply currently, the most important thing for me, is the royal foreign policy, when amidst the colonialist trends of the Great Powers in that period, [we pursued a policy of] building a

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<sup>8</sup> Gregory V. Raymond, "War as Membership: International Society and Thailand's Participation in World War I," *Asian Studies Review* 43, no. 1 (2019), 132–47, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>9</sup> Lim and Cooper, "Reassessing Hedging," 702.

<sup>10</sup> Kuik Cheng-Chwee, "The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's Response to a Rising China," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 30, no. 2 (2008): 159–85, <http://www.jstor.org/>.



balance of the great powers or a policy of building close ties with one Great Power to balance other Great Powers (Balance of power and influence).<sup>11</sup>

During a 2015 interview, a senior Thai government advisor and academic hinted that Thailand would apply this approach to its alliance with the United States, saying that:

... dynamics are going to be more and more complicated. There are many areas that we share interests. Other areas that we might not share interests and things could become more competitive. So the challenge is how can you separate. Thailand is in very good position to do that. It's a Thai diplomatic hallmark. It's the Saranrom approach. It's the flexible with the wind. It's the Middle Path approach. It's now officially called a bridge approach. Saranrom is named after an old palace. It's very much a model that many countries try to emulate but it's not easy. We develop this position over centuries with the Thai finesse, leadership, and now political leaders allow us to do this.<sup>12</sup>

While Thai leaders maintain confidence in the rationale behind this strategy and their ability to execute it, both temporal hedging and dominance denial strategies entail certain costs. Ambiguity introduces risks, including the possibility that the primary great-power partner questions the utility of its secondary power counterpart. In the forthcoming sections, this article will assess whether we can regard the submarine purchase as an instance of dominance denial hedging, and if so, whether Thailand can effectively manage the associated risks. However, before delving into this analysis, it is essential to determine whether an intentional signal was indeed conveyed.

### **Was the Submarine Purchase a Signal?**

From a statistical perspective, China has emerged as a progressively significant source of arms for Thailand. In the period spanning 1950 to 2009, imports of US arms significantly overshadowed all other suppliers. Among the 22 countries engaged in arms sales to Thailand, the United States stood as the preeminent contributor, accounting for 56 percent of the total by dollar value during this era. The second-largest supplier was China, with a share of 13 percent. However, when we

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<sup>11</sup> Special Address by Dr. Surakiart Sathirathai, ราลึก ๑๐๐ ปี ปียมหาราชา นสุรณ บพเรยนควา มยูรอดของชาติ ทาหมกลา มชืดแยง, (press release, Royal Thai Navy, 19 October 2010), <https://rtnpr.blogspot.com/>.

<sup>12</sup> Gregory Raymond and Kpjm Blaxland, *The US-Thai Alliance and Asian International Relations: History, Memory and Current Developments*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2021), 183, <https://doi.org/>.

examine a more recent period, from 1989 to 2009, the dominance of US arms sales declined. During this interval, the United States accounted for 45 percent, while China's contribution rose to 22 percent of Thailand's recent armament imports.<sup>13</sup>

Scholars commonly regard arms purchases from a major power as a relatively weak form of alignment since they indicate a willingness to acquire capabilities about which the major power possesses substantial knowledge and control.<sup>14</sup> However, attributing Thailand's gradual shift to an increasing alignment with China presents certain hazards. This line of reasoning presumes a unitary, rational state while neglecting how a state's internal characteristics can influence its response to the external environment. It also fails to consider other potentially significant factors in arms procurement decision making, such as pricing, conditionality, and opportunities for kickbacks.

Within Thailand, the concept of a unitary state is somewhat problematic. Under Thailand's civil-military relations, central governments, especially civilian ones exposed to the risk of coups, often exert limited control over arms procurement. The majority of such decisions are led by individual armed services with relatively minimal oversight. In my 2018 book on Thai strategic culture, I identified various patterns in arms procurement, including moderate spending compared to other Southeast Asian states and a tendency for defense expenditures to rise following coups.<sup>15</sup> Of particular relevance here is the enduring quid pro quo arrangement between Thai governments and the military services. In this compact, the military accepts the government's allocated defense budget, and, in return, the services retain the autonomy to procure as they see fit.

Had this compact been applied to the submarine acquisition, the Thai Navy would have had the liberty to select its source. It is reasonably safe to assert that if left to its own devices and with an ample budget, the Thai Navy would not have opted for Chinese submarines. The Thai Navy has a long-standing preference for procuring submarines from European suppliers. Many Thai Navy officers have received their education in Europe and perceive European submarines as superior in terms of capability and endurance compared to Chinese submarines.<sup>16</sup> In alignment with this preference, the navy pursued Kockums submarines from Sweden in 1995 and U-206 submarines from Germany in 2012. On each occasion, debates

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<sup>13</sup> "SIPRI Arms Transfers Database," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, n.d., <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>14</sup> Lim and Cooper, "Reassessing Hedging," 705.

<sup>15</sup> Gregory Raymond, *Thai Military Power: A Culture of Strategic Accommodation*, 1st ed. (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2018).

<sup>16</sup> "How necessary is it for Thailand to have submarines?" [จำเป็นแค่ไหนที่ไทยต้องมีเรือดำน้ำ], *KomChadLuek Online*, 8 February 2016, <https://www.komchadluek.net/>.

revolving around resource allocation and the financial crisis of the 1990s obstructed these acquisitions. In contrast, experiences with Chinese armaments, including problems with Chinese-made frigates and the Thai Army's Chinese T-69 tanks (which were ultimately discarded as artificial coral reefs), have left a lingering sense of distrust.<sup>17</sup> These issues raised concerns regarding the safety of personnel in deep-sea scenarios.

Considering the Thai Navy's historical preference for European submarines and their reservations regarding Chinese submarines, it is reasonable to infer that the central government exerted more than usual influence in the decision to procure from China.<sup>18</sup> A statement made by a Thai Navy officer in a 2016 interview supports this inference. Captain Wachiraporn Nakornsawang alluded to the challenge of governments "wanting a special relationship with some countries while the RTN [Royal Thai Navy] has a view that the submarines of that country are not to its preferred specifications." He emphasized that "most of the people leading the acquisition have been politicians or from the military service that has political power." This clearly alluded to the Thai Army, an institution with significant financial resources and a history of coup involvement.

In 2017, a Thai navy source disclosed additional details about the submarine tender evaluation, confirming that the government exerted pressure on the navy to select the Chinese submarines.<sup>19</sup> The source presented comprehensive evidence indicating that the Thai navy had conducted a comparative assessment of the Chinese submarines against those offered by European and Korean companies. The evaluation revealed that the Chinese submarines fell short in various significant tender criteria. Specifically, the CSOC submarines demonstrated weaknesses in their ability to safely operate in shallow water, maintain maximum speed, travel quietly, track multiple targets, and facilitate submariners' rescue. Additionally, their batteries and the overall lifespan of the submarines were shorter. However, due to the government's signaling, the Navy devised methods to exclude the European and Korean vessels while highlighting that the Chinese offered three boats for the price of three.

In essence, it appears that, faced with a history of unsuccessful efforts to acquire submarines in the post-Cold War era, the Thai Navy acceded to the government's

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<sup>17</sup> BBC Thai, "Submarine of RTN's dreams became 100% Chinese, with various support costs will be THB 5 billion" [เรือดำน้ำในฝันทัพเรือไทยที่ส่อเป็นจีนแท้ 100% กับหลากงบสนับสนุน รวมเฉียด 5 หมื่นล้าน] *Prachachat.net*, 14 December 2022 <https://www.prachachat.net/>.

<sup>18</sup> "How necessary is it for Thailand to have submarines?"

<sup>19</sup> "Navy source reveals that they had to acquire Chinese submarines because of a signal from those in power" [แหล่งข่าวทัพเรือเผย «ต้องเรือดำน้ำจีนเพราะสัญญาณจากผู้มีอำนาจเหนือ ทร.»], *Isra News Agency*, 24 April 2017, <https://www.isranews.org/>.

choice. As one media article aptly noted, “in a period when the coup made other choices out of reach due to price and conditions, Chinese submarines were better than no submarines at all.”<sup>20</sup>

In summary, the preponderance of evidence suggests that Thailand’s submarine procurement was not solely about capability but also intertwined with geopolitics and diplomacy. In the subsequent section, this article endeavors to gain a deeper understanding and calibration of what this acquisition might imply regarding Thailand’s alignment, while analyzing it in the context of long-standing biases in Thai military operational and politico-military thinking.

### **What Signal Was Intended?**

There is little doubt that the criticism leveled by the United States at the 2014 coup, along with the Congressionally-mandated suspension of USD 4.7 million in defense aid, prompted significant contemplation regarding the Thai-US relationship and, to some extent, the emergence of a pro-China sentiment.<sup>21</sup> According to US official Scot Marciel, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, the “coup and post-coup repression” made it impossible for the United States to go on with “business as usual.”<sup>22</sup> Senior US officials reinforced this message in public speeches within Thailand. Senior US State Department official Daniel Russell criticized the coup during a speech at Chulalongkorn University, stating,

I’ll be blunt here: When an elected leader is deposed, impeached by the authorities that implemented the coup, and then targeted with criminal charges while basic democratic processes and institutions are interrupted, the international community is left with the impression that these steps could be politically driven.<sup>23</sup>

Conservative Thais and a significant portion of the Thai mainstream media responded vigorously to the criticism. There was a prevailing perception of US hypocrisy. Commentators observed that Thailand was not receiving the same treatment as other countries that had carried out coups, raising doubts about whether

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<sup>20</sup> BBC Thai, “Submarine of RTN’s dreams became 100% Chinese.”

<sup>21</sup> “China may gain from Thai-US Cobra Gold spat,” *The Nation*.

<sup>22</sup> Scot Marciel, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, “Testimony Before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, Washington, DC,” 24 June 2014, <https://th.usembassy.gov/>.

<sup>23</sup> Daniel R. Russel, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, “Remarks at the Institute of Security and International Studies Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand,” 26 January 2015, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/>.

“the US would apply the same standards of engagement to all allies, such as Egypt or Israel.”<sup>24</sup> The Thai-language press voiced complaints that the “US really wasn’t interested in democracy or human rights very much. It has supported coups in Egypt, Ukraine, Iraq, Iran, Algeria and other countries all over the world that help its national interests.”<sup>25</sup>

Our 2017 research among Thai military officers revealed a substantial unease regarding the US stance. Notably, our respondents perceived the military threat from the United States as more substantial than that posed by any other major power, including China.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, China’s nonjudgmental position regarding the coup cast it in a favorable light for Thais sensitive to foreign criticism. Sino-Thais, for instance, turned to China not solely based on ethnic identification but rather in defense of Thailand’s royalist-nationalist conservatism. Paisal Puechmongkol, a Sino-Thai lawyer and an aide to Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan following the 2014 coup, advocated for Thailand to realign its security and foreign policy away from the West and toward Russia and China.<sup>27</sup> In this context, the regime’s dispatch of former Deputy Prime Minister Somkid Jatusripitak to China to meet with Chinese Vice President Li Yuanchao and facilitate an agreement for enhanced bilateral cooperation in 2014 may have conveyed the message that Thailand would not be isolated, notwithstanding US criticism.<sup>28</sup>

The submarine purchase might similarly have been a form of dominance denial messaging. This aligns with Thai strategy, which has historically exhibited a pronounced inclination toward politico-military strategy over pure military strategy. The Thai military has typically measured its success not merely by the capacity to achieve operational success in a conventional military operation against a peer force but by the extent to which the deployment of its military resources advanced its objectives in relation to major powers. Thailand has employed the military sphere as a means of diplomatic signaling, as seen when Rama VI dispatched troops to Europe during World War I and when Prime Minister Phibun Songkram sent a deployment to the Korean War. During the last major security crisis faced by Thailand, which entailed Vietnam’s occupation of Cambodia in the 1980s, the Thai

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<sup>24</sup> Kavi Chongkittavorn, “US political posturing kills US-Thai relations,” *The Nation*, 20 July 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Arnon Sakwirawit, “Panda Gold versus Cobra Gold,” *Thai Post*, 2 June 2014, 4.

<sup>26</sup> John Blaxland and Gregory Raymond, “Tipping the balance in Southeast Asia?: Thailand, the United States and China,” Centre of Gravity series paper No. 34 (Canberra: Australian National University, 7 November 2017), <https://sdsc.bellschool.anu.edu.au/>.

<sup>27</sup> Kasian Tejapira, “The Sino-Thais’ right turn towards China,” *Critical Asian Studies* 49, no. 4 (2017): 606–18, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>28</sup> Toru Takahashi, “Thailand’s General Outwit ‘Team US,’” *Nikkei Asia*, 5 November 2014, <https://asia.nikkei.com/>.

military achieved its most substantial and noteworthy strategic impact through cooperation with the Chinese military in providing support to the Khmer Rouge forces along the Thai–Cambodian border. In contrast, the planning for repelling Vietnamese forces crossing into Thai territory, including the scenario of a full-scale Vietnamese invasion, appeared comparatively lackluster, with weak implementation.<sup>29</sup>

However, the question of how robust this message was requires careful calibration of the level of trust and the strength of the signal. Many analysts tend to view the selection of a submarine supplier as a reliable indicator of alignment because submarine capabilities are often both important and sensitive. They are important because a submarine capability can be pivotal to a state’s overall defense strategy, and sensitive because the supplier possesses in-depth knowledge of the submarine’s technical capabilities and limitations, as well as the ability to provide or withhold maintenance and spare parts. To gauge the strength of the geopolitical signal, it is essential to determine the weight Thailand assigns to submarines in its overarching defense and military operational planning. Assessing how Thailand rationalizes the need for submarines and their actual importance for its defense becomes crucial in evaluating the decision to place trust in China.

Thai declaratory policy offers relatively limited insight. Thai Navy officers generally speak in broad terms, emphasizing the necessity for capabilities in all three domains: air, surface, and subsurface. High-ranking leaders mention that neighboring countries already possess submarines. In fact, Thailand’s internal *National Maritime Security Plan 2015–2021* specifically references Vietnam and Myanmar in this context. An officer from the National Security Council, interviewed in 2017, commented on the submarine acquisition, stating, “Of course we don’t expect to go to war. But in terms of having capable defence forces it’s better to have them just to make our defence capability complete. If something happens we will not be in a difficult position.”<sup>30</sup>

Potential maritime disputes with neighboring countries could be a motivating factor. As responsible members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Thai policy makers generally remain reserved regarding the potential for disputes over maritime boundaries and resources to escalate into conflicts. Thailand has overlapping maritime claims with Myanmar, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Cambodia.<sup>31</sup> An agreement in 1997 resolved the 3,903-km<sup>2</sup> overlap with Vietnam,

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<sup>29</sup> Gregory V. Raymond, “Strategic Culture and Thailand’s Response to Vietnam’s Occupation of Cambodia, 1979–1989: A Cold War Epilogue,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 22, no. 1 (2020), 4–45. <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>30</sup> National Security Council officer, interview with author, Bangkok, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Barry Wain, “LATENT DANGER: Boundary Disputes and Border Issues in Southeast Asia,” *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2012): 38–60, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

and the two countries engage in biannual joint patrols. In contrast, the overlap with Cambodia covers a much larger area (27,000 km<sup>2</sup>), lacks an equivalent agreement, and was the scene of a militarized territorial dispute in the 2008–2011 temple crisis. Thai officials may envision submarines as playing a role in a possible escalation of a Thai–Cambodian standoff at sea.

However, procuring submarines for managing a boundary dispute over resources with a neighboring country differs significantly from preparing for a substantial military threat to Thailand’s homeland. In the latter case, Thai security planners appear to perceive limited genuine challenges. In a survey conducted in 2016 and 2017, we questioned 1,800 Thai military officers about the likelihood of military threats. When asked about their sense of security from external military threats, the median response stood at 7 on a 1–10 Likert scale, with 10 signifying “very secure.”<sup>32</sup>

Historically, the place of maritime strategy and the role of Thailand’s navy in military operational planning attribute less, rather than more, importance to the acquisition of submarines. An interview with a Thai military officer in 2012 revealed that “in history, Thailand has not recognized the potential of maritime strategy because it has perceived itself as a land power rather than a maritime power, despite being a coastal state.” Thailand traditionally exhibited greater proficiency in land warfare than maritime operations.<sup>33</sup> For instance, during the outbreak of war between Vietnam and Siam in 1833 under the rule of Rama III (1824–1851), the Siamese held an advantage on land but proved less proficient in maritime battles. Even during the height of the colonial threat to Thailand in the late nineteenth century, when the modern Thai military was shaped under the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868–1910), the approach continued to prioritize land forces. Thailand’s defense strategy revolved around the expansion of its army. In 1902, King Chulalongkorn initiated universal conscription, reflecting his land-centric strategy.<sup>34</sup> This was mirrored in an augmented army budget that surpassed the navy’s budget in 1902 and subsequently more than doubled it.<sup>35</sup> Remarkably, as late as 1908, King Chulalongkorn contemplated the complete elimination of the

<sup>32</sup> Blaxland and Raymond, “Tipping the balance in Southeast Asia?”

<sup>33</sup> Jitraporn, “Organization of the Royal Thai Armed Forces,” 25.

<sup>34</sup> David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 2nd ed. (London: Yale University Press, 2003), 195.

<sup>35</sup> Military expenditure was 11.5 percent of government spending in 1902–03 (army 6.1 percent, navy 5.4 percent), 13.1 percent in 1903–04 (army 8.2 percent, navy 4.9 percent), 17.3 percent in 1904–05 (army 10.8 percent, navy 6.5 percent). Noel Alfred Battye, “The Military, Government and Society in Siam, 1868–1910: Politics and Military Reform During the Reign of King Chulalongkorn” (PhD thesis, Cornell University, 1974), 464.

navy. Fortunately for the navy, his National Defense Council advised against such a move.<sup>36</sup>

The consistent skewing of the Thai defense budget toward the army has been a persistent feature since that era, further accentuated by the political dominance of the Thai Army.<sup>37</sup> This, coupled with a propensity to underfund maintenance, has resulted in some of the Thai Navy's most significant acquisitions becoming inoperable. A prominent instance is the Thai Navy's helicopter carrier, the *Chakri Naruebet*. Delivered in 1997, the vessel was equipped with the British short-take-off combat aircraft known as the Sea Harrier. In 1999, the navy reported that all nine Sea Harrier aircraft were inoperable because of insufficient funds to send them to the United States for servicing.<sup>38</sup> By 2012, the carrier saw limited use, and the short-take-off and vertical landing Harriers were no longer in service.<sup>39</sup>

In conclusion, it is highly probable that Thailand intended to convey a heightened interest in a strategic relationship with China through its submarine purchase. It was likely a signal to the United States that alternative partners were available if needed. However, precisely assessing the strength of this signal requires consideration of other factors. Thai military planning traditionally downplays maritime strategy and naval capability. Consequently, Thai decision makers may not have attached great importance to the military advantages offered by submarines, and they may not have viewed them as a critical defense capability vital to Thai security. Therefore, they might not have regarded the choice as a profound manifestation of trust in China.

## **Unintended Consequences, Costs, and Outcomes**

Thailand's elites may believe they effectively manage their major power relations through Saranom-inspired hedging strategies, such as temporal hedging and dominance denial. In fact, in August 2017, a senior advisor to the Thai government claimed that the Chinese submarine purchase successfully achieved the desired goal of obtaining US attention.<sup>40</sup> However, as noted by Lim and Cooper, maintaining ambiguity carries risks of unintended consequences. One such risk is that China's advances lead to increasing reliance and dependence, potentially deepening

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<sup>36</sup> Batty, "The Military, Government and Society in Siam," 531, 397–443, 531–33.

<sup>37</sup> Gregory Raymond, "Naval Modernization in Southeast Asia: Under the Shadow of Army Dominance?," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 39, no. 1 (2017): 149–77, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>38</sup> "Air force looks at purchasing 5 billion baht radar—navy fighter jets lame," ทอ.จ้องซื้อเรดาร์5พันล. - ทร.'บึนรบ'ง้อย, *Maticchon*, 29 May 1999, 24.

<sup>39</sup> "SAAB to upgrade Thai aircraft carrier combat system," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 25 April 2012.

<sup>40</sup> Procurement Diplomacy: การทูตแบบรัฐทหาร ชื่ออาวุธเรียกความสนใจมหาอำนาจ, *BBC Thai*, 26 August 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/>.



the Thai–China strategic relationship in a path-dependent manner, which may contradict Thailand’s preference for omnidirectional alignment. For example, Thailand, seeking to address past issues with Chinese-made equipment, is establishing Chinese maintenance and logistics support facilities on Thai soil, potentially enhancing China’s capacity to provide logistical support to its military from Thai territory. Another risk is that the United States, observing China’s growing role in Thai defense planning, may reduce, rather than increase, its investment in the alliance.

There is evidence that both of these risks may be materializing. US interest in Thailand has waned since the 2014 coup, compared to other Southeast Asian states like Vietnam and Indonesia. The last US president to visit Thailand was Barack Obama in 2012. Donald Trump visited the Philippines and Vietnam but never Thailand.<sup>41</sup> Joe Biden has visited Cambodia, Indonesia, and Vietnam but not Thailand.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has visited Indonesia more frequently than Thailand.<sup>43</sup> Even the flagship of the alliance, multilateral exercise Cobra Gold, has reduced in size since the 2006 coup. From 1986 to 2004, the average participation was about 17,000 persons, but since the coup in 2006, the average has been around 10,500, indicating a 40-percent decline.<sup>44</sup> Most recently, the United States declined Thailand’s request to purchase the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, with the US ambassador to Thailand citing security as one of the reasons.<sup>45</sup>

This trend has coincided with the growth in the Thailand–China strategic relationship. Thailand was the first country in Southeast Asia to conduct a military exercise with China in 2005, focusing on demining and humanitarian exercises.<sup>46</sup> Over time, the relationship expanded to include exercises between special forces in 2007, marines in 2010, and air forces in November 2014.<sup>47</sup> Initially, these activities were relatively modest, likely reflecting residual sensitivity to US perceptions, and focused on nontraditional areas such as humanitarian relief and counterterrorism. However, reports suggest that the exercise content is evolving. For instance, the most recent joint naval exercise Blue Strike included joint command, joint

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<sup>41</sup> US Department of State, “Presidential Visits Abroad,” 2023, <https://history.state.gov/>.

<sup>42</sup> Sarah Austin, “5 Facts about Presidential Travel Abroad,” Pew Research Center, 28 April 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/>.

<sup>43</sup> “Secretary of State’s Travel,” US Department of State, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/>.

<sup>44</sup> Gregory V. Raymond, “The Birth, Expansion and Decline of Joint Military Exercise Cobra Gold,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, forthcoming.

<sup>45</sup> “US rejects purchase bid, says F-35 fighter jets too sophisticated for Thailand,” *The Nation*, 23 May 2023, <https://www.nationthailand.com/>.

<sup>46</sup> Ian Storey, “China’s Bilateral Defense Diplomacy in Southeast Asia,” *Asian Security* 8, no. 3 (2012), 303, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>47</sup> “Chinese air force to train with Thai pilots,” *Bangkok Post*, 7 November 2014, 2.

antisubmarine operations, helicopter cross-deck landings, mutual presence on each other's ships, jungle survival, urban combat, and helicopter fast-roping. According to the Chinese side, the exercise demonstrated a "high level of trust and deep integration" and had a strong combat orientation.<sup>48</sup>

Another aspect of the growing strategic relationship is the proliferation of Chinese logistics support and military production facilities throughout Thailand, some co-located with Thai military bases. This includes a jointly-funded Chinese-built weapons maintenance center in the northeastern Thai province of Khon Kaen and a warehouse for spare parts of Chinese-made military equipment in the nearby province of Nakhon Ratchasima.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, there is another Chinese military hardware repair facility at the Thai air force base of Takhli in Nakhon Sawan.<sup>50</sup> The submarine purchase will elevate this Chinese logistics presence to a new level since the company building the submarines, CSOC, is also constructing the submarine pier and base at Sattahip.<sup>51</sup> Notably, one of the most attractive features for China in selling submarines to Thailand is the basing infrastructure established at Sattahip, which will, for obvious reasons, be capable of hosting and supplying China's own *Yuan*-class submarines.

Overall, China has displayed significant acumen in seizing opportunities arising from international realignments and domestic political crises. Thai interest in arms purchases from China dates to the 1980s when Thailand and China formed a pseudo-alliance to counter Vietnam's presence in Cambodia. During that time, China offered gifts and sales at friendship prices, including heavy artillery, tanks, and *Jianghu*-class frigates.<sup>52</sup> Bates Gill, a scholar of Chinese defense planning, noted that China's approach in offering defense materiel at heavily discounted prices to Thailand in the 1980s resembled its deals with Pakistan.<sup>53</sup> Like Pakistan, Thailand's coastline may offer China additional basing options and routes to the sea, which align with China's goal of complicating any blockade plans that the United States and its allies might have in the event of a South China Sea shipping blockade.

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<sup>48</sup> Sun Xingwei and Yan Su, "China-Thailand Blue Strike-2023 joint naval training exercise concludes," *China Military Online*, 11 September 2023, <http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/>.

<sup>49</sup> "Russia courts Southeast Asian partners with authoritarian streaks, Putin looks to capitalize on wariness of China and the West," *Nikkei Asia*, 16 January 2018 <https://asia.nikkei.com/>.

<sup>50</sup> Wassana Nanuam, "China tank deal opens old wounds for wary," *Bangkok Post*, 19 October 2017, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

<sup>51</sup> "The Navy explains the allegations," Royal Thai Navy.

<sup>52</sup> Michael R. Chambers, "The Chinese and Thais Are Brothers': The Evolution of the Sino-Thai Friendship," *Journal of Contemporary China* 14, no. 45 (2005), 616–17, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>53</sup> R. Bates Gill, *Chinese Arms Transfers: Purposes, Patterns, and Prospects in the New World Order* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992), 173–74.

A similar comparison can be made with China's timing in strengthening its defense relationship with Cambodia. Two years after Hun Sen's 1997 coup against the so-called second prime minister Norodom Ranariddh, China began providing significant military aid worth millions of dollars.<sup>54</sup> The Thai case is analogous, with discussions of submarines commencing one year after the 2014 coup in Thailand, when the Prayuth junta cabinet lifted the halt on submarine projects imposed in 2012.<sup>55</sup> In March 2017, Prayuth confirmed a "buy two submarines, get one free deal" from China.

Furthermore, China would also stand to gain from the precedent and symbolism of selling submarines to a US ally. This move could serve to elevate the profile of its arms exports and align with its broader strategy of undermining the US alliance system in the Indo-Pacific. In fact, as the Thai navy insider suggested, from China's perspective, the submarine sale signifies "China gains an ally, while Thailand gains a submarine." While this perspective may be inaccurate, it is one that could be shared by other countries in the region.<sup>56</sup>

However, the submarines themselves might not be sufficient to convince regional players like India, Japan, and Australia that Thailand has firmly aligned with China, given Thailand's reputation for balancing relationships between the great powers. Likewise, the Philippines and Vietnam, the ASEAN states most likely to have disputes with China, might not view this acquisition with significant concern, as tolerance for the strategic choices of individual ASEAN members is a deeply ingrained principle. Nevertheless, ASEAN's unity, which is already delicate, would likely further weaken.

## Conclusion

This analysis of Thailand's procurement of Chinese submarines concludes that Thailand's submarine purchase was indeed a geopolitical signaling effort. However, for two significant reasons, the purchase served as a relatively weak alignment signal. Firstly, despite Thailand's formal alliance with the United States, Bangkok's politico-military strategy prioritizes autonomy and the preservation of ambiguity through dominance denial. Secondly, the relatively low priority accorded to maritime forces in Thai defense planning does not necessarily imply that Bangkok has a high degree of trust in Beijing.

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<sup>54</sup> Heng Pheakdey, "Cambodia-China Relations: A Positive-Sum Game?," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 31, no. 2 (2012), 66, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>55</sup> BBC Thai, "Submarine of RTN's dreams became 100% Chinese."

<sup>56</sup> "Navy source reveals that they had to acquire Chinese submarines," *Isra News Agency*.

The article further notes that Thailand's ability to manage the risks stemming from unintended consequences of its strategic hedging practices may be less effective than anticipated. While Thailand may have intended to signal its appeal to other major powers, this carries the unintended risk of Washington reducing its engagement with Thailand rather than seeking to improve relations with the monarchical-military regime. Several indications suggest a decline in US engagement, from reduced high-level visits to Thailand to the scaling back of the multi-lateral exercise Cobra Gold.

Conversely, China is actively striving to deepen and expand its relationship with Thailand, thereby enhancing its strategic position in mainland Southeast Asia. Thailand may feel compelled to accept some of China's proposals to avoid offending this great-power partner, including engaging in more ambitious and combat-oriented military exercises with China and increasing its logistics support presence. Notably, China's construction of the submarine base at Sattahip for Thai *Yuan*-class submarines could potentially open the door for China to base, resupply, and service its own submarines in the future. These developments further exacerbate the trust deficit with the United States, increasing the risk that the United States will continue to reduce its investment in Thailand while strengthening relationships with other Southeast Asian partners, such as Vietnam and the Philippines.

In summary, Thailand is engaged in a high-risk bargaining game in which the outcomes of reduced strategic autonomy and a hollow alliance are entirely plausible. Particularly, if Thailand overestimates its indispensability to the United States as it deepens relations with China, Bangkok may find itself increasingly marginalized by the United States and increasingly dependent on China. ♣

#### **Dr. Greg Raymond**

Dr. Raymond is a senior lecturer in the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre in the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs researching Southeast Asian politics, defense and foreign relations. He is the author of *Thai Military Power: A Culture of Strategic Accommodation* (NIAS Press 2018) and the lead author of *The United States-Thai Alliance: History, Memory and Current Developments* (Routledge, 2021). His work has been published in journals including *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, *South East Asia Research*, and the *Journal of Cold War Studies*. He convenes the ASEAN Australia Defence Postgraduate Scholarship Program, the Global China Research Spoke for the ANU Centre for China in the World, and is international relations editor for the journal *Asian Studies Review*. He holds a PhD in political science from La Trobe University and an MA in Asian studies from Monash University. Before joining the Australian National University, Greg was a policy advisor in the Australian government, including in the strategic and international policy areas of the Department of Defence and the Australian Embassy in Bangkok.

# 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.

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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*.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

**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.<sup>4</sup>

**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.”<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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

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

<sup>5</sup> “Thailand ready to strengthen economic ties,” *The Nation*.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.”<sup>9</sup> In fact, the war in Ukraine disrupted and undermined the legal principle of national

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

<sup>8</sup> “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/>.

<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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,

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<sup>10</sup> "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.<sup>11</sup>

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

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<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup>

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.”<sup>14</sup>

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.

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

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

<sup>14</sup> 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.”<sup>15</sup>

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.

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<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> Recently, the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs hosted the IPEF Negotiation Round in Bangkok during 10–16 September 2023.<sup>17</sup>

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."<sup>18</sup>

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

<sup>17</sup> 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.

<sup>18</sup> "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.<sup>19</sup> 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."<sup>20</sup>

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.

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<sup>19</sup> *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.

<sup>20</sup> 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."<sup>21</sup>

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

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<sup>21</sup> "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.<sup>22</sup>

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."<sup>23</sup> "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."<sup>24</sup>

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.<sup>25</sup>

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

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

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

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

<sup>25</sup> "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.<sup>26</sup> 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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<sup>26</sup> 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.

# Can Thailand's Military Evolve?

## Moving Beyond Domestic Interference, Institutional Corruption, and Personal Gain

MARK S. COGAN

### Abstract

The Thai military maintains a close interdependence with the monarchy and a history of recurrent extra-constitutional interventions in domestic politics, marked by numerous successful coups throughout Thailand's modern history. A culture of greed, corruption, and self-enrichment pervades the armed services, often sidelining professionalism and institutional integrity in favor of personal ambitions. Thailand's military faces continuous and unaddressed challenges, with security-sector reform and modernization efforts frequently disrupted by influential elites seeking to assert control. High-ranking military officers exceed their authority, engaging in activities that are ostensibly exploitative and detrimental to Thailand's external relations. This article critically assesses efforts to implement security-sector reforms and foster a military aligned with its intended purpose, examining three distinct eras in Thailand's military development. It extrapolates insights from each era to the context of a new semi-democratic Pheu Thai-led government.

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The Thai military has played a significant role in shaping Thai society for many decades. From its development under the reign of King Chulalongkorn in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the era of Phibun Songkhram, who played a central role in the 1932 Khana Ratsadon revolution, the military initiated a period of Thai-style nationalism and centralized control.<sup>1</sup> The military's influence has persisted through various regime types, including military-dominated regimes like those of Sarit Thanarat and Thanom Kittikachorn, democratic administrations, and contemporary junta rule from 2014 to 2023.

<sup>1</sup> Stithorn Thananithichot, "Understanding Thai Nationalism and Ethnic Identity," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 46, no. 3 (1 June 2011): 250–63, <https://doi.org/>; Jack Fong, "Sacred Nationalism: The Thai Monarchy and Primordial Nation Construction," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 39, no. 4 (1 November 2009): 673–96, <https://doi.org/>; Thongchai Winichakul, "Nationalism and the Radical Intelligentsia in Thailand," in *Developmental and Cultural Nationalisms*, ed. Radhika Desai, 176–92 (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), <https://doi.org/>; and Daniel M. Fineman, *A Special Relationship: The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947–1958* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2020), 77.

The Thai military's close association with political power is partly due to its pragmatic relationship with the monarchy.<sup>2</sup> Military-dominated institutions, often described as a "parallel state" or "deep state," have hindered democratization and peaceful transfers of political power.<sup>3</sup> Military-aligned political parties and semi-democratic parliamentary bodies have played a key role in legitimizing military control, facilitating military elites' influence, and allocating resources for military purposes.

Measuring progress in any military involves assessing modernization, adaptability to evolving threats, and the professionalization of the armed forces, which can be defined as security-sector reform (SSR). Civil-military relations have been influenced by Samuel Huntington's concept of the professional soldier and civilian control, while the idea of SSR is more of a post-Cold War concept, particularly in Southeast Asia.<sup>4</sup> According to a joint US agency briefing, SSR encompasses a "set of policies, plans, programs, and activities that a government undertakes to improve the way it provides safety, security, and justice. The overall objective is to provide these services in a way that promotes an effective and legitimate public service that is transparent, accountable to civilian authority, and responsive to the needs of the public."<sup>5</sup>

However, reform is primarily the goal of democratic nations. Southeast Asia lacks comparable democracies, and comparable SSR reform efforts following the downfall of authoritarian regimes have seen limited success. This is evident in the cases of the Philippines in 1986 after the fall of the Ferdinand Marcos regime and in 1998 with the collapse of the Suharto dictatorship in Indonesia. Although Marcos significantly expanded the Armed Forces of the Philippines during his rule, a nonviolent "People Power" revolution, with the support of General Fidel Ramos declaring allegiance to Corazon Aquino, eroded loyalty to the Marcos regime.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, this did not create a conducive environment for SSR, as

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<sup>2</sup> Duncan McCargo, "Network Monarchy and Legitimacy Crises in Thailand," *Pacific Review* 18, no. 4 (2005): 499–519, <https://doi.org/>; Paul Chambers, "Military 'Shadows' in Thailand Since the 2006 Coup," *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 40, no. 2 (1 April 2013): 67–82, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ivan Briscoe, "The Proliferation of the 'Parallel State,'" *Fundación Para Las Relaciones Internacionales y El Diálogo Exterior*, no. Working Paper 71 (October 2008); and Eugénie Méricau, "Thailand's Deep State, Royal Power and the Constitutional Court (1997–2015)," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 46, no. 3 (2 July 2016): 445–66.

<sup>4</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil–Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1981).

<sup>5</sup> USAID, "Security Sector Reform: USAID, DOD, DOS Policy Statement," US Department of State, February 2009, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Hedman, Eva-Lotta, and John Sidel, eds. *Philippine Politics and Society in the Twentieth Century: Colonial Legacies, Post-Colonial Trajectories* (London: Routledge, 2000), 26, <https://doi.org/>; and Mark S. Cogan, "Dic-

Aquino faced multiple coup attempts, and subsequent governments grappled with corruption issues. Maintaining control over the military has been a political imperative for administrations such as Rodrigo Duterte and Ferdinand “BongBong” Marcos, Jr.

Similarly, following the Suharto regime’s fall, Indonesia made substantial efforts to reform the Tentara Nasional Indonesia (TNI) with the aim of professionalizing the military and reducing its influence in domestic politics.<sup>7</sup> However, this has proven challenging, as the TNI’s composition largely remained unchanged. Recent efforts by the Indonesian military to connect with the public, particularly at the village level to enhance local conditions, have shown promise.<sup>8</sup> Yet, the economic aftermath of COVID-19 has hindered this progress and strained Indonesia’s legitimate modernization endeavors for its armed services.<sup>9</sup>

Opportunities for democracy in Thailand are infrequent, and when they do occur, they are often short-lived. The rise of Thaksin Shinawatra in 2001, with his populist support base, dominated legitimate elections in 2001 and 2005. However, the chance for military reform during his tenure was missed due to elite competition for control of the military, power consolidation, and a rivalry with former Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda.

The growth and evolution of Thailand’s military have been shaped by an enduring culture of self-preservation, characterized by persistent efforts to exert influence over domestic political affairs and internal elite interference, rather than being driven by the presence of emerging internal or external threats. This article explores these dynamics through an examination of three distinct eras of military development in Thailand.

It assesses the extent to which SSR has been implemented, focusing on its significance for civil-military relations, the interplay between development and democratization, and the impact of defense measures on these processes. Additionally, it scrutinizes the modernization efforts of the Thai military in response to relevant and emerging security challenges.<sup>10</sup>

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tatorships and Authoritarian Regimes, Insurrections Against,” in *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace, & Conflict* 3rd ed., ed. Lester R. Kurtz (Oxford: Academic Press, 2022), 425, <https://doi.org/10.1016/>.

<sup>7</sup> Jun Honna, *Military Politics and Democratization in Indonesia* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> “Indonesian Politicians Are Giving the Armed Forces a Big Role in Government,” *The Economist*, 31 October 2019, <https://www.economist.com/>.

<sup>9</sup> Andi Raihanah Ashar and Muhammad Fauzan Malufti, “Indonesian Military Modernization: A Race Against Time,” *The Diplomat*, 23 June 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

<sup>10</sup> Alex J. Bellamy, “Security Sector Reform: Prospects and Problems,” *Global Change, Peace & Security* 15, no. 2 (1 June 2003), 102, <https://doi.org/>.

Finally, the article evaluates the potential for reform under a new semi-democratic government led by Srettha Thavisin, a former real estate businessman who has transitioned into the realm of Pheu Thai politics.

### **US Development of the Thai Military: 1950–1980**

The early development of the Thai military became intertwined with Thailand's national economic growth, monarchical influence, and robust support from the United States. As Daniel Fineman details, both American pragmatism and geo-strategic considerations were key factors in the "special relationship that was cultivated under the military regimes of Phibun Songkhram and Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat between 1947–1958. For the Thai government and its military, described by Fineman as both "corrupt, undemocratic" and "brutal," the rationale for the close relationship with the United States was based on finding allies to fight communism, and for Washington, the prevailing belief was that Thailand needed strong leadership to accomplish that task.<sup>11</sup> Pragmatism, coupled with Thailand's central location in a region marked by conflict, has long been a driving force behind US foreign policy in Southeast Asia. Thailand emerged as a stronghold against communist influence and, subsequently, as a pivotal base for both overt and covert military operations. This significance remains critical, despite the regime's lack of commitment to democratization and its clear repression of the population.

Sarit fostered a mutually beneficial relationship with the young King Bhumibol Adulyadej, marking a period in Thailand's history when the military collaborated harmoniously with the monarchy to legitimize what is now referred to as a "monarchized military" or a "parallel state."<sup>12</sup> Sarit, an autocrat often described as a "cinematic picture of the Third World generalissimo," enjoyed the backing of the Thai monarchy, which had grown disenchanted with the concept of democracy.<sup>13</sup> Though the term *security-sector reform* did not gain common usage until after the Cold War, Washington held major concerns about the professionalism of Thai military leadership and its commitment to democracy and the rule of law. These concerns were later validated by the arbitrary arrests of journalists, politicians, and regime critics in November 1952.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Fineman, "A Special Relationship", 1–5.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Chambers and Napisa Waitookiat, "The Resilience of Monarchised Military in Thailand," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 46, no. 3 (July 2, 2016), 425, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Handley, *The King Never Smiles* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 139.

<sup>14</sup> Craig J. Reynolds, *Thai Radical Discourse: The Real Face of Thai Feudalism Today*, Studies on Southeast Asia (Ithaca, NY: SEAP Publications, 1987), 27.

However, the United States prioritized its need for a client state and an ally against a resurgent China over normative considerations.<sup>15</sup> Sarit's 1958 coup also raised worries in Washington, as they feared that their long-term investment in Thailand under Phibun might go to waste.<sup>16</sup> Pragmatically, the Eisenhower administration downplayed the Thai coup, characterizing it as an "orderly attempt by the present ruling group to solidify its position."<sup>17</sup> Washington needed assurances of Thailand's support, particularly as US efforts to establish a stable Laos against communist influence encountered political divisions in Vientiane. In response, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) initiated a covert war to disrupt supply lines between Laos and Vietnam.<sup>18</sup>

Balancing the potential for crises in their neighborhood, Thailand reaffirmed its commitment to consecutive American administrations. It hosted American troops and, in return, received substantial military assistance packages totaling over USD 1 billion between 1950 and 1971.<sup>19</sup> Convinced of Thailand's role in creating an "anticommunist bastion," the United States initiated the development and modernization of the Thai military. By 1951, 28 arms shipments had arrived, sufficient to equip nine Royal Thai Army battalions, with US aid exceeding 2.5 times the size of the Thai military budget. An early CIA program also bolstered the police under Phao Siyanon.<sup>20</sup>

The presence of the US military also directly benefited the emerging Thai economy. Thousands of Thais found employment in connection with the construction of military facilities, along with substantial economic assistance packages during this early period. For example, in the mid-1960s, more than 200 American combat aircraft were based in Thailand, with 9,000 US Air Force personnel. The construction of the B-52 air base at Utapao employed more than 2,000 Thais.<sup>21</sup> Total US economic assistance amounted to USD 500 million through the end of 1970, with an additional USD 800 million in direct military assistance

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<sup>15</sup> Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 147, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>16</sup> Handley, *The King Never Smiles*, 139.

<sup>17</sup> Baker and Pasuk, *A History of Thailand*, 147.

<sup>18</sup> Fredrik Logevall, "Laos: America's Lesser Known Human and Political Disaster in Southeast Asia," *Washington Post*, 2 February 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

<sup>19</sup> Bjorn Hagelin, "Military Dependency: Thailand and the Philippines," *Journal of Peace Research* 25, no. 4 (December 1, 1988), 433, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>20</sup> Baker and Pasuk, *A History of Thailand*, 145.

<sup>21</sup> Arne Kislenko, "A Not So Silent Partner: Thailand's Role in Covert Operations, Counter-Insurgency, and the Wars in Indochina," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 24, no. 1 (2004), 73, <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/>.



during the same period.<sup>22</sup> The United States was the sole foreign supplier of arms to Thailand during this era.<sup>23</sup>

The scope of American involvement in professionalization and modernization efforts is extensively documented in the 1974 CIA *National Intelligence Survey* on the Thai Armed Forces. To start, Thailand had meticulously patterned its service schools after those of the United States, incorporating instruction and direct translations of materials delivered by US-trained instructors. By January 1974, over 9,000 Thai military personnel had undergone training in US military schools, with many subsequently assuming instructional roles in Thai-led training institutions.<sup>24</sup> Washington initially equipped the Royal Thai Army with weaponry from the Korean War era, including 155mm, 105mm, and 75mm howitzers, 40mm anti aircraft guns, 4.2-inch mortars, and .50 caliber machine guns. Armaments included M41A3 Walker Bulldog tanks and M-113 personnel carriers. Through 1974, the United States was the source of 90 percent of the Thai Army's materiel requirements.<sup>25</sup>

A pivotal development during this phase of Thailand's military evolution revolved around the recognition of both internal and external threats. These threats encompassed subversion from within and an externally mobilized and aggressive threat emanating from communism. While Thailand initially had limited concerns about its internal security until 1965, the emergence of Southeast Asia as a new theater in the Cold War brought Thailand's foreign policy into closer alignment with Washington.<sup>26</sup> The US Department of State and the CIA collaborated to forge an anti-communist partnership, with the United States, during the Johnson administration, authorizing a comprehensive counterinsurgency (COIN) program. This program shifted its focus away from central or urban areas to Thailand's northeast. In 1964, 64 percent of grant aid was directed at Thailand's borders with Cambodia and Laos, a figure that rose to more than 68 percent by 1967. The USAID program encompassed two primary categories: COIN and nation building, with the former designated as the higher priority.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> George J. Viksnins, "United States Military Spending and the Economy of Thailand, 1967-1972," *Asian Survey* 13, no. 5 (1973), 441, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>23</sup> Hagelin, "Military Dependency: Thailand and the Philippines," 435.

<sup>24</sup> "Thailand: National Intelligence Survey" (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, April 1974), 3.

<sup>25</sup> "CIA, "National Intelligence Survey," 14.

<sup>26</sup> Bob Bergin, "Defeating an Insurgency—The Thai Effort against the Communist Party of Thailand, 1965–ca. 1982," *Studies in Intelligence* 60, no. 2 (June 2016), 26.

<sup>27</sup> R. Sean Randolph, "The Limits of Influence: American Aid to Thailand, 1965-70," *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 6, no. 4 (1979), 247.

Later, in August 1965, the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) announced its intention to overthrow the military government and establish a Marxist-inspired regime.<sup>28</sup> This sense of urgency prompted the first-ever visit by a US president to Thailand, as Lyndon Johnson toured the newly-constructed USD 75-million naval base in the Gulf of Siam.<sup>29</sup> The substantial US presence in Thailand was not only highly visible but also raised concerns that due to the volume of ordnance dropped on Vietnam from Thai-based facilities, American bases might inadvertently foster a local insurgency.<sup>30</sup>

However, from the American perspective, as outlined in a Contemporary Historical Evaluation of Combat Operation (CHECO) Division report on COIN in Thailand from January 1967 to December 1968, the origins and rationale of the insurgency remained speculative at first. The number of clashes along border areas was difficult to confirm and did not clearly indicate the extent of activities such as clandestine operations, propaganda, or recruiting. The Thai government categorized all criminal activities as “subversive” without distinguishing their nature. In fact, it was challenging for the US Air Force to ascertain the existence of a communist insurgency threat.<sup>31</sup>

The CHECO Report highlighted similar views held by scholars of that era, suggesting that Thailand was not an ideal recruiting ground. The population, despite being economically disadvantaged, was neither malnourished nor prone to violence or militancy.<sup>32</sup> According to a US Department of Agriculture report from January 1968, Thailand’s rice crop for 1967 was approximately 10 million metric tons, which was close to Burma’s annual output.<sup>33</sup>

However, as US operations continued in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, the American military began to perceive an insurgent threat. This threat did not arise from the conversion or recruitment of Thais, but rather from the destabilization of Laos and significant military offensives, such as the Tet Offensive by the Viet Cong (VC) in January 1968. During this period, US Ambassador Leonard Seidman Unger noted, “[even] though we have no solid information regarding [plans

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<sup>28</sup> Jeffrey M. Moore, “The Thai Way of Counterinsurgency” (dissertation, University of Exeter, 2010), 65, <https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/>.

<sup>29</sup> Frank C. Darling, “America and Thailand,” *Asian Survey* 7, no. 4 (1967), 213, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>30</sup> Al McCoy, “Subcontracting Counterinsurgency,” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 3, no. 2 (February 1971), 57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/>.

<sup>31</sup> “COIN in Thailand: January 1967–December 1968” (San Francisco: HQ PACAF Directorate, Tactical Evaluation CHECO Division, 1969), 1–2, <https://apps.dtic.mil/>.

<sup>32</sup> “COIN in Thailand: January 1967–December 1968,” 6.

<sup>33</sup> “Rice Situation,” RS-12 (Washington, DC: Economic Research Service, US Department of Agriculture, 1968), 7.

to attack installations in Thailand by air, mortar, or other means] we cannot afford to take any unnecessary risk.”<sup>34</sup> While only minor incidents occurred, the United States grew concerned that its military presence in Thailand was reaching a critical point, especially among those labeled as subversives by the Thai government.<sup>35</sup>

Taking a broader view, the establishment of a joint COIN effort provided a renewed sense of purpose for the Thai military. Its primary objective was to safeguard newly-constructed American bases against potential, yet unforeseen adversaries. The COIN strategy comprised three major components: administration, rural development, and rural security. Notably, the rural security aspect constituted the largest element of the USAID-funded program.<sup>36</sup> Arguably, the provision of training, equipment, and logistical support to new segments of the security apparatus, including the Thai Border Patrol Police, institutionalized a lasting presence of both military and paramilitary elements within the fabric of Thai society. This also reinforced the concept that the military should play a central role in the development of the Thai state, driven by an insular vision in which it held responsibility for safeguarding national security and preserving the Thai monarchy.<sup>37</sup>

The COIN effort redefined the boundaries of military involvement, exemplified by the formation of the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), a political arm of the Thai military. ISOC not only supervised the conflict with the CPT but engaged in paramilitary activities aimed at suppressing dissent, leading to widespread political violence in 1973 and 1976.<sup>38</sup> The military and the monarchy collaborated on various fronts, disseminating pro-monarchy, ideology-driven propaganda to counter CPT efforts in the northeast and establishing village-oriented groups and paramilitary organizations to identify and curb subversive elements within Thai society.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup> “COIN in Thailand: January 1967–December 1968,” 16.

<sup>35</sup> Jayakrishna Baral, “U.S. Involvement in Thai Security,” *China Report* 9, no. 4 (1973): 16–28, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/000944557300900403>.

<sup>36</sup> Ralph Thaxton, “Modernization and Counter-Revolution in Thailand,” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 5, no. 4 (1 December 1973), 32, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>37</sup> Napisa Waitookiat and Paul Chambers, “Khaki Veto Power: The Organization of Thailand’s Armed Forces,” in *Knights of the Realm: Thailand’s Military and Police, Then and Now*, ed. Paul Chambers (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2013), 82.

<sup>38</sup> Siwach Sripokangkul and Mark S. Cogan, “Political Demonology, Dehumanization, and Contemporary Thai Politics,” *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review* 19, no. 2 (June 2019): 115–30.

<sup>39</sup> Katherine A. Bowie, *Rituals of National Loyalty: An Anthropology of the State and the Village Scout Movement in Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); and Prajak Kongkirati, “Counter-Movements in Democratic Transition: Thai Right-Wing Movements after the 1973 Popular Uprising,” *Asian Review* 19, no. 1 (2006): 101–34.

However, despite the substantial support provided to the Thai military by the United States, encompassing firearms, weapons training, administration, psychological operations, and intelligence, the kingdom's victory over the CPT in the early 1980s did not result from superior military capacity. Rather, it stemmed from the fact that the young students who had joined the CPT ranks exhibited little inclination for guerrilla warfare and were receptive to the amnesty proposals presented by the Thai government.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, the CPT's diminishing ability to secure support from foreign entities like China and Vietnam sealed its demise.<sup>41</sup>

Nonetheless, despite the reported success of the counterinsurgency campaign, the CIA's 1974 assessment identified two pivotal developments concerning the achievements in building the Thai military. Firstly, while acknowledging the Thai military's capability to withstand an independent attack from countries such as Malaysia, Laos, Cambodia, or Burma (Myanmar), it highlighted that confronting a joint "invasion" by North Vietnam and/or China would necessitate foreign assistance and materiel.<sup>42</sup>

Secondly, the CIA expressed apprehension over persisting weaknesses among senior military officers. These weaknesses encompassed negligence in supervising command and training units beyond the battalion level. Furthermore, there was a prevalent "preoccupation of senior officers with politics and their personal economic interests."<sup>43</sup> This early recognition sets the stage for the second section of this article, delving into Thailand's failure to implement necessary security reforms and modernization after a shift in foreign policy resulted in enhanced relations with neighboring states. It also explores the extent to which high-ranking elites vied for increased control and personal gain.

### **Toward an Exploitative Military: 1980–2006**

Following its development and buildup, the Thai military did not adopt a modernization strategy for several decades. Instead, the Thai armed services, laden with high-ranking military officials and politically-connected elites wielding influence, pursued a strategy of self-enrichment. Rather than seeking a distinct or broader regional role, the military immersed itself in domestic political affairs. This persis-

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<sup>40</sup> Puangthong Pawakapan, *Infiltrating Society: The Thai Military's Internal Security Affairs* (Singapore: IS-EAS Publishing, 2021), 22; and Duncan McCargo, "Security, Development and Political Participation in Thailand: Alternative Currencies of Legitimacy," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 24, no. 1 (2002), 52.

<sup>41</sup> Kevin Hewison, "Thailand: An Old Relationship Renewed," *Pacific Review* 31, no. 1 (2 January 2018), 118, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>42</sup> "CIA, "National Intelligence Survey," 12.

<sup>43</sup> "CIA, "National Intelligence Survey," 11.

tent interference in civilian politics perpetuated a pattern of striving for greater control over Thai society. A substantial body of literature addresses this issue, with Thailand ensnared in a recurring “coup trap,” as the military has intervened in numerous coups and coup attempts since the 1932 Revolution. These interventions are consistently rationalized and justified by the perceived need to defend the monarchy as an institution.<sup>44</sup>

In 1972, David Morell identified some of the factors in Thai society that legitimized military interference. These included bureaucrats seeking to expedite the passage of their legislative proposals, cliques advocating for new or established foreign policies, officers aiming to accelerate communist suppression, and competition for political power among military leaders and Cabinet members.<sup>45</sup> In the post-CPT era, the military entered a phase of rapid monarchization under Prem, with pro-monarchy military factions becoming dominant.

However, it is overly simplistic to suggest that this symbiotic relationship between the military and monarchy was the sole significant development post-1980. As Paul Chambers later argued, the Thai military evolved into a “praetorian state” and a “khakistocracy,” characterized by extensive collusion among “tycoons, royals, and religious leaders.”<sup>46</sup> The shift toward a self-serving, predatory military was not a strategic choice but rather the outcome of internal struggles among various military factions vying for increased control, not only over political affairs in Thailand but also over the military itself. An illustration of this stagnation in Thailand’s military modernization and professionalism was the change in Thailand’s foreign policy initiated during General Chatichai Choonhavan’s premiership. He pledged to “turn battlefields into marketplaces” and pursued a policy of greater regional cooperation, as well as a degree of appeasement and accommodation with the Burmese regime of the time.<sup>47</sup>

David Morell’s argument regarding various “cliques” pursuing distinct foreign policies finds relevance here, particularly in the context of Myanmar. The Thai security apparatus, including the military, veered away from Western pressures and,

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<sup>44</sup> John B. Londregan and Keith T. Poole, “Poverty, The Coup Trap, and the Seizure of Executive Power,” *World Politics* 42, no. 2 (1990): 151–83, <https://doi.org/>; and Nicholas Farrelly, “Why Democracy Struggles: Thailand’s Elite Coup Culture,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 67, no. 3 (1 June 2013), 281, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>45</sup> David Morell, “Thailand: Military Checkmate,” *Asian Survey* 12, no. 2 (1972), 162–63.

<sup>46</sup> Paul Chambers, “Assessing the Monarchized Military and Khakistocracy,” in *Coup, King, Crisis: A Critical Interregnum in Thailand*, ed. Pavin Chachavalpongpan, Yale Southeast Asia Studies (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 170.

<sup>47</sup> Mark S. Cogan and Vivek Mishra, “India–Thailand Security Cooperation: Strengthening the Indo-Pacific Resolve,” *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 7, no. 1 (April 2020), 38, <https://doi.org/>.

through a new policy of “constructive engagement,” brokered a series of security and economic agreements with Myanmar’s State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).<sup>48</sup> Concurrently, a series of clandestine, black-market exchanges emerged in tandem with Thailand’s military arrangements with Myanmar. This was exemplified, in part, by SLORC’s attempts in the early 1990s to order 20 million rounds of small arms ammunition through Thai intermediaries.<sup>49</sup>

Certain branches of the military have been caught undermining Thailand’s gun control legislation. In 2001, a senior Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) officer was apprehended after armed military personnel pilfered 30 Glock semi-automatic pistols from a warehouse at Don Mueang Airport in Bangkok. Thailand’s Interior Ministry uncovered that the military was being utilized as a conduit to circumvent restrictions on the number of weapons that could be sold to private gun shops. Although the law provided a tax-free import of weapons as a “welfare benefit” for officers, the Thai judiciary compelled the RTAF to reimburse fraudulently avoided import duties during this period.<sup>50</sup>

As Duncan McCargo highlighted in a similar context, the Thai military seemed to avoid “potentially hazardous situations,” as military officers “devote their energies to referred to devote their energies to the more interesting and satisfying professions of business and politics,” some of which involved smuggling and exploitative natural resource extraction.<sup>51</sup> For example, in the interest of its own national security, the military knowingly allowed a black-market opium trade to flourish in Myanmar, deliberately neglecting narcotics control, even as opium production surged significantly.<sup>52</sup> Between 1987 and 1995, opium levels in Myanmar escalated from 836 tons to 2,340 tons, with cultivation areas expanding from 93,200 hectares to 154,000 over the same period, coinciding with a substantial increase in the number of heroin refineries.<sup>53</sup> Military-controlled governments, given that Thai prime ministers often emerge from high-ranking military ranks, demonstrated a

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<sup>48</sup> Leszek Buszynski, “Thailand and Myanmar: The Perils of ‘Constructive Engagement,’” *Pacific Review* 11, no. 2 (1 January 1998), 290–91, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>49</sup> Martin Smith, “The Burmese Way to Rack and Ruin,” *Index on Censorship* 20, no. 10 (1 November 1991), 45, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>50</sup> David Capie, *Small Arms Production and Transfers in Southeast Asia*, Canberra Papers on Strategy & Defence 146 (Canberra: Australia National University, 2002).

<sup>51</sup> McCargo, “Security, Development and Political Participation in Thailand,” 51.

<sup>52</sup> Ronald Cima, *Narcotics and the Police and Military Forces of South and Southeast Asia* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, August 1986), 6, <https://apps.dtic.mil/>.

<sup>53</sup> Patrick Meehan, “Drugs, Insurgency and State-Building in Burma: Why the Drugs Trade Is Central to Burma’s Changing Political Order,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 42, no. 3 (2011), 382, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

willingness to be pragmatic in pursuit of their political and economic objectives through a policy of constructive engagement.

These trends persisted, despite domestic upheavals, as seen in 1991 when other high-ranking members of the Thai military, including Royal Thai Army General Sunthorn Kongsompong and members of Class Five of the prestigious Chulachomklao Military Academy, General Deputy Army Chief Gen. Issarapong Noonpakdi, and Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army General Suchinda Kraprayoon, ousted Prime Minister Chatichai from power in a February coup. The official justification for the coup was unexplained wealth. However, the so-called “Kra-pakdee clique,” led by Suchinda, had held senior roles in state enterprises, including the Port Authority of Thailand, the State Railway of Thailand, and Thai Airways International.<sup>54</sup>

The 1991 coup and the subsequent 1992 “Black May” street violence temporarily loosened the military’s influence and control over Thai society. The Thai monarchy remained undiminished due to a royal intervention by King Bhumibol and the workings of a “network monarchy.”<sup>55</sup> Prem, under the control of the Privy Council, increased monarchical influence over the armed services. After the Black May violence, General Suchinda was publicly admonished and replaced by more senior statesmen, including senior diplomat Anand Panyarachun and later Chuan Leekpai.

Chuan won a closely-monitored election, with his Democrat Party earning 79 parliamentary seats and forming a coalition government with four other political parties. It was during Prime Minister Chuan’s tenure that Thailand began to curb the military’s influence and initiate the process of embracing military modernization. While this policy direction would resurface after the 2006 coup d’état, two important documents, a “Master Plan for Regional Cooperation or the Creation of a New Equilibrium” in 1993 and a 1994 White Paper issued by the Defense Ministry, suggested that the military should no longer merely safeguard its interests but promote political cooperation between neighboring Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries and China.<sup>56</sup> This shift required a departure from an exploitative foreign policy.

Unfortunately, the successive premierships of Banharn Silpa-archa and General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, marked by systemic corruption and inattention to Thailand’s economic vulnerabilities, contributed to the 1997 Asian economic crisis. This

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<sup>54</sup> John McKinnon, “Can the Military Be Sidelined?” *Pacific Viewpoint* 33, no. 2 (1992), 130, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>55</sup> McCargo, “Network Monarchy,” 508.

<sup>56</sup> McCargo, “Security, Development and Political Participation in Thailand,” 53.

crisis opened the door to the populist Thaksin Shinawatra era, which brought significant changes to Thailand's foreign policy and the composition of its military.

Instead of pursuing demilitarization or SSR, Thaksin prioritized personalized control. A clear example of this strategy was his formation of a clique of Thaksin loyalists within the military. This was evident early on through his appointments, such as his cousins General Uthai Shinawatra as deputy director of the Defense Ministry's Planning and Policy Office and Lieutenant General Chaisit Shinawatra as deputy commander of the Armed Forces Development Headquarters.<sup>57</sup> Many senior positions in the Royal Thai Navy, Army, and Air Force were filled by members of Thaksin's Class 10 of the Armed Forces Academies Preparatory School. These appointments included Admiral Werayut Uttamot as Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Third Fleet, Major General Chatchai Thawonbudtra as Army Advisor, and Captain Siripong Wanuntrakul as Chief of the Air Staff, among others.<sup>58</sup>

Thaksin also acquiesced to substantial budgetary requests for the military, a departure from the previous administration under Chuan.<sup>59</sup> As McCargo noted, "[ties] between Thaksin and the Army [undermined] principles of military professionalism and neutrality, a potentially dangerous state of affairs," suggesting that the separation between the executive and the military had never been complete and that Thaksin was repeating the mistakes of the past.<sup>60</sup>

During the Thaksin era, there was a shift in military priorities. Initially, Thaksin hesitated to become involved, in part due to the large Muslim population in Thailand's southernmost provinces. However, the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks and the subsequent pressure on US allies to contribute to the global war on terror (GWOT), along with concerns about international terrorist groups using Southeast Asia as a staging area for attacks, prompted some action by the Thaksin government.<sup>61</sup> Thaksin's approach to the southern insurgency, while seen as heavy-handed and damaging to human rights and internal security, was driven by a perspective of maintaining law and order rather than countering terrorism.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Duncan McCargo and Ukrist Pathmanand, *The Thaksinization of Thailand*, NIAS Studies in Contemporary Asian History 4 (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2005), 135–36.

<sup>58</sup> McCargo and Ukrist, *The Thaksinization of Thailand*, 138–39.

<sup>59</sup> McCargo and Ukrist, *The Thaksinization of Thailand*, 151.

<sup>60</sup> McCargo and Ukrist, *The Thaksinization of Thailand*, 155–57.

<sup>61</sup> Kavi Chongkittavorn, "Thailand: International Terrorism and the Muslim South," in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2004*, ed. Daljit Singh and Kin Wah Chin (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2004) 267–76, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>62</sup> Mark S. Cogan and Vivek Mishra, "Regionalism and Bilateral Counter-Terrorism Cooperation: The Case of India and Thailand," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 16, no. 3 (2 September 2021), 249, <https://doi.org/10.1080/>.



Under internal and external pressure, Thaksin eventually pledged Thailand's support for the GWOT, deploying troops to Iraq and aiding in the capture of Nujrman Riduan bin Isomuddin, a top leader of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) with close ties to al-Qaeda. It was reported that JI planned the Bali bombings in Indonesia from safehouses in Bangkok.<sup>63</sup> American SSR efforts during that period, mainly through the Cobra Gold joint military exercises, began to incorporate more counterterrorism components.<sup>64</sup> These joint exercises, along with similar exercises with Australia and Japan, helped professionalize the military by imparting transferable skills to personnel of different ranks.

### The Post-Coup Thai Military: 2006–2023

The 2006 and 2014 coups, which removed both Thaksin and his sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, were driven by elite distrust and suspicion of the power structures that Thaksin had established both during his time in office and while in exile. As noted by Kevin Hewison, the prevailing opinion about the 2006 coup was that it was a “justified coup” necessary to remove the corrupt elements of the Thaksin era and “restore democracy” through military intervention.<sup>65</sup> Similar justifications were put forth after the May 2014 coup, with the Prayut-led military junta claiming it was “returning happiness to the Thai people.” Many Thais welcomed the military's presence in the streets and at junta-sponsored public events.<sup>66</sup>

The justification for Thailand's multiple military coups often revolves around the issue of systemic corruption. Arguments put forth by both the military and civilian factions, particularly the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), were centered on allegations of corruption involving Thaksin and his tendency to derive personal gains from public office.<sup>67</sup> In a broader sense, as pointed out by Pavin Chachavalpongpun, the Thai military saw itself as the “moral compass” of the nation, which legitimized the coup against Thaksin as the only means to save democracy, cleanse politics of corruption, remove corrupt politicians, and restore stability.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Cogan and Mishra, “Regionalism and Bilateral Counter-Terrorism Cooperation,” 249.

<sup>64</sup> Seth Robson, “Troops Leave Cobra Gold Exercise with Understanding of Role in Regional Security — and Maybe a Few Tattoos,” *Stars and Stripes*, 1 June 2004, <https://www.stripes.com/>.

<sup>65</sup> Kevin Hewison, “Thailand after the ‘Good’ Coup,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 14, no. 1 (2008), 237, <https://bjwa.brown.edu/>.

<sup>66</sup> Kate Hodal, “Thai junta ‘brings happiness to the people’ with parties and selfies,” *The Guardian*, 4 June 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

<sup>67</sup> Aim Sinpeng, “Corruption, Morality, and the Politics of Reform in Thailand,” *Asian Politics & Policy* 6, no. 4 (2014), 525, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>68</sup> Pavin Chachavalpongpun, “Thaksin, the Military, and Thailand's Protracted Political Crisis,” in *The Political Resurgence of the Military in Southeast Asia*, ed. Marcus Mietzner, Contemporary Southeast Asia Series

However, corruption isn't the sole motivator, as evidenced by both the coups against Chatchai and Thaksin. While Thaksin had garnered attention for his conflicts with Prem's monarchist establishment and his attempts to shape the military for personal gain, Chatchai was ostensibly ousted for similar reasons—his clash with the financial interests of the military and the personal interests of its elite members.<sup>69</sup> Following the pattern of the justifications for the Thaksin coup, the 2014 coup against Yingluck aimed to excise the political influence of Thaksin.<sup>70</sup>

The coups against Thaksin and Yingluck represented significant challenges to the efforts to professionalize and bring the Thai military under civilian control. The 2007 Constitution, which replaced the People's Constitution of 1998, characterized by democratic processes and public input, established a culture of impunity.<sup>71</sup> It offered amnesty for those involved in the 2006 coup and empowered the military to allocate funds for the "protection and upholding of its independence, sovereignty, security of State, institution of kingship, national interests and the democratic regime of government with the King as Head of State, and for national development."<sup>72</sup> As noted by Aurel Croissant and others, the military sought to prevent the rise of a Thaksin-like figure by disbanding the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) Party. The Constitutional Court, originally established to foster judicial independence, was granted the authority to investigate and prosecute political parties, Members of Parliament, and other independent institutions.<sup>73</sup>

Both coups had some consequences for SSR efforts and modernization, but primarily in the context of US concerns about the state of Thai democratization. In both cases, there were impacts on US weapons sales, particularly in 2014 when US Foreign Military Financing (FMF), which supports defense equipment, training, and services, was reduced. Additionally, USD 1.3 million in funding under the

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(New York: Routledge, 2011), 47.

<sup>69</sup> Miron Mushkat, "Policy Implications of Thailand's Unexpected Coup," *International Studies* 29, no. 2 (1992), 163, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>70</sup> Chris Baker, "The 2014 Thai Coup and Some Roots of Authoritarianism," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 46, no. 3 (2016), 389, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>71</sup> Somchai Preechasinlapakun, "Dynamics and Institutionalization of Coups in the Thai Constitution," VRF 483 (Chiba: Institute for Developing Economies - Japan External Trade Organization, 2013), 30, <https://www.ide.go.jp/>.

<sup>72</sup> Aurel Croissant et al., "Thailand: Civilian Control Deterred," in *Democratization and Civilian Control in Asia*, ed. Aurel Croissant et al., Critical Studies of the Asia Pacific Series (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013), <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>73</sup> Croissant, et. al., "Thailand: Civilian Control Deterred," 170.

International Military Education and Training (IMET) program, which allows Thai officers to attend US military institutions, was terminated.<sup>74</sup>

The pressure for democratization exerted by the Obama Administration proved ineffective due to Thailand's deepening relationship with China. As nurtured over the years, Michael Chambers suggested that the growing closeness between China and Thailand represents a mutually beneficial relationship that drove them towards stronger ties, which was particularly advantageous for Thailand as it gained a major trading partner.<sup>75</sup> According to World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS) data, China has become one of Thailand's largest trading partners, with USD 66 billion worth of Chinese goods imported into Thailand and USD 36.5 billion exported to China in 2021.<sup>76</sup>

However, this was not the sole reason for the expanded ties. Thai foreign policy adjusted after the US withdrawal from the region in the mid-1970s, leading to a significant improvement in Sino-Thai relations. Beijing offered Bangkok protection from Vietnamese aggression through the provision of weaponry and deals at "friendship" prices.<sup>77</sup> It became evident that China viewed Thailand not only as a potential partner but also as a reliable buyer of Chinese arms. Thailand had been procuring weapons from foreign manufacturers since a significant foreign policy shift following the Vietnam conflict. During this period, arms acquisitions from China's state-owned industries notably increased, especially when US restrictions limited Bangkok's options.

Starting in 2015, Thailand entered into multiple defense agreements with China, including the purchase of NORINCO-made VT4 battle tanks, the procurement of three S26T diesel submarines, and a proposal by Defense Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan to establish a joint military facility for manufacturing Chinese small arms and drones.<sup>78</sup>

Furthermore, in the post-coup era, Thailand expanded joint military drills, including the Falcon Strike exercise held at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base, which originated in 2015.<sup>79</sup> Joint Strike, an Army exercise, and the Blue Strike naval

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<sup>74</sup> Emma Chanlett-Avery, Ben Dolven, and Kirt Smith, *Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 11 September 2019), 2, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/>.

<sup>75</sup> Michael R. Chambers, "The Chinese and the Thais Are Brothers: The Evolution of the Sino-Thai Friendship," *Journal of Contemporary China* 14, no. 45 (2005): 599–629, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>76</sup> "Thailand Monthly Trade Data," World Integrated Trade Solution, 2023, <https://wits.worldbank.org/>.

<sup>77</sup> Chambers, "The Chinese and the Thais Are Brothers," 616.

<sup>78</sup> Mark S. Cogan, "Is Thailand Accommodating China?," *Southeast Asian Social Science Review* 4, no. 2 (1 December 2019), 39, <https://papers.ssrn.com/>.

<sup>79</sup> "China-Thailand Joint Air Force Training Exercise 'Falcon Strike 2022' to Kick off," Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, 12 August 2022, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/>.

exercise, which began in 2010 but expanded under Prayut in 2016 to include more than 1,000 Thai and Chinese participants, now encompass a wide range of armaments, including helicopters, tanks, guns, and speedboats.<sup>80</sup>

Subsequent US administrations saw a return to greater cooperation, including access to IMET and FMF programs. Cobra Gold activities also resumed at normal capacity, although the focus of each training exercise varied, encompassing counterterrorism, humanitarian relief, interoperability, maritime security, and disaster response.

The most significant and problematic development during this era was the ongoing interference in domestic political affairs, highlighted by the enactment of the 2017 Thai Constitution. This constitution imposed significant restrictions on normal democratic processes by introducing junta-selected senators.<sup>81</sup> The process was predominantly internal within the Prayut government, with final approval and some additions authorized by King Vajiralongkorn. This, however, led to some tensions between the two institutions.<sup>82</sup> In 2019, King Vajiralongkorn took control over two Army units through a royal decree, the 1st and 11th Infantry Regiments, which were directly assigned to the Royal Security Command.<sup>83</sup> Both the military and the monarchy made substantial efforts to shape Thai society, including the approval of a controversial national development plan that granted the military significant control over Thailand's national development for the next two decades.<sup>84</sup>

The 2017 Constitution, which Thai voters approved in a 2016 referendum, accelerated military control at the expense of established political parties. Similar to what would happen in the aftermath of the May 2023 election, the new charter reduced the likelihood of any one political party securing an outright majority government. This was because the 250 senators, handpicked by the junta, were granted the authority to select the next prime minister. Furthermore, the requirements for the office of prime minister were modified, eliminating the need for a potential candidate to be an elected member of the Thai Parliament. This change favored then-Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha, who had assumed power through

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<sup>80</sup> Prashanth Parameswaran, "China, Thailand Kick Off Military Exercise Blue Strike 2016," *The Diplomat*, 23 May 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

<sup>81</sup> Hiroshi Kotani and Yukako Ono, "Thailand's New Constitution Favors the Monarchy and Military," *Nikkei Asia*, 13 April 2017, <https://asia.nikkei.com/>.

<sup>82</sup> Eugénie Mériéau, "Seeking More Power, Thailand's New King Is Moving the Country Away from Being a Constitutional Monarchy," *The Conversation*, 3 February 2017, <http://theconversation.com/>.

<sup>83</sup> "Thailand's King Takes Personal Control of Two Key Army Units," *Reuters*, 1 October 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

<sup>84</sup> Marwaan Macan-Markar, "Thai Military Draws up 20-Year National Political Blueprint," *Nikkei Asia*, 19 July 2018, <https://asia.nikkei.com/>.

nonconstitutional means and had never been elected as a Member of Parliament (MP). The appointed senators included *ex officio* military commanders and former members of the now-defunct National Legislative Assembly (NLA).<sup>85</sup>

Evidenced by recurrent political crises stemming from dysfunctional political institutions, the revised electoral system, a mixed-member proportional representation (MMP) regime, also heightened the likelihood of instability within Thailand's legislative branch. This, in turn, created an environment conducive to fragile coalitions and obstacles in passing reform-oriented legislation.<sup>86</sup> The combination of fragility and a perceived sense of crisis has historically been used to justify military intervention in domestic affairs.

During this same period, Thailand actively pursued military modernization, particularly through a 2017 act aligning defense strategy with its National Strategic Development Plan (2017–2036) and its National Strategic Defence Plan (2017–2036). However, this approach appeared haphazard and somewhat irrational. While the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted crucial training and interoperability efforts, Thailand's plans for local defense manufacturing were also interrupted. There was an increased focus on security relations with both Russia and India, partly due to strained relations with the United States. This was evident in Moscow's interest in the Thai arms market and New Delhi's broader security interests in the region following the 2008 Mumbai attacks and the evolving security crisis along its shared border with Myanmar.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, the local manufacturing base in Kanchanaburi faced challenges such as a lack of innovation, weak local governance, and a shortage of skills at the local level required to make a local defense industry competitive.<sup>88</sup>

Moreover, there are questions regarding the alignment of purchases from both China and the United States, as well as other foreign suppliers, with the proposed modernization plan. The lack of attention to SSR has compromised Thailand's ability to develop weapons that effectively meet the military's needs in response to external threats. For instance, the acquisition of Chinese-made S26T diesel submarines, totaling over USD 1 billion, drew criticism due to the scale of the pro-

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<sup>85</sup> Khemthong Tonsakulrungruang, "Thailand's National Legislative Assembly," *New Mandala* (blog), 24 August 2014, <https://www.newmandala.org/>.

<sup>86</sup> Enze Han and Sirada Khemanitthathai, "Thailand: The Baffling Mathematics That Helps to Keep the Junta in Power," *The Conversation*, 17 April 2019, <http://theconversation.com/>.

<sup>87</sup> Dmitry Gorenburg and Paul Schwartz, "Russia's Relations with Southeast Asia," *Russie.NEI.Reports* (Paris: IFRI, March 2019), 39 <https://www.ifri.org/>; and Cogan and Mishra, "India–Thailand Security Cooperation," 39–40.

<sup>88</sup> Hadrien Saperstein, "A Reckoning for Thailand's Indigenous Defence Industry," *The Interpreter*, 9 December 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/>.

curement. Additionally, a German engine supplier declined to provide engines for these submarines, citing a long-standing embargo with China related to the Tiananmen Square massacre.<sup>89</sup> The Prayut government faced significant criticism for the procurement of GT200 fake bomb detectors, which raised alarm as various military units and other agencies spent over 1.4 billion baht on nearly 1,400 counterfeit detection devices. This prompted concerns that the Thai military had not taken sufficient measures to ensure transparency, accountability, and quality control in its acquisitions.<sup>90</sup>

Furthermore, the attempted purchase of US-made F-35 fighter jets, at an estimated cost of approximately USD 408 million, was denied due to issues related to training and technical requirements. This occurred despite Thailand being designated as a Major Non-NATO Ally in 2003.<sup>91</sup> The deepening relations between Thailand and China have also raised significant concerns among analysts.<sup>92</sup>

During Prayut's more than nine years of military rule, elite exploitation and corruption within the Thai military escalated. Personal relationships with foreign militaries not only affected the professionalism of higher-ranking military personnel but also amplified military influence and private profit motives in shaping foreign policy decisions.

For instance, when Myanmar experienced a coup in February 2021, General Min Aung Hlaing sought counsel from Thailand's military. Many of these personal relationships date back to 2012 when General Hlaing was named the "adopted son" of Prem Tinsulanonda.<sup>93</sup> These interpersonal ties raise concerns about ongoing corruption and a significant departure from Thailand's prior constructive engagement policy, which, while exploitative, was lucrative and extended support to an isolated Tatmadaw regime in Myanmar.

An example of this concerning trend is a 2019 deal with the junta-run Myanmar Economic Corporation, which allocated over USD 1 million to construct a fuel terminal on land seized from rural farmers.<sup>94</sup> The implications of these personal

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<sup>89</sup> Mike Yeo, "Thai Submarine Purchase Hits Rough Seas," *Defense News*, 28 August 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/>.

<sup>90</sup> Nopporn Wong-Anan, "GT200 Scam Tests Regime's Mettle," *Bangkok Post*, 23 June 2016, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

<sup>91</sup> "Thailand Air Force Says U.S. Has Denied Request to Buy F-35 Jets," *Reuters*, 25 May 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

<sup>92</sup> "Thai Plan to Acquire F-35 Fighter Jets Poses Dilemma for Washington," *Radio Free Asia*, 16 February 2022, <https://www.rfa.org/>.

<sup>93</sup> "Former Thai Army Chief Is 'Godfather' to Burma's Top General," *The Irrawaddy*, 16 July 2014, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/>.

<sup>94</sup> "Myanmar: Thai State-Owned Company Funds Junta," *Human Rights Watch*, 25 May 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/>.

ties have prompted criticism regarding the depth of Thailand's relationships with the Myanmar junta and their impact on the broader ASEAN effort to address the regional crisis. While some ASEAN states like Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore have pursued a policy of isolation, Thailand remains among a select few, including Cambodia and Laos, that have chosen to engage with the junta. This has caused a division within ASEAN, with some states prioritizing security interests and pragmatic national security considerations.

### **Conclusion: The Srettha Government and Military Relations**

The progressive Move Forward Party (MFP), in coalition with the Pheu Thai Party, managed to defeat the military and monarchy-aligned conservative parties in the 2019 election. However, the 2017 Constitution played a crucial role in the post-May 2023 election crisis, where junta-appointed senators wielded significant influence and power over the final outcome. Pragmatism on the part of Pheu Thai led to a deal to “make friends with the devil,” where a Thaksin-aligned party formed a coalition with several conservative parties, including those that had previously played a role in removing both Thaksin and Yingluck from political office.<sup>95</sup> The resulting semi-democratic government, led by real estate businessman turned Pheu Thai candidate Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin, complicates efforts to reform the Thai military and achieve modernization and professionalization objectives, which had been a key campaign focus for MFP, its former coalition partner.<sup>96</sup> One of the concessions made by Pheu Thai to the military-aligned parties was allowing Prayut to handpick the next generation of military leaders as part of the annual military reshuffle.<sup>97</sup>

Srettha's relationship with the military remains somewhat unpredictable, as he has recently offered measured public praise for the armed services, acknowledging that the military “has done many good things”, while also noting some unresolved issues from the past.<sup>98</sup> Srettha has engaged in a series of meetings with the military to “bridge the divide” between the public and armed forces. Changes are likely to

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<sup>95</sup> Koh Ewe, “How Thailand Finally Got Its New Prime Minister,” *TIME*, 22 August 2023, <https://time.com/>.

<sup>96</sup> Bryan Pietsch, “Meet the Ivy-Educated Opposition Leader Who Could End Thai Military Rule,” *Washington Post*, 15 May 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

<sup>97</sup> Patpicha Tanakasempipat, “Prayuth Makes Key Military Appointments Before Leaving Office,” *Bloomberg News*, 31 August 2023, <https://www.bnnbloomberg.ca/>; and Francesca Regalado, “Thailand's Pheu Thai Coalition Adds Largest pro-Military Party,” *Nikkei Asia*, 21 August 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/>.

<sup>98</sup> Bloomberg, “Thailand to Hold US Security Talks, PM Says as He Skips Asean,” *Bangkok Post*, 4 September 2023, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

be gradual, as indicated by a September announcement that military procurement would involve economic benefits and deals to import products from Thailand.<sup>99</sup>

Pheu Thai has also consulted with former defense ministers, including General Thammarak Isarangkura na Ayudhaya, a former Thaksin defense minister turned Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) campaigner.<sup>100</sup> Complicating matters was Pheu Thai's selection of Sutin Klungsang as Defense Minister. While Sutin would be only the second civilian to hold this position, his expertise has been in education rather than defense matters.<sup>101</sup>

Recent developments between the end of the Prayut era and the start of the Srettha government indicate that politics, rather than modernization efforts, are shaping policy decisions. In October 2023, when Defense Minister Sutin visited the Royal Thai Navy Headquarters, he announced the government's intention to acquire a Chinese frigate instead of the previously planned submarine. This change was attributed to external disagreements regarding the submarine's propulsion system.<sup>102</sup>

An internal document leaked from the China Shipbuilding and Offshore International Co., Ltd (CSOC) revealed that the Chinese-manufactured engines had a maximum output of 18 knots, but were sustainable for only 10 minutes, which fell significantly short of the specifications offered by other bidders, such as South Korea. This raised suggestions that both Prayut and Srettha prioritized Thailand's ongoing relationship with Beijing over the submarine's actual capabilities when evaluating potential bids.<sup>103</sup>

As noted by Termsak Chalermpananupap, Srettha's appointment of Sutin could have presented an opportunity for the new government to hold the military accountable by introducing transparency in the procurement process. However, given that the critical information regarding the submarine bidding process is now over eight years old, it appears unlikely that more accountable or transparent processes are being considered, even though negotiations with China for the frigate are still ongoing.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Wassana Nanuam, "Srettha Lays out Defence Buy Plans," *Bangkok Post*, 3 September 2023, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

<sup>100</sup> Aekarach Sattaburuth, "PPRP Recruits Thammarak to Lead Northeastern Assault," *Bangkok Post*, 23 March 2023, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/>.

<sup>101</sup> "The Military Policy of Srettha and the Civilian Defence Minister Is Closely Watched," *Khaosod English*, 4 September 2023, <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/>.

<sup>102</sup> Sebastian Strangio, "Thailand Will Replace Chinese Sub With Frigate, Defense Minister Says," *The Diplomat*, 24 October 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

<sup>103</sup> Termsak Chalermpananupap, "Thailand's Marooned Submarine Deal: Some Questions Need Answers," *Fulcrum*, 30 October 2023, <https://fulcrum.sg/>.

<sup>104</sup> Termsak, "Thailand's Marooned Submarine Deal."



However, by forming a pragmatic coalition with military partners, Srettha's control over key line ministries and his ability to influence ad-hoc policies and decisions created under the previous regime are limited. This represents a significant departure from the MFP's promises not only to demilitarize and decentralize power in Thailand but also to reverse Thailand's exploitative Myanmar policy. With appointments now secured and military parties in the coalition gaining more influence over future annual appointments, it is likely that the political status quo will persist, and reform efforts will be put on hold in the near term or until a coalition without the support of military-backed political parties becomes viable.

This article has aimed to trace the development, professionalization, and modernization of the Thai military, which has played a prominent role in Thai society since the 1932 Revolution. This historical review of three distinct eras of contemporary military history has brought to light long-standing concerns that continue to affect the new Srettha government. Each era has demonstrated that the lack of attention to professionalism and SSR has allowed successive generations of military leaders to perpetuate a culture that prioritizes personal gain and ensures the survival of both military and monarchical institutions, often at the expense of foreign policy, corruption harming Thai citizens, and the erosion of trust and confidence in the Thai body politic.

While the May 2023 election initially served as a referendum on Prayut's nine-plus years of authoritarian rule and prompted a long-overdue public discourse on the role of the Thai monarchy in society, continued nondemocratic interventions, such as the coordinated abstentions of appointed senators during the prime ministerial confirmation, reaffirmed a multigenerational belief that ruling elites find justifications for intervening in the political process, not just during national crises, but at all-too-suspicious times. 🌟

### **Mark S. Cogan**

Mr. Cogan is an Associate Professor of Peace and Conflict Studies at Kansai Gaidai University, Japan. His research focuses primarily on Southeast Asia, particularly on authoritarian regimes in Thailand and Cambodia, with an emphasis on foreign policy, diplomacy, security cooperation, and peacebuilding. His recent co-edited volume, *Alternative Perspective on Peacebuilding: Theories and Case Studies*, was published by Palgrave MacMillan in 2022.

# “Thailand’s Foreign Policy Does Not Exist”

## Windy Times Call for Better Roots, Not Just More Bending

DR. CHRISTOPHER ANKERSEN

### Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

elections but frustratingly concealed in subsequent government formation, tragically illustrates.<sup>2</sup>

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

### Outside, But Looking In

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>6</sup> Zawacki, “An Absence Felt.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>10</sup> Pongsudhirak, "Battle Between Continuity and Change."

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>15</sup> Abuza, “America Should Be Realistic About Its Alliance with Thailand.”

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

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

<sup>18</sup> Abuza, “America Should Be Realistic About Its Alliance with Thailand.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **"It Is Crucial to Think about Our Illustrious Diplomatic Record"<sup>28</sup>**

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>28</sup> "Everything Starts at Home," *The Nation* (Thailand).

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>29</sup> Zawacki, “An Absence Felt.”

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

<sup>31</sup> Kislenko, “Bending with the Wind.”

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

<sup>33</sup> Thai PBS, “Thai Foreign Policy at a Low Point, Experts Say.”

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



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

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

**Dr. Christopher P. Ankersen**

Dr. Ankersen is a Clinical Professor of Global Affairs. He leads the Global Risk Specialization as part of the MS in Global Affairs degree at New York University’s Center for Global Affairs.

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

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

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

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

<sup>39</sup> Chongkittavorn, “Imagining Thai Diplomacy under MFP.”

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