

“Bamboo Stuck in the Chinese Wind”: The Continuing Significance of the China Factor in Thailand’s Foreign Policy Orientation

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This research article examines how domestic politics has affected Thailand’s engagement with the United States and China since the 2014 military coup. It argues that Thai conservative elites, primarily the military, perceive the United States as a threat to their political legitimacy because of Washington’s emphasis on human rights and democracy. In contrast, they appreciate Beijing’s commitment to non-interference while increased economic ties with China strengthen their domestic legitimacy. Although Thailand’s foreign policy underwent an adjustment following the 2019 general elections, with Bangkok and Washington reaffirming their security ties, Thai policymakers continue to perceive China as a more dependable partner and think they must reassure Beijing that they are not aligned with the alleged US goal of containing China.

Keywords: Thai domestic politics, foreign policy, great power competition, US-Thai relations, Sino-Thai relations.

According to Arne Kislenko, Thai diplomacy is “always solidly rooted, but flexible enough to be whichever way the wind blows to survive”.¹

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Hence the moniker “bamboo diplomacy”. Through such statesmanship, Thai policymakers have navigated great power rivalries over the centuries by pursuing policies that, while negatively impacting the country in the short term, work towards broader goals of preserving Thailand’s independence and autonomy. Bangkok employed various diplomatic tactics in the late nineteenth century to balance competing European colonial powers against one another, accommodating some of their demands for territorial expansion into Thailand’s periphery in return for Bangkok preserving its control over the bulk of the country. As such, Thailand was the only Southeast Asian country that avoided outright colonization by a European power. In recent decades, Bangkok has had to attempt another balancing act because of the intensifying US-China strategic competition.

Domestic politics have played a key role in determining Thailand’s response. Political fragmentation since the mid-2000s—a political struggle between a royalist-conservative coalition and progressives since the military coup that toppled Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra’s democratically-elected government in 2006—has shaped each successive government’s foreign policy direction. On the one hand, an unstable political system at home has distracted Thai policymakers from foreign affairs, meaning they have primarily been reactive, not proactive, to the pressure exerted on them by China and the United States. On the other hand, ruling elites have prioritized their own domestic legitimacy and survival when responding to external concerns.

The existing literature has attempted to elucidate a general pattern in Thai foreign policy behaviour, primarily by looking for continuity between successive governments (democratically elected or military-run). These studies can be divided into two main groups. The first contends that Bangkok continues its traditional foreign policy behaviour—“bamboo bending with the wind”—to balance external power.² The second doubts Thailand’s maintenance of this bamboo diplomacy and instead argues that it has increasingly leaned towards China.³

“Bending with the wind” presupposes that Thailand has two corollary foreign policy goals. In its relations with great powers, policymakers think maintaining a balanced position safeguards national sovereignty and independence. Thus, Bangkok should be flexible in accommodating the demands of external powers so long as the country’s vital interests are not compromised. At the same time, balancing multiple powers creates a competitive environment, maximizing the potential rewards Thailand can reap

from interactions with foreign powers. Much of the existing literature on this topic explores how bamboo diplomacy functioned during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when Siam (as Thailand was called before 1939) proactively managed the competing interests of competing European colonial powers. For instance, Siam invited the European states to contribute to its modernization programmes but, at the same time, counterbalanced each of their colonial ambitions against one another.⁴

According to the existing literature on this, flexibility and pragmatism are key. By allowing numerous powers a stake in Thailand, its policymakers could swiftly evaluate the external situation and adjust their policies to align more closely with whichever power they thought was prevailing. Despite having good relations with Imperial Germany, Siam entered the First World War on the side of the Allies, not Berlin's Central Powers. In fact, Siam only entered the war during its final year because Bangkok predicted an Allied victory, which, it reasoned, would give Siam a better position to renegotiate the unequal treaties it had previously been compelled to sign by the Allied countries.⁵ Similarly, Siam remained neutral during the first two years of the Second World War but sided with Japan in 1941 after Tokyo's forces invaded much of the rest of Southeast Asia. However, it switched allegiance in the war's latter stages once it was clear that Japan was heading for defeat.⁶ During the early years of the Cold War, Thailand fully aligned with the United States to receive support from the West and in response to the perceived threat of communist expansion in Southeast Asia, yet Thailand also maintained contact with communist China and quietly encouraged cultural exchanges.

This historical pattern of foreign policy established normative guidelines for subsequent Thai policymakers to interpret, and much of the existing literature on Thai foreign affairs still aligns with the concept. Indeed, scholars argue that Thailand still bends towards the major power that can provide the most benefits while simultaneously diversifying cooperation with other powers for risk management. As this is usually defined in the post-Cold War era, Bangkok considers the United States its security guarantor and seeks improved relations with Beijing to benefit from China's growing economy.⁷

In many ways, Thailand's so-called bamboo diplomacy is much like the hedging strategies employed by other Southeast Asian states. While scholars differ on how to define "hedging", they generally agree that it means that smaller states pursue neither absolute balancing nor bandwagoning *vis-à-vis* great powers while also, in

contrast to the presuppositions of neorealist theorists, adjusting their strategies according to their national interests. Put simply, they strengthen their political and economic ties with external powers while being cautious about losing their autonomy; they diversify their political and security partnerships to minimize dependency on any one power while engaging multiple external powers in political and security affairs, thus creating a balance that prevents any one power from dominating them.⁸

Although China has become a major economic partner in Thailand, Bangkok still wants to expand trade with as many markets as possible so that it does not become economically dependent on China. At the same time, although its treaty alliance with the United States remains a cornerstone of security, Bangkok does not want to rely solely on Washington for defence, so it increasingly engages in security cooperation with China. This strategy also serves to shield Bangkok from pressures exerted by Washington, especially in anticipation of periods of democratic and human rights deterioration in Thailand—when the United States is likely to constrain relations or impose sanctions—or when the United States' attention on Southeast Asia wanes, as was experienced in the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis in the late 1990s.

However, this research article concurs with a growing body of research that doubts whether Thailand has continued to exercise bamboo diplomacy (or hedging) because of China's rise.⁹ Increased trade with China has undeniably contributed to Thailand's economic development, yet it has also increased Chinese influence and pressure on Bangkok, especially after the military coup in 2014. For instance, when Beijing did not invite Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha to the inaugural Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Summit in 2017, it was widely interpreted as a sign of China's frustration with the slow pace of the Thai-Chinese high-speed railway project. In response, Prayut took swift action and ordered any legal obstacles to be removed, which paved the way for the project to commence.¹⁰ Meanwhile, Bangkok's reluctance since 2014 to cooperate with the United States, even on non-security issues, is driven by concerns that China will misinterpret such cooperation as Thailand aligning with Washington's alleged containment of China.¹¹

This research article argues that deviation from Thailand's traditional bamboo diplomacy is the result of domestic politics, particularly the resurgence of the Thai military in politics since 2014. The military junta, formally the National Council for Peace and Order, that ruled between 2014 and 2019 suffered a

crisis of legitimacy at home (and abroad), leading to a reciprocal accommodation of China, including in security, as Beijing offered political support to the Thai regime.¹² Hence, domestic variables should be considered as significant as structural determinants when analysing Thai foreign policy.¹³ However, much of the existing literature that takes this perspective focuses on events between 2014 and 2019; few studies attempt to connect it with broader domestic transformations since the early 2000s. However, since the turn of the century, Thailand has sought to rebalance its foreign policy, but the process has been slow and inconsequential, which this article argues is because successive governments have overly focused on boosting their domestic legitimacy, including the legitimacy derived from rapid economic growth, which has required ever-greater assimilation with China's fast-growing economy. This article employs qualitative research, utilizing a diverse range of open-source documents and information for analysis. The primary sources include official websites of various government agencies, news reports and digital content, with a focus on materials from Thailand, China and the United States. Additionally, this study is enriched by interviews with Thai government officials and secondary sources from scholarly literature.

This article proceeds as follows. After reviewing the existing literature to establish a foundational understanding of Thailand's bamboo diplomacy, it discusses how regime legitimacy influences foreign policy decisions. The subsequent section explores the relevance of regime legitimacy in Thai foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. This period highlights the increasing significance of the China factor in Thailand's strategic considerations. The final section analyses the post-Cold War implications of this shift. It shows how maintaining strong ties with China provides substantial economic benefits to the country, enabling Thai governments to bolster their economic performance and, by extension, their political legitimacy. The article concludes by observing that the connection between regime legitimacy and Thailand's proclivity towards China remains consistent across different forms of government, whether democratic or authoritarian.

Regime Stability and Foreign Policy

Although academics and foreign policymakers often invoke neorealist strategies when analysing global events, foreign policy is an inherently complex business, with numerous variables influencing the outcomes

of decisions and much deviation from neorealist predictions. While foreign policy analysis falls within the broader discipline of International Relations, it emphasizes factors that structural theories may overlook. This section establishes a theoretical foundation for examining the impact of domestic determinants, particularly regime stability, on foreign policy while demonstrating this perspective's relevance to Thailand.

In contrast to neorealists, neoclassical realists emphasize that because state affairs are conducted by human beings, policymakers are constrained by their own limitations, including the type of regime making the decision and its strategic culture, state-society relations and decision-makers' personal opinion.¹⁴ Moreover, policymakers are liable to misjudge their own or another country's strengths and can oftentimes lack enough information to make decisions adequately, leading to an underestimation or overestimation of the outcomes of their decisions. In some cases, states face domestic constraints, such as limited resources, in pursuing specific foreign policies. Power struggles within domestic politics can be another constraint, as the political opposition and non-governmental groups may oppose specific options from which the government has to choose. Elite cohesion or vulnerabilities within the regime can also steer decision-making towards different foreign policy choices.¹⁵

Regardless of the type of regime (democratic or not), politicians prioritize their own political survival. Once in power, they aim to remain in power, while those not in power strive to attain it. To achieve this, those in power must appease supporters—even authoritarian regimes cannot avoid politics' inherent nature to please the masses. However, leaders sometimes struggle to formulate optimal policies when faced with persistent political opposition. When the incumbent government's authority or legitimacy is challenged, it must struggle to survive in power. For example, the political opposition may allege that the government fails to protect the nation's interests and lacks public legitimacy. In response, the government might attempt to explain to the public why its current policies benefit them, or as is often the case, it might implement policies intended to simply win over voters. As such, domestic political competition sometimes results in the incumbent government implementing policies that maximize its own political survival, but which are not necessarily good for the country. A government might try to stir up nationalist sentiment at home to mobilize support, but it could incite frustration (or worse) from neighbouring countries.

In other words, in foreign policymaking, the optimal options for a nation when responding to external pressure may differ from the (suboptimal) options that better serve an incumbent leader or government's domestic political interests. As such, foreign policy can become a tool to manipulate domestic politics. Thus, events in the international system remain relevant when shaping foreign policymaking, but domestic variables also play a role in determining a government's final decision.

This perspective aligns with the prevailing description of the hedging behaviour of Southeast Asian states. According to Cheng-Chwee Kuik, hedging involves a country's assessment of risks associated with inherently ambiguous threats. Southeast Asian states interpret these risks and threats differently based on how they align with the interests of policy elites.¹⁶ Consequently, the domestic considerations of these elites shape hedging strategies along a vast spectrum from "balancing" to "bandwagoning". Indeed, although all Southeast Asian states can be characterized as hedgers, no two employ the same hedging strategy. Drawing on these theoretical approaches, it becomes evident that understanding domestic politics is essential when comprehending foreign policy dynamics, as we will see in Thailand's case.

Regime Legitimacy and Thai Foreign Policy

Thailand's integration into the global economy in the late 1980s empowered much of society, leading to vast political changes, after decades of military rule, and the rise of civilian governance under Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan (1986–91).¹⁷ This period coincided with the end of the Cold War and the conclusion of regional conflict over Cambodia, with Vietnam withdrawing its troops from the country in the late 1980s. The beginning of peace in the region, which had been engulfed in conflict for decades, led Thailand to seek reconciliation and economic cooperation with its neighbours, epitomized by the slogan: "turning battlefields into marketplaces".

Emerging China factor in regime legitimacy in the post-Cold War Thailand

However, the post-Cold War era also saw a shift in Bangkok's relations with China. During the Cold War, the Thai-US military alliance was crucial to Thailand's campaign to combat communism, within

and abroad. But with the communist threat now gone, Thais began looking differently at communist China. Some looked favourably upon it for “protecting” Thailand during Vietnam’s occupation of Cambodia in the 1980s, given that Beijing had launched military attacks on Vietnam because of its invasion of Cambodia in 1978.¹⁸ By the 1990s, Thais of Chinese ethnicity had become relatively well-integrated into mainstream society and played an important role in developing Thailand’s economy. Frequent contact between the two countries’ leaders and policymakers, particularly the Thai royal family, also helped improve trust between the two nations. Moreover, the two countries have never had territorial disputes since they do not share a border, unlike several other Southeast Asian countries.¹⁹

The Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 was a major turning point in Thailand’s relations with the United States and China. Whereas Washington was perceived as providing limited support to Thailand—primarily through a standard structural adjustment programme from the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—China provided Thailand with US\$1 billion in aid, mitigating the belt-tightening measures imposed on Thailand by the IMF’s programme.²⁰ The United States’ tepid response led Bangkok elites to start doubting the effectiveness of their countries’ security alliance and the overall US contribution to Thailand. At the same time, they welcomed China’s economic support, especially as the country’s economy was booming in the 1990s, leading to closer economic ties and gradual dependence on China for economic stability during the late 1990s. The democratically elected government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (2001–6) strengthened relations with China, a source of Thailand’s economic revival during this period, which added to the legitimacy of Thaksin’s administration (besides its landslide victories in the 2001 and 2005 general elections). Thailand’s exports to China increased sixfold between 2000 (the year before Thaksin Shinawatra came to power) and 2007 (the year after a military coup overthrew him).²¹

However, domestic crises sparked by the 2006 coup greatly impaired Thailand’s foreign policy. Political polarization between Thaksin’s supporters (Red Shirts) and royalists and conservatives (Yellow Shirts) led to domestic instability and frequent changes in the ruling coalition. Between 2006 and 2014, the positive image of China remained while perceptions of the United States, especially among Thailand’s conservative bloc, worsened due to Washington’s perceived attempts to intervene in Thai politics.²² Although a pro-Thaksin coalition led by the former prime minister’s sister, Yingluck

Shinawatra, won the 2011 general elections, it only eased tensions temporarily. Seeking domestic stability, Yingluck's administration was initially receptive to US engagement, but it was concerned that China would misinterpret such friendliness negatively and that the Yellow Shirt opposition would make political capital out of her government aligning too closely with Washington. Indeed, the Yellow Shirts criticized Yingluck's pledge to join the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a global free trade pact, and its approval for NASA, the United States' space agency, to conduct scientific research in Thailand. It asserted that such engagement with the United States would send the wrong signal to Beijing, chiefly that Bangkok was part of Washington's alleged "containment" strategy against China.²³ Such opposition affected Yingluck's attempt to strengthen her legitimacy and, thus, her government's stability.²⁴ Eventually, Yellow Shirt protests and judicial activism brought down Yingluck's government, culminating in a military coup in 2014.

Deepening China factor in securing regime legitimacy of the coup government

Following the coup, Thailand began to align even more closely with China due to US opposition to the military putsch. Because of the coup, the United States suspended high-level contacts and cooperation, including military assistance and arms sales, while the annual Cobra Gold joint-military exercise was scaled down.²⁵ US criticism of Thailand's worsening human rights situation in the years that followed—the military arrested, interrogated and intimidated more than 900 people, including the Red Shirt leaders, politicians, academics and students²⁶—exacerbated bilateral tensions.²⁷ Thailand's foreign ministry was particularly incensed when the US human trafficking report in 2015 ranked Thailand lower than the previous year, which Bangkok perceived as a political move by Washington.²⁸ A war of words between Thai leaders and US officials ensued. General Prayut Chan-ocha, the junta leader and self-appointed prime minister, and Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai accused the US government of "leaving another scar on the Thai people's heart", a reference to the perceived lack of financial assistance after the Asian Financial Crisis, which remained a bitter memory for Thai political elites.²⁹ Many pro-coup public figures and media outlets piled in, demanding that the US ambassador to Bangkok be classified as *persona non grata* and that Bangkok abandon its treaty alliance with the United States.³⁰

By contrast, Beijing endorsed the 2014 coup and recognized the Prayut regime as Thailand's legitimate government. The Chinese ambassador to Thailand is thought to have met with another instigator of the coup, General Thanasak Patimaprakorn, weeks afterwards to offer assurances that bilateral ties would not be affected.³¹ The military regime in Bangkok courted China and even tried to emulate Beijing's political and economic development model. Thai military leaders believed adopting China's model would serve a dual purpose: it would consolidate their political authority and stimulate economic growth, thereby strengthening the regime's legitimacy. General Prayut even suggested that his cabinet read Chinese President Xi Jinping's book, *Xi Jinping: The Governance of China*.³² Politically, Prayut admired the Chinese model because his regime wanted to ensure that the conservative establishment—the royal palace, the military, the civil service bureaucracy and businesses closely aligned with them—remained dominant in Thai politics. In fact, the military-drafted 2017 Constitution created a political structure that gave the military-appointed Senate, the upper house of parliament, greater power over the elected House of Representatives, the lower chamber. Importantly, these military-selected senators were given veto power over the lower house and the ability to vote for or against the appointment of a prime minister—which allowed them to block the prime ministerial candidate of the largest (and anti-military) party after the 2023 general elections. Prayut's government also tried to replicate China's economic development successes.³³ Formulated by a small pro-military group and given constitutional sanction that obliges succeeding governments to follow it, the 20-Year National Strategy (2017–36) set out an ambitious restructuring of the economy that it asserted would allow Thailand to overcome a middle-income trap and become a modern and advanced economy. Such a long-term strategy has been compared to Xi's "China Dream".³⁴

Junta leaders in Bangkok recognized that economic performance, which required closer cooperation with China, would bolster their legitimacy among the Thai populace after the coup, especially as they faced challenges of political legitimacy because of widespread discontent within the population over the coup. Close ties with China have provided economic opportunities for Thailand since the 1980s. It became Thailand's largest trading partner in 2013³⁵ and surpassed Japan as Thailand's largest foreign investor in 2021.³⁶ Thailand's vital tourism sector also relies on Chinese visitors, who accounted for almost one-third of inbound tourists by 2019.³⁷ Chinese

visitors grew substantially from less than 5 million in 2014 to 12 million in 2019.³⁸

Policymakers in Prayut's military government saw China's BRI as an economic opportunity. Central to the BRI in Thailand is a high-speed railway that will run from Nong Khai Province (on the Laos border) to Bangkok and Thailand's eastern seaboard.³⁹ This will connect Thailand to the Laos-China railway that opened in 2021. Moreover, the junta's 20-Year National Strategy also prioritized the development of the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC), a vast special economic zone across three provinces in eastern Thailand that, planners hope, will attract more investment in advanced industries, such as the bio-industry, medicine and artificial intelligence.⁴⁰ Another idea was for the EEC to become a regional aviation and logistic hub, modelled on China's Zhengzhou Airport Economy Zone.⁴¹ Chinese companies such as Alibaba, Huawei and SAIC Motor Group became major investors in the EEC.⁴² Furthermore, contracts to construct mega-projects within the EEC, such as railways and ports, were given on concessional terms to Chinese companies, including Sinohydro Corporation, China State Construction Engineering Corporation, China Harbour Engineering Company and China Railway Construction Corporation.⁴³ Thailand was also enthusiastic about signing up for the Regional Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership (RCEP), an initiative in which China was proactive because it would benefit the Chinese economy and serve as a political counterbalance to US-led economic frameworks such as the TPP.⁴⁴ Thai policymakers in the junta believed that joining RCEP would allow for increased trade with China. According to Jurin Laksanawisit, a Thai commerce minister after 2019, the RCEP can also be utilized to develop a Thailand-China economic corridor, allowing Thai firms to tap into the Chinese supply chain and expand their exports to China.⁴⁵

Washington's opposition to the military coup of 2014 resulted in the Thai military taking a dimmer view of security relations with the United States. According to a 2017 survey conducted by John Blaxland and Gregory Raymond, Thai military personnel expected China to become more influential for Thailand than the United States.⁴⁶ Because post-coup restrictions imposed by Washington restricted the export of Western military goods to Thailand, Bangkok turned to China for arms. In 2015, Prayut's military government approved a deal worth roughly US\$1 billion to purchase three Yuan-Class S26T submarines from China.⁴⁷ Bangkok then ordered 34 VN-1 armoured vehicles in 2017, 63 VT-4 tanks in 2018 and

another 38 VT-4 tanks in 2019.⁴⁸ Also in 2019, Thailand ordered a Chinese Type 71E LPD amphibious ship, a CX-I anti-ship cruise missile and a CM 708UNB Sea Eagle submarine-launched anti-ship missiles.⁴⁹

Beijing also agreed to transfer China's military technology to Thailand, strengthening its ability to repair and develop its own military equipment.⁵⁰ During a meeting in 2014, Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang and Prayut agreed that China would assist Thailand in its production of a multiple-launch rocket system—based on the Weishi models (WS-1 and WS-2)—the FD-2000 missile defence system, FL-3000N surface-to-air missiles and CS/VP3 Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicles.⁵¹ In 2016, both countries agreed to set up a military maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) facility in Thailand, which began operations in January 2018, to repair VT-4 and VT-1 tanks and for future domestic production of similar equipment.⁵²

Combined military exercises were another manifestation of close security ties between Thailand and China, although they had begun after the previous military coup in 2006. Exercises between Thai and Chinese Special Forces (codenamed “Strike”) took place in 2007, 2008, 2010, 2012 and 2013. In 2010, both countries' marines conducted a separate bilateral drill (“Blue Strike”) and repeated it in 2012, 2016 and 2019. Combined exercises between their air forces (“Falcon Strike”) took place in 2015, 2017, 2018 and 2019. According to some commentators, these exercises were unsophisticated and merely photo opportunities, while they paled in comparison to the Cobra Gold drills between the United States and Thailand.⁵³ Others argued that the Thai military would gradually adopt Chinese military doctrines and tactics if the bilateral exercise continued, thus steering Thailand's military away from the United States.⁵⁴

Impacts on Thai Foreign Policy: “Bamboo Stuck in the Chinese Wind”

By cultivating closer relations with Beijing after the 2014 coup, it became more difficult for Bangkok to rebalance its foreign policy when the military junta agreed to hold elections in March 2019. Although the military-aligned parties did not win the elections and the larger, anti-military parties attempted to form a coalition government, post-election scheming meant that Prayut was renamed prime minister as part of a military-civilian government. Subsequently,

the United States sought to repair relations with Bangkok. It lifted some of the sanctions it had imposed in 2014, allowing Bangkok to purchase US weapons and equipment.⁵⁵ In November 2019, both countries signed the Joint Vision Statement for the US-Thai defence alliance, which pledged to promote cooperation for regional peace and stability.⁵⁶ The following year, they signed a strategic vision statement on enhancing military cooperation.⁵⁷ The Biden administration, which entered office in 2021, was quick to proclaim that Thai-US bilateral relations are a cornerstone of US policy in mainland Southeast Asia.⁵⁸

However, improving ties with the United States was a double-edged sword for Thailand because of Beijing's belief that Washington intends to encircle China.⁵⁹ This has made Bangkok cautious about cooperating too closely with Washington, especially the US "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy, for fear that doing so might trigger Beijing's irritation. In April 2022, for instance, Thai Foreign Minister Don visited his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, in Beijing, a meeting that some foreign diplomats and media outlets claimed was a result of Don being summoned by the Chinese government to be lectured on Thailand's recent cooperation with the United States. The Thai Foreign Ministry felt compelled to publish a post-meeting statement denying the rumour. According to a foreign ministry spokesperson, the visit "had been planned by both sides since the end of 2021 ... to reciprocate the official visit of Mr. Wang Yi in October 2020", as well as being intended to strengthen the Thailand-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and to enhance economic cooperation in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era.⁶⁰

Despite US attempts at rapprochement after 2019, some in Bangkok still considered the United States to be an unreliable partner, especially over allegations that it neglects its security alliance with Thailand.⁶¹ For instance, despite several visits to other Southeast Asian states, no senior figure from the Biden administration travelled to Thailand until June 2022, almost 17 months after the administration entered the White House. Neither did President Biden attend the 2022 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Bangkok. However, Chinese President Xi did attend the summit, underscoring Beijing's commitment to Thailand. During the summit, Xi and Prayut agreed to collaborate towards establishing a shared future Thailand-China community to promote stability, prosperity and sustainability. The two sides also signed five agreements to strengthen political, economic and educational ties.⁶²

Similar to its neighbours, Thailand wants to keep the United States engaged in the region, yet Washington's ever-changing Southeast Asia policy since the end of the Cold War has created uncertainty in Bangkok. Despite their treaty alliance, there appears to have been a lack of a common understanding between the two countries since the disappearance of the mutual threat of communism after the Cold War. Washington is concerned that Beijing is challenging its regional dominance, yet Thailand does not view China as a threat. In fact, it sees it as a natural partner, partly because Beijing tolerates whatever happens in Thailand's domestic politics, including military coups. Therefore, Thailand wants to avoid confronting China. At the same time, Washington's criticism of Thailand's human rights and democracy record has alienated Thai conservative elites who regard these values as disadvantageous to their power and wealth. According to the 2017 survey by Blaxland and Raymond, Thai military officials perceived the United States as the greatest threat to Thailand despite the US-Thai treaty alliance.⁶³

Thai-China economic relations continued apace after the 2019 elections. Thailand's commitment to China's initiatives was reflected in the 4th Joint Action Plan on Thailand-China strategic cooperation (2022–26) as well as the Cooperation Plan on the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, which were signed during Xi's visit to Bangkok in December 2022. In these documents, both countries agreed on closer cooperation for sustainable development under the China-led Global Development Initiative (GDI) and greater security cooperation under the Global Security Initiative.⁶⁴ Prayut attended the High-level Dialogue on Global Development in June 2022, and Foreign Minister Don participated in the Ministerial Meeting of the Group of Friends of the GDI a few months later. According to Don, "Thailand supports China's constructive role as a responsible major power in contributing to global peace, stability and sustainable development. The GDI and Global Security Initiative reflect China's endeavours to realize such goals."⁶⁵

In contrast, Thailand has remained cautious about US-led initiatives. Despite pledges to do so, it did not join the TPP—likely because the TPP involved large comprehensive tariff reductions that would have forced Thailand to undertake far-reaching reforms, including on intellectual property rights, investment liberalization and government procurement standards. These issues held particular sensitivity for sectors like agriculture and traditional domestic industries, including the automobile sector and local pharmaceutical

companies, which faced increased competition under the new arrangement.⁶⁶ Such dynamics could influence their support for politicians who favoured joining the TPP, potentially affecting the political landscape and stakeholder backing. Thai policymakers have also remained cautious about joining the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). According to members of Thailand's IPEF negotiating team, many Thai stakeholders accept the IPEF's direction but are concerned about Thailand's lack of capacity to adjust its standards. For instance, IPEF's promotion of clean energy will benefit Thailand environmentally, but the country may not have the right technology to implement the plan, thus requiring expensive imports. Moreover, switching to clean energy will raise domestic prices and affect low-income consumers, potentially affecting a government's popularity.⁶⁷ Despite reservations from domestic stakeholders, Thailand joined the IPEF, a decision that appeared to be influenced not only by the potential economic benefits but also by Bangkok's deliberate strategy of rebalancing Thailand's foreign policy between the two great powers.

Thailand's apprehensions about the United States and favourable views of China will likely continue under Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin's new coalition government, formed after the 2023 general elections. Despite being led by the pro-Thaksin Pheu Thai Party, the coalition includes other parties with ties to the previous military governments, namely the military-aligned Palang Pracharath Party—led by General Prawit Wongsuwan, a significant figure in the junta after the 2014 coup—and Prayut's United Thai Nation Party. Prayut and Prawit's influence within the new administration can be seen by the appointments of two former secretaries-general of the National Security Council. General Natthapon Nakpanich and General Somsak Rungsita, two Prayut protégés, are now the secretary and advisor, respectively, to Defence Minister Sutin Klungsang.⁶⁸

While the Srettha administration may seek to improve relations with Washington, strategic considerations related to China will remain paramount, ensuring Bangkok remains balanced and avoids appearing overly aligned with the United States. Keen to stimulate the economy, the current Thai government is desperate to boost exports to China and to welcome more tourists from China. On 15 September 2023, it announced that Chinese tourists would enjoy a 30-day visa exemption when visiting Thailand.⁶⁹ It has also revisited an earlier concept of creating a link between the Indian and Pacific Oceans across Thailand's southern isthmus. Rather than constructing a canal, as was previously imagined, the Srettha administration

has proposed the Land Bridge Project, which would feature deep seaports in Chumporn Province (on the Gulf of Thailand) and in Ranong Province (on the Andaman Sea) connected via a network of railways and roads. The primary aim of this initiative is to capitalize on the heavy traffic in the Malacca Strait and offer an alternative shipping route through Thailand. Prime Minister Srettha introduced this idea to Xi during his visit to China for a BRI summit in October 2023. During the summit in Beijing, Srettha and Xi held an official bilateral dialogue, Srettha's first formal meeting with a US or Chinese leader—he had met with Biden on the sidelines of a United Nations General Assembly session a month earlier, but it was not an official bilateral talk.⁷⁰

Srettha's visit encapsulated Thai policymakers' perception that China will be the project's crucial supporter and most significant investor. During his visit to Thailand in January 2024, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed Beijing's interest in this idea. According to Srettha, "Mr Wang had said that the Chinese government was interested in the Land Bridge Project but needed more information about it and that the Chinese private sector wanted a part in it."⁷¹ This initiative would also complement China's other BRI projects—including the Laos-China railway and the forthcoming Thailand-China high-speed railway—and align with Beijing's long-term interest in a route between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The involvement of Chinese firms in this project could further enhance China's economic and political influence in Thailand.

Conclusion

This article argues that regime stability has been the main driver of Thailand's foreign policy, especially under military-led governments between 2014 and 2023. In response to the criticism and sanctions imposed by the United States over its democracy and human rights record, military governments sought political support from China, prompting further engagement with China in other areas, too. Meanwhile, China's economic role in Southeast Asia has convinced Thai policymakers that Beijing is more reliable than the United States, especially as Washington's interest in the region has fluctuated from retreat in the 1990s to pivoting back in the 2010s, although even Washington's re-engagement has worked against the interests of Thailand's conservative elites. As political divisions within Thailand have widened—as seen by the youth-focused, progressive Move Forward Party winning the most votes in the 2023 general

elections—conservative elites perceive themselves as increasingly vulnerable, impacting Thailand's foreign policy decisions.

Although relations with the United States have somewhat improved since the 2019 elections, senior decision-makers in Bangkok still do not share Washington's fundamental values (democracy and human rights) or priorities (competing with China). They also fear that Beijing will perceive too much cooperation with the United States as a sign that Thailand is joining alleged US efforts to contain China. This is likely to continue under the democratically elected coalition government that took office in 2023.

Ultimately, for Thai political elites, whether they are military or elected civilians, preserving their domestic political legitimacy is of utmost importance—and economic growth, which requires close cooperation with China, is a crucial element of this legitimacy. Thus, Thailand sees accommodation and alignment with Beijing as essential to reaping economic benefits. As such, Thailand's position towards China and the United States is unlikely to change drastically in the coming years.

NOTES

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