

***Thailand: Shifting Ground between the US and a Rising China.***  
**By Benjamin Zawacki. London: ZED Books, 2017. Paperback: 370pp.**

In *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the US and a Rising China*, Benjamin Zawacki makes an important contribution to the field of Thailand's foreign relations. The author advances an argument which runs counter to the conventional wisdom: that the main feature of Thai diplomacy is to maintain a balancing position vis-à-vis the Great Powers in order to avoid having to choose sides. Instead, Zawacki contends that since the end of the Second World War, Thailand *has* chosen sides: the United States during the Cold War and, since the turn of the new century, China.

Zawacki argues that despite the close ties Washington cultivated with Bangkok during the Cold War, the United States is largely to blame for Thailand's shift towards China. He shows that America failed to capture the domestic dynamics, especially the new generation of Thai elites that took place after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. Thereafter, America's benign neglect of Thailand created a power vacuum that China was able to fill by increasing economic engagement, political and diplomatic engagement with Thailand at every level. Positive perceptions of China were enhanced by the re-emergence of Chinese identity among the influential Sino-Thai population.

The book is divided into two parts and comprises ten chapters. The first part traces the historical development of the triangular relationship between Bangkok, Beijing and Washington from the early post-war period until the election of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in 2001. The second part examines the Sino-Thai-US triangle from Thaksin until the military coup in 2014.

In Part One, Zawacki demonstrates that Thailand was a loyal follower of the United States during the Cold War. He lays out the formation of the bilateral relationship which was instrumental in shaping Thailand's political characteristics for the next fifty years; Washington was pragmatic and supportive of Thai elites (mainly the military) who in turn helped sustain pro-American sentiment. American support also enabled the Thai military to exercise political control throughout the Cold War period. Thai-US relations deepened as the conflict in Indochina intensified, while Thai-China ties deteriorated until the mid-1970s.

The author goes on to discuss changes in Thailand's relations with the United States from the mid-1970s until the end of the

Cold War. Following the closure of US bases in Thailand in the mid-1970s, the Thai elite began to express doubt about America's commitment to Thailand. A brief period of democracy during 1973–76 allowed a liberal government to adjust the country's foreign policy, ending Thailand's in the Indochina conflict and establishing ties with communist countries, including the People's Republic of China in 1975. Although the military regimes after 1976 were generally pro-American, Thai–China relations became much closer following Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1978. This event led to a convergence of security interests among Thailand, China and the United States to secure Thailand's security and contain Vietnamese and Soviet influence in Southeast Asia. As a result, China became a significant factor in Thailand's foreign policy calculations. In the early post-Cold War period, Zawacki argues that Thai policy elites still valued the country's ties with America despite China's increasingly important economic interactions with the Kingdom. For instance, in Chapter Six, the author shows that the governments of Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai (1992–95 and 1997–2001) remained a strong supporter of the US-led international order, even though the United States backed a painful IMF austerity programme during the 1997–98 Asian Financial Crisis (AFC).

Part Two is arguably the most important part of the book because in it Zawacki claims that Thailand's policy shift towards China accelerated greatly under Prime Minister Thaksin (2001–06). He argues that Thaksin used his Chinese ethnicity to tap into China's rapid economic expansion, with strong support from the Sino-Thai business community. As a result, Thai-Chinese trade and investment increased rapidly during the Thaksin era. In addition, Thaksin's foreign policy promoted a (short-lived) Asia-centric regional architecture in which he placed China at the core. Thaksin was also attracted to the China model because of its emphasis on economic performance over political freedoms and human rights.

Zawacki goes on to argue that Thailand's tilt towards China continued despite changes in US foreign policy following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, after which Washington devoted more attention to Thailand and Southeast Asia more generally. While Thailand supported the Bush administration's "war on terror", it felt that the United States did not adequately consult with the Kingdom but simply forced it to assist Washington. Although Washington tolerated the 2006 military coup which allowed Thailand's conservative elite to retake power from Thaksin, it did not change the direction of

Thailand's shift towards China. And while the Obama administration pledged to strengthen relations with Thailand as part of its "Asia pivot", US–Thai relations actually worsened following the 2014 coup. The imposition of US sanctions and Washington's criticism of the junta's human rights record further eroded the already weak trust between Thailand and the United States.

According to Zawacki, the core problem in the bilateral relationship is that Washington no longer understands Thai political culture and has failed to connect with the new generation of Thai elites. This stands in marked contrast with China, which has continually reached out to every level of Thai society. This crucial difference has led China and the United States to approach Thailand's decade-long political crisis differently: Washington has adhered to its principles and publicly criticized Thailand, while Beijing has been more pragmatic and subtle.

In summary, this book offers an excellent account of Thailand's foreign policy shift from the United States to China and augments current debates on Southeast Asia's strategic positioning between Washington and Beijing. Although the main argument may not be entirely new, the book contributes to the limited literature on Thai foreign relations. It reconfirms the country's foreign policy shift by providing some fresh and interesting evidence. For example, Zawacki is not bound by the unwritten rule among scholars against citing WikiLeaks cables. Together with an impressive list of interviews, the author skillfully crafts the book with colourful stories.

However, political events and evidence are subject to interpretation. Zawacki's conclusion, which is based on WikiLeaks cables and interviews, may have overstated the case, especially when other sources are taken into account. For instance, Prime Minister Chuan's promotion of liberal values during the AFC was motivated by his desire to attract Western investors rather than because he was a diehard pro-American. On many occasions, the records show that Chuan and his administration expressed their discontent with Washington and seriously questioned its friendship. It was also Chuan, and not Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan as Zawacki states in his book, who initiated the Growth Quadrangle in 1993 which was designed to connect mainland Southeast Asia with China. In this case, Chuan's approach to Washington and Beijing can be said to be similar to Thaksin's. Therefore, Bangkok's shift towards China may have occurred much earlier than what Zawacki suggests.

This book offers one interpretation of Thai foreign policy, and an important one at that. It will be of interest to students and observers of Thailand who want to gain a deeper understanding of Thai politics, the country's foreign affairs and especially America's (dis)engagement with the Kingdom.

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