

***A Genealogy of Bamboo Diplomacy: The Politics of Détente with Russia and China.* By Jittipat Poonkham. Canberra, Australia: ANU Press, 2022. Softcover: 325pp.**

The world of Thai and English writings on Thai diplomacy is a peculiar one. Consider these oddities. First, almost all major studies, regardless of the author’s background (be they Thai or non-Thai), share the common assumption that Thai diplomatic practice is conditioned by a pragmatic “bending with the wind” approach. Second, even critical scholars and experienced policymakers assume that this so-called “bending with the wind” approach—sometimes referred to as “bamboo diplomacy”—is a unique characteristic of Thai diplomacy. Third, there is a widely held belief that “bamboo diplomacy” has been Thailand’s favoured diplomatic practice since the foundation of the country as a modern nation-state, and that the practice has remained unchanged since then. To think outside this dominant paradigm is a tectonic shift. However, *A Genealogy of Bamboo Diplomacy* has dared to do it. It is therefore unsurprising that this fascinating book has aroused great interest and been warmly welcomed by academics and policymakers alike.

Jittipat Poonkham argues that it is necessary to question the bamboo diplomacy paradigm as “it serves not only to narrate transhistorical diplomatic practices but also to make judgement on the achievement of respective Thai foreign policies” (p. 303). Based on this argument, *A Genealogy of Bamboo Diplomacy* can be read as both an International Relations text and a book on the history of Thai diplomacy. Drawing from extensive archival research, and relying on Foucault’s genealogical approach, Jittipat cogently argues that bamboo diplomacy first emerged as a diplomatic discourse to help Thai policymakers cope with the rapidly changing geopolitical situation in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In the late 1960s, the abrupt changes in international affairs, particularly Hanoi’s impending victory in the Vietnam War and the prospect of American retrenchment, caused a great deal of geopolitical anxiety in Thailand. This was partly due to the fact that, thus far, Thai diplomatic practice had been conditioned by the hegemonic discourse of anti-communism, which had resulted in an over-reliance on the United States. In Chapter Three, Jittipat explores how Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman initiated the idea of “flexible diplomacy” in an effort to cope with the changing environment, even before the proclamation of the Nixon Doctrine in

1969. Thereafter, détente emerged as the new diplomatic discourse to explain Thailand's dealings with the communist powers, particularly the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. The practice of ping-pong diplomacy, petro-diplomacy, cultural diplomacy and so on, which helped to cement ties between Thailand and the communist powers, did not emerge out of nowhere. To legitimize Thailand's recalibrated diplomatic approach, and the change in China's and Russia's status from "enemy" into "friend", a new discursive practice was needed. In this context, the metaphor "bamboo diplomacy" began to emerge. In other words, "bamboo diplomacy" is a recent constructed discourse.

In Chapters Four to Seven, Jittipat elucidates his argument by analysing three episodes of Thailand's détente with China and Russia: under Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman (1959–71); under Prime Ministers Kukrit Pramoj (1975–76) and Foreign Minister Chatichai Choonhavan (1975–76); and under General Kriangsak Chomanan (1977–80). In each episode, the author closely scrutinizes the tussle between proponents of détente and anti-communist Cold Warriors. These tussles, Jittipat argues, eventually resulted in the consolidation of the détente discourse. Détente as a new hegemonic discourse clearly revealed itself during the periods of General Kriangsak Chomanan (1977–80) and his successor, General Prem Tinnasulanon (1980–88). By the late 1970s, the debate between détente and anti-communism was over and had been replaced by a new tussle between "balanced" and "unbalanced" détente. Simply put, factions within the Thai foreign ministry debated how close Thailand should engage with communist states, particularly China. In this sense, détente established itself as a hegemonic discourse in Thai diplomacy and became a yardstick for evaluating Thai diplomatic practice from the late 1970s.

Besides challenging the conventional wisdom of Thai diplomacy, *A Genealogy of Bamboo Diplomacy* also adds a new and significant understanding to Thai domestic politics. Jittipat's analysis shrewdly places the series of coup d'états in the 1970s in a new light. Rather than understanding these events as merely coups against democracy, Jittipat argues that they represented coups against diplomacy as well. The struggle between the proponents of détente and the anti-communist Cold Warriors was one of the factors leading to the series of coups as each side attempted to put their discourse into practice.

In sum, *A Genealogy of Bamboo Diplomacy* is a meticulously crafted book with a blend of theoretical and empirical research.

However, a more extensive use of Russian and Chinese language materials could have added a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of geopolitical developments in the 1970s and Thailand's bamboo diplomacy discourse. Furthermore, the role of the Devawongse Varopakarn Institute of Foreign Affairs (DVIFA), which is only briefly mentioned in Chapter Three, could have been expanded, especially to illustrate how the DVIFA's institutional practices facilitated the rise of the détente discourse. These minor shortcomings, nonetheless, should not detract from the merits and significance of Jittipat's magnum opus. *A Genealogy of Bamboo Diplomacy* will certainly be compulsory reading for those interested in Thai diplomacy for years to come.

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