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## Thailand's "Bamboo Bending with The Wind" Policy, *Shifting Ground* Between The U.S and A Rising China

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### Abstract

This article examines Thailand's perception of "national interest," which has guided its flexible foreign policy post-2006 coup d'état. It explores why the U.S. pushback from Thailand's post-coup d'état in 2006 brings Thailand back to a deep-rooted Thai-China relationship. This article focuses on achieving three objectives; 1) examines the nature of the diplomatic relations that change Thailand's policy toward a superpower; 2) examine domestic factors, including the current political crisis shaping Thailand in Southeast Asia; 3) analyse the relevance of Thailand's traditional foreign policy in protecting her national interest in Southeast Asia. The puzzle that drives this research is to explore why the U.S. government's pushback from Thailand's post-coup d'état in 2006 brings Thailand back to pursue a deep-rooted Thai-China relationship. Neoclassical realists believe states use their power for self-interest rather than security. Many academics believe this behaviour is fundamental to Thai foreign policy. Due to increased geographical competition, the U.S. and China must maintain ties with Thailand. Both nations recognise Thailand's strategic importance in a geopolitical power struggle. Thailand was aware of its position between the U.S. and China during the conflict. To protect its interests and guarantee its safety, it has used a pragmatic and adaptive policy approach, called "bending with the wind." This helps Thailand maintain good relationships with superpowers without losing trust or advantages. The paper is divided into seven sections which are structured as follows; (i) introduction, (ii) foreign policy under leadership, (iii) Thai bilateral relations behaviour (iv) the competition between new and old government administrations to legitimise their foreign policies (v) the political disorder and its spill over effects on foreign policy, (vi) analysis and finding, (vii) the conclusion.

**Keywords:** Post-2006 Coup D'état, National Interest, Flexible Foreign Policy 'Bending with the Wind'

### Introduction

Thailand's political system has been volatile since the country transitioned from an absolute monarchy to parliamentary democracy in 1932. Due to political upheavals in Thailand, internal conflicts have caused long-term challenges and have resulted in overall social instability. In Thailand, however, there have been upwards of nineteen military coups d'état

since the removal of the absolute monarchy in 1932, with the most recent coup taking place in 2014 (Malesky, 2011).

The crisis in Thailand has not only had a significant impact on political stabilities but also on its foreign affairs, looking into the close relationship between domestic affairs and foreign policy through two essential aspects: the political disorder and its spillover effects on foreign policy and the competition between new and old government administration to legitimise their foreign policies. It argues that foreign policy is indistinguishably bound up with domestic policy, and the essential rationality of 'bends with the wind' is a discourse of flexible foreign policy. The description of 'bamboo' diplomacy is firmly grounded in the Thai nation's decisive objective to survive independently. The monarchy was portrayed as a gifted King who saved the kingdom from external intimidation in history. According to Thamsook Numnonda in *Thailand and the Japanese Presence, 1941-45* reinterprets Phibun's foreign policy as fundamentally flexible. The Thai art of 'bamboo diplomacy' saved the Thai Kingdom. Furthermore, this has always been how the Thais have encountered and overcome every predicament. This discourse of flexibility of their diplomacy is so robust that it handily blends its independence and avoids the losses of Thai territory, and it validates the continuity of Thai diplomacy policy since the eighteenth century.

Thailand's traditional foreign policy emerges in the year 1868. The paper focused on explaining how Thailand's perception of 'national interest' has played a significant character in guiding Thai foreign policy. Most of the literature has focussed on state actors, particularly those responsible for the state's security policy with regard to Thai foreign policy. However, in the post-coup d'état, "state actors" became involved in policy making. The absence of a serious empirical study of Thailand's foreign policy and political actors has increased in recent years to rather superficial analyses of Thailand's foreign policy. These analyses do not accurately reflect the substantive changes in Thailand's foreign policy that emerged toward the end of the military coup d'état in 2006.

### **Foreign Policy Under Leadership**

#### **Thaksin Shinawatra**

The political turmoil in Thailand highlights a widening gap between the mainly impoverished rural population and Bangkok's middle society. Thaksin ignited a populist movement, resulting in resounding electoral victories for his Thai Rak Thai Party by inflaming Thai nationalism and offering low-cost healthcare and other forms of assistance to rural populations. Following the coup against Thaksin in 2006, the party was dissolved, but its successors, the People's Power Party and the Puea Thai Party, continued to triumph in national elections. This achievement put the "old guard," which consisted of the Thai military, the royal family, and elite bureaucrats, in jeopardy. The rise and fall of Thaksin, as well as the part he now plays in Thai politics, contributed significantly to exposing and escalating the nation's divisions along regional and class lines (Busbarat, 2015).

Even if the disparities between the urban elite and the majority of impoverished, rural Thaksin supporters continue to be enormous and drive many of the players, the struggle is not as straightforward as that. Regional rivalries are also present in the conflict. The majority of Thaksin's fans are from the country's northeast and dislike the influence that comes from Bangkok's wealthier elite. Politicians are driven by their self-interest and also take advantage of political differences. Many Puea Thai Politicians sided with Thaksin in order to gain support, although they belong to the same affluent, frequently corrupt group of power brokers as the opposition party.

**Prayuth Chan-o-Cha**

On 22 May 2014, a coup headed by General Prayuth Chan-o-Cha, leader of NCPO the military junta, overthrew the elected government of Yingluck Shinawatra, sister of former prime minister Thaksin. After assuming control, Prayuth said that the NCPO, a body of top military officers, would rule Thailand. A new National Legislative Assembly (NLA) was established by the NCPO, and its members were chosen. Prayuth has not specified a timeframe for the changeover to civilian government and has been hesitant to call for elections. He first said that elections might take place in early 2016 after the coup, but later declared that they would be postponed until August or September 2017. The NCPO also established the Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC).

Prayuth lifted martial law in April 2015, under which the military had dominated Thai politics while the monarchy was in power. Civil freedoms are curtailed, free speech is quieted, criticism is criminalised, and political action is outlawed under brutal military rule. Following the coup, the generals consolidated their position as the new ruling military elites by increasing their rank, a sphere of influence, resources, and workforce. However, he quickly addressed Article 44 of the temporary constitution, which gave his government the power to prevent "acts judged injurious to national peace and stability." The action was swiftly denounced by human rights organisations as being just another sign of Thailand's "deepening spiral into dictatorship" (Campbell, 2015). By weakening centralist political institutions and reducing the role of political parties and civic society, they also hope to keep control over the Thai constitution. Thailand remained the sole nation under direct military administration as of early 2019. The military authoritarian administration that Prayuth's coup created is the longest-lasting one the nation has ever known since the 1950s.

At the end of May 2014, it was a political change that did not only deflect the direction of internal dynamics and affected the wider society. Thai Foreign Affairs become new conditions and challenges after the coup and diplomacy's intricate and volatile nature in the first year after the seizure. The new administration, led by Prayuth, continued the country's foreign policy within the context of its broader policy orientation and its "Thailand 4.0" agenda. It was discovered that the Prayuth administration detailed its foreign policy approach and outlined the "5S foreign affairs strategy", which; security, sustainability, standard, status, and synergy. Under 5S approach paralleled the traditional Thai foreign policy, which is widely known for its adaptability as "bending with the wind" diplomacy. Despite diplomatic difficulties during the first year of the government's administration, the government's foreign policy manoeuvring in international politics manages the external environment for Thailand's economic development (MFA, 2019).

**The Political Disorder and its Spillover Effects on Foreign Policy**

The country's development cannot be achieved without the impact of the external environment that both create opportunities and challenges for Thailand along the way. Foreign policy is like a "bridge" to open and filter the external effect of the interaction among the actors in international politics while simultaneously seeking to control the environment, which can affect Thailand. It appears that the military continued to be a key, vital, and influential institution and that the Thai defence establishment and foreign policy leadership valued their relationship with the U.S. and China. The cumulative conflicts and issues that have shaped bilateral defence and security need to be managed deftly by both sides to achieve a sustained commitment to common goals in a shifting regional and global strategic context. How successfully Thailand, U.S. and China manage the treaty relationship in the face

of divergent strategic goals will determine the future of bilateral defence and security cooperation.

Understanding the historical background of Thai-U.S. security cooperation can increase knowledge and understanding of how the partnership between the two nations was formed. This article seeks to scrutinise the security and strategic interests underlying Thai-U.S. security cooperation operations in order to examine what and how the Thailand and U.S. collaborate on security arrangements. This article also examines small state opportunities in the context of the growth of great power through the bilateral interaction between Thailand and China. In an age of Thai politics dominated by coups d'état, China's presence and consistent policy of non-interference give much-needed comfort. However, Thailand's foreign policy is less effective at achieving balance and makes concessions on national security challenges in order to suit Chinese interests. However, Thailand has withstood China's pressure on a few significant economic concerns. The study argues for selective accommodation with China through two factors: military cooperation and economic cooperation (Huda & Xinlei, 2022).

### **Domestic Affairs Impacted Foreign Policy**

The military administration of Thailand, commanded by General Prayuth Chan-o-Cha, has been utterly obsessed with the infamous "20-Year National Strategy Plan." The junta's institutionalisation of a long-term plan prompted future tendencies among ministries to craft their 20-year vision. The Thailand Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), a foreign policy authority and gatekeeper, is not exempt from the 20-year attribution. The MFA's 20-Year Masterplan defines the "5S Strategy," which enumerates the five pillars necessary for success: Security, Sustainability, and Social Responsibility. Standard, Recognition, and Synergy (PMO, 2019).

In April 2015, Prayuth lifted the martial law that had been in place when the monarchy was in power and had allowed the military to dominate Thai politics. Under repressive military control, civil liberties are constrained, free speech is suppressed, criticism is made illegal, and political activity is forbidden. The generals strengthened their position as the new ruling military elites after the coup by elevating their position and expanding, the resources, and workforce in their network. He swiftly turned his attention, though, to Article 44 of the interim constitution, which allowed his government the authority to stop "acts determined to be harmful to national peace and stability." They also intend to maintain control over the Thai constitution by weakening central political institutions and scaling back the influence of political parties and civil society. As of the beginning of 2019, Thailand was the only country with direct military rule. The military coup led by Prayuth led to the country's longest-lasting authoritarian military rule since the 1950s.

Every approach is significant to the MFA. However, the recognition image of "national independence" as a component of foreign policy's utmost importance is intriguingly essential to understanding Thailand's international relations. According to the MFA's official proclamation, Thailand's status-based foreign policy aims to "increase prestige and honour in the eyes of the international community." In other words, Thailand's long-term strategy will be image-oriented for at least 20 years.

The emphasis on Thailand's notion of 'national independence' has significantly guided this flexible foreign policy. However, the main consensus is that the nation's image of independence and freedom from external interference has remained a source of pride and dignity. Based on the concept of national independence, Thailand would thus bend in whichever direction of the wind, allowing the country to maintain its national independence. By analysing Thai foreign policy over a long time, it becomes clear that the need to maintain

an image of national independence has long been at the core of Thailand's "bamboo bending with the wind" foreign policy.

Thailand's bending with the wind philosophy aims to safeguard the nation's survival. Instead, Thailand flexes its foreign policy to protect its core national value, which is its image as an independent nation. Thailand regards itself as a long-independent nation due to the fact that it is the only Southeast Asian country that has never been conquered. This sense of national pride is ingrained in Thai identity. As components of national identity, Thailand must retain its image of independence to preserve its notion of national sovereignty. Therefore, foreign policy plays a significant role in maintaining the country's image of independence. In relation to the features of 'bamboo' policies, the common perception of Thailand's 'bamboo bending in the wind' nature is based on a security-oriented concept.

The image-driven agenda stated by Thai officials may have been a mask from the inception. With closer analysis, its implications for studying Thai foreign policy might be necessary. A traditional approach to interpreting the characteristics of Thai foreign policy reveals that Thai foreign policy tends to be flexible, adaptive, and adaptable to the changing balance of power and international environment. This approach stresses the attitude of Thai foreign policy studies upholds the primacy of national security and survival in the crude arena of international politics over all other aspects of the policymaking process and descriptive analysis. This so-called "bending with the wind" foreign policy fits well within the neo-realist theory of international relations (IR) and continues to be prevalent among Thai academics.

### **Thai Bilateral Relations Behaviour**

Compared to Thai-China relationships, Thai-U.S. relations appear to have deteriorated significantly. According to (Chachavalpongpun, 2015), the primary cause for the deterioration of the bilateral relationship between Thailand and the U.S. was the country's internal issues (Busbarat, 2016). Specifically, the 2006 military coup d'état ended Thaksin's rule and strained ties between Washington and Bangkok. The anti-Thaksin group accused the U.S. of favouritism in supporting the deposed prime minister and interfering in Thailand's domestic affairs (Kittivorapoom, 2019).

During his administration from 2001 to 2006, Thaksin asserted that his great foreign policy efforts, such as the ACD and the ACMECS, had improved Thailand's international prestige to a new level and helped make it into one of Southeast Asia's leading powers (Chongkittavorn, 2019). Once overthrown, Thaksin's ambitious international strategy was abandoned. Thai diplomacy has been rendered aimless as a result of political instability. Since Thaksin's departure in 2006, Thai foreign policy has become an outflow of the country's ongoing domestic political struggles. The previous regimes of Thaksin and Yingluck associated themselves with populist diplomacy or with the mainstream royalists who advocated a purportedly ethical and nationalistic foreign policy (Regilme, 2018). None of the regimes has shown genuine concern for the national interests of Thailand. Examining the two-overlapping domestic and foreign fields and the legitimisation of foreign policy in the face of political adversaries reveals that foreign policy has been used for domestic gain. Thus, in the instance of Thailand under former Prime Minister Thaksin and current Prime Minister Prayuth, the concept of national interests as the ultimate objective of foreign policy requires significant reconsideration.

The direction of Thai foreign policy under the present administration of Prime Minister Prayuth applies the concepts of multifaceted engagement and convenience engagement to address geopolitical dilemmas at a time when significant powers contend, cooperate, and

interact in conflict (Kongkirati & Kanchoochat, 2018). Domestic affairs and significant geopolitical shifts have threatened Thailand's foreign policy's efficacy.

### **Multifaceted Engagement**

A foreign policy posture was taken following the 2014 coup d'état, when the junta-backed government deployed different approaches to managing the relation with and achieving equilibrium among opposing superpowers, including the U.S., China, Russia, and Europe. As Thailand sought positions to play in the region, it was confronted with an environment characterised by collaboration and conflict among various nations. Multifaceted engagements were defined by "pro, open interactions through several levels and across multiple issue contexts." Equally crucial to interdependence is the purposeful cultivation of cooperative relationships based on mutual understanding (Ba, 2006).

The priority of Thailand's relations with the U.S. is to enhance security and military cooperation. In November 2019, Prayuth, also the defence minister, signed the Joint Vision Statement 2020 with U.S. Defence Secretary Mark T. Esper. The declaration promises collaboration, enhanced interoperability, military modernisation, information sharing, and more training and exercises (U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Thailand, 2020).

With the inauguration of Donald Trump as president, the Thai-U.S. relationship appears to be more problematic. On the one hand, the Trump administration emphasises 'America First,' signalling less involvement with Asia and bringing an end to the Obama administration's pivot to Asia plan. The majority of Asian allies are concerned if their partnerships are qualified. Trump's overall strategy thus far appears damaging to the U.S.'s soft power and might harm the country's image. In contrast, Trump is less concerned with democracy than his democratic predecessor. This can provide the Thai military government greater room to manoeuvre since the Trump administration is unlikely to exert significant pressure on Thailand to return to democracy. Following North Korea's many missile launches during the spring of 2017, Trump began to appreciate the traditional allies in South-East Asia more, as seen by his phone calls to the leaders of Thailand, the Philippines, and Singapore. Additionally, President Trump extended an invitation to Prayut to visit him in Washington, D.C.

In a joint statement issued at the last Trump-Prayuth summit at the White House in early October 2017, Thailand and the U.S. pledged to expand their defence cooperation. The statement underlines Thailand's anticipated more considerable involvement in settling Korean Peninsula and South China Sea tensions. The foundations established by the summit between Trump and Prayuth give a chance for both parties to benefit and improve (T.Office 2017). The Thai government under Prayuth might take advantage of this chance to address important economic and security problems and realign its foreign policy to better balance its interests with those of China and the U.S. It might provide just the reversal the U.S needs for its fragile partnerships in Southeast Asia for the Trump administration.

Even if some progress has been achieved in mending the relationship between these two nations, other strategic obstacles will require more time to overcome. The U.S. continues to be worried about Thailand's close links to China, and Thailand must manage the numerous uncertainties surrounding the Trump administration's Asia strategy. Thailand has thus far remained neutral in the regional battle between China and the U.S., but a regional confrontation might upset this delicate equilibrium. Because Thailand is neither a claimant in the South China Sea disputes nor has it taken a strong stance against China's growing military presence in the region, Thailand's place in the balance of regional influence between the U.S

and China will depend on how each side cultivates opportunities like the Trump-Prayuth summit.

### **Convenience Engagement**

After the 2014 coup, Thailand has grown closer to China in every aspect. Thailand has discovered that it is more flexible in dealing with nations in East Asia than those in the West since the former refrains from negative criticism of Thai domestic politics and focuses only on economic factors. Bangkok views its relations with China as a protective environment for political, economic, and security cooperation.

The Thai junta has determined that the government must leverage China's rise. The Belt and Road Initiative is linked to several development initiatives, including the Eastern Economic Corridor and high-speed railways. Since 2013, China has become Thailand's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade expanding from US\$61 billion in 2013 to US\$77.5 billion in 2019. Bangkok has acquired additional Chinese military hardware in recent years, including the KS-1C missile in 2016, the VT-4 main battle tank in 2017, the S26T submarine in 2017 and armoured vehicles in 2018 (Grebe & Mutschler, 2020). In recent years, military training and exercises with China, such as those under the codename Strike, have expanded, although their effect on Thai military operations remains minimal (Raymond, 2020). The biennial Thai-U.S. Cobra Gold military exercise continues to be Southeast Asia's largest multinational military exercise (Chanlett-avery & Dolven, 2014).

The country's protracted instability determines Thailand's foreign policy towards the U.S. and China. The 2014 coup d'état also influenced the utilitarian approach to Thailand's foreign policy employed. Specifically, the Thai-China friendship grew closer. Beijing was able to handle the situation with greater diplomacy. China attempted to avoid interfering with Thailand's domestic issues. The Thai junta administration much admired Beijing's non-intervention policy. Evident in the February 2015 visit of Chinese Defence Minister Chang Wanquan to Thailand. His Thai colleague complimented him for representing a nation that "would not interfere in Thailand's politics, but will provide political assistance and help preserve connections on all levels" (Pongsudhirak, 2016).

Thailand was deeply affected by the U.S.'s stance. Bangkok felt feelings of isolation and betrayal. As a result of the U.S. disregard for regionalisation efforts in Thailand's security cooperation, China's position within the regional architecture expanded, and its ties with Thailand got solid. Thailand considered security cooperation the foundation upon which the Thai-U.S. relationship was founded. Thailand had received substantial U.S. military support through various programmes, such as the IMET, ILEA, FMF and FMS. In addition, it was reported that forty programmes were undertaken regularly as joint military exercises as part of the security cooperation between these two countries. Cobra Gold, CARAT, and Cope Tiger are examples. In addition, Thailand and the U.S. collaborated extensively through the ILEA to increase their security cooperation in regard to non-traditional threats (Morrison, 2000).

Thailand is the most hesitant of the partners to accept the alliance's effect on its security policy. In contrast, the common notion is that Thailand has maintained its alliance with the U.S. to avoid conflict with the U.S. and that it sees little benefit in giving the alliance a more critical role. While this image is primarily influenced by the fact that Thailand's relationship with China is far more amicable than with the other four alliance members, Thailand has a widespread sense that the United States has not been a wholly loyal partner. Despite its long-standing connections with Thailand, the U.S. has encountered obstacles in its relationship with Thailand, mainly as China has grown economically and militarily closer to Thailand.



Thailand has historically rejected U.S. participation in its domestic security affairs, notably during the decades-long conflict in the south, setting it apart from other allies. The periodic U.S. restrictions put on military-to-military engagement between the two nations and the unwillingness of the U.S. to supply armaments to Thailand in response to military coups have also resulted in a far more constrained relationship between the two allies in terms of security.

Due to a lack of converging interests, the Thai-U.S. defence cooperation has not been maximised for over three decades. Thailand's sometimes criticised domestic political climate frequently lends an air of unpredictability to one of the U.S.'s most vital Southeast Asian security ties. The current strategic environment has posed new difficulties to international standards and rule of law compliance. The U.S. approach reflects Thailand's objective to enhance regional peace, stability, and prosperity. In addition, it seeks to improve relations and collaboration between allies and friends in the economic, security, and social spheres. As a vital defence ally of the U.S. and an active member of ASEAN, Thailand can perform these twin responsibilities to connect the Indian and Pacific seas into one interconnected strategic area and prevent the competition among big powers for regional dominance from degenerating into hegemony.

### **The Competition Between New and Old Government Administrations to Legitimise Their Foreign Policies**

The path of the Thai "bending with the wind" policy from 2000 to 2019, during which political turmoil and China's rising have fundamentally changed Thailand's foreign policy. The military coups and the impaired worth of governments have deteriorated the nation's competitiveness through the misallocation of geopolitical and undermining the country's security cooperation's growth potential. It will be clear from the analysis in this chapter that domestic factors (coup d'état) for the behaviour of the "bend with the wind" policy. Specifically, it examines Thai foreign policy within its bilateral relations with the U.S. and China. The study focuses on whether or not Thailand continues to maintain a "bending with the wind" policy between the U.S. and China to maximise its security interests. It contends that Bangkok has not simply readjusted to become a Chinese ally rather than a U.S. one. (Winichakul, 2016).

Conversely, the latter approach, coined "bending with the wind," is a determined endeavour to maintain independence from any superpower. Despite the appearance of solid alliances with Britain at the end of the 19th century, Japan during World War II, and the U.S. during the Cold War, "Thailand has avoided anything more than ephemeral arrangements with foreign powers" (Kislenko, 2002). However, between 2006 and 2018, Thai-U.S. security relations were in turmoil. This time was marked by numerous government changes in both nations, the relative rise of Chinese dominance in Asia, the intensifying geopolitical competition between China and the U.S. in Southeast Asia, and a sharp escalation of Thai-U.S. tensions followed by a swift reconciliation.

### **National Interest vs Diplomacy Interest**

While the PAD and UDD may employ different strategies, they share a single objective: to overthrow the current administration. This has injected a new element into Thai politics: "mob politics," in which an elected government is obligated to consider the interests of such extra-constitutional entities and even create laws that pander to their demands. Since 2006,

yellow-shirted and red-shirted protestors have organised sporadically violent rallies that have deteriorated Thai politics. Non-state players have negotiated with the administration while attempting to influence the country's foreign policy favouring their political goals and taking advantage of the constant political upheaval.

The connection between contemporary Thailand's domestic and foreign policy spheres is crucial to comprehending the country's foreign policy more than at any other time in Thai history. It is crucial because contemporary political conditions have made room for substantial growth in the number of Thai political players who cross the domestic boundary into the unfamiliar area of international affairs and utilise external concerns as a political weapon to remove their competitors. Moreover, Thailand's extreme polarisation has changed the political arena into a battleground of contending groups' legitimacy. In their quest to bolster their legitimacy, old and new elites have accused one another of engaging in illegitimate or immoral foreign policy.

The open confrontation between two opposing political factions has significantly impacted the Thai government's foreign policy. Political actors, whether in the government or opposition, both state and non-state, have attempted to redefine national interests to fit their political agendas, resulting in strained ties with Thailand's neighbours in certain instances. Considering the Thai situation, it is evident that foreign policy is an inherent part of domestic politics and a beneficial instrument for those competing for political power to legitimise themselves. It also demonstrates that the ongoing search for legitimacy and the periodic re-conceptualisation of foreign policy has disrupted the job of diplomacy, resulting in rising mistrust and even animosity between Thailand and neighbouring governments such as Cambodia and Myanmar. In an effort to earn the favour of the Thai public, opposing political factions formulated divergent sets of foreign policy. Not only have policy practitioners been bewildered by Thailand's ever-changing foreign policy, but so have Thailand's foreign policy partners.

Following Thaksin's departure in 2006, Thai foreign policy has become an offshoot of the country's ongoing domestic political conflicts. The previous four governments and the current Prayuth regime have either aligned with Thaksin and his populist diplomacy or with the conventional royalists who advocate an allegedly ethical and nationalistic foreign policy. None of the regimes has shown genuine concern for the national interests of Thailand. The analysis of the three aspects raised at the outset of this research, the overlapping domestic-foreign domains, the legitimisation of foreign policy in the face of political foes, and the role of non-state actors demonstrates that all political actors involved have devised schemes to exploit foreign policy for domestic advantage. Therefore, in the instance of Thailand, the concept of national interests as the ultimate objective of foreign policy must be reinterpreted.

Since the September 2006 coup, Thailand's preoccupation with complex issues of national governance, political power, social justice, stability, and the viability of democratic institutions has diverted Bangkok's attention from the effective management of foreign policy without diminishing the strategic value of the Thai-U.S. alliance, and without diminishing the solid economic partnership that makes bilateral trade and commerce so vital to both Bangkok and Washington. In the face of conflicting strategic objectives, the future of bilateral military and security cooperation will depend on how efficiently Thailand and the U.S. manage their treaty relationship. The cumulative conflicts and issues that have shaped bilateral defence and security will have to be managed deftly by both sides to ensure a sustained commitment to common goals in a shifting regional and global strategic context. It is unclear how the core institutions of democracy and the Thai monarchy will emerge from the chaotic struggles for

influence and power amongst internal political groups. It appears that the military will continue to be a key, vital, and influential institution; the Thai defence establishment and foreign policy leadership will value their relationship with the U.S.

Thailand, in particular, and Southeast Asia, in general, had tumbled in Washington's list of foreign and defence policy objectives following the military coup d'état and the development of various regional crises and transnational difficulties that had captured the U.S.'s attention. Thai officials believed that the U.S. had been slow to recognise the significance of Southeast Asia in the face of China's rise and negligent in identifying the strategic relevance, growing importance, and adaptability of ASEAN, which, in the minds of some Asians, was well positioned to serve as a link between the two oceans and a bridge between the emerging powers in the region (Hongfang, 2013).

Over time, it has become increasingly difficult to address challenges in defence cooperation and to express the essential aims and principles of the alliance without encountering the misconceptions that have dotted the relationship's environment over the last two decades. This does not imply that Thailand is less significant to the United States or that the bilateral relationship has become distant and irrelevant. Thailand deserves its status as a significant non-NATO ally, as it is plainly prepared to make sacrifices to continue U.S. involvement in the area and join the U.S. and others in fighting the war against terror. In fact, two Thai troops made the supreme sacrifice in Iraq while serving with the coalition, a painful reminder of Thailand's enduring dedication to shared objectives. Despite the fact that the relationship is solid and secure, a component carries the unconcealed wounds of certain difficult times and difficult-to-manage situations that become more challenging to heal with time.

### **Critique of Thailand Foreign Affairs**

Thailand has been praised as a successful model of small-nation diplomacy since it is the only nation in Southeast Asia to have preserved its sovereignty in the face of European and Asian colonial powers. Thailand was the only Southeast Asian nation to escape being conquered by a European power throughout the nineteenth century. The experience in Thailand was unique. Its political status at this time can be partially attributed to Britain's and France's desire for peace and a buffer state separating their territories in Burma, Malaya, and Indochina, as well as to the cunning and leadership skills of the Thai king Chulalongkorn.

If such Thai leaders had not shown great cleverness in diplomacy skills, the outcome of the story would have been different. For Thai to preserve the fundamental foreign policy strategy of protecting independence and reducing outside intervention in internal affairs, a favoured policy option in the past has been to seek to accommodate the dominating countries of the region. Burma was the first country to oppose the British in the nineteenth century, but after being defeated, it was eventually captured by the British. Thailand quickly realised that it needed to exercise caution while working with Western nations as a result of Burma's experience serving as a lesson to Thailand. Thailand was forced to adopt the policy of accommodation when faced with European expansion in Southeast Asia. Thailand has had the most successful foreign policy in Southeast Asia from 1855 to the present. Direct colonisation, devastation from World War II, retaliation for being on the losing side in the Second Indochina War (1959–75), and the potential for Vietnam's control of Cambodia (1978–1991) to turn into a permanent occupation were all prevented by Thai diplomacy skills.

Thai flexible diplomacy is currently being modified to take into account China's rise while keeping Thailand's military security agreement with a less close-knit U.S. Thus,

Thailand's accommodative behaviour throughout the nineteenth century, often known as the "bend with the wind" foreign policy strategy, was not without difficulty. In an endeavour to protect the core interest of the country that makes up modern-day Thailand, Thailand did lose a sizable portion of its territories to Britain and France. Thailand bent but did not break like bamboo. Thailand was the first nation in Asia to successfully adopt a neutralist policy after 1910. Thailand has enhanced its national interests during the past 200 years despite being a weak military and economy. Through flexible diplomacy, it has succeeded in making many significant emerging nations believe that Thailand is supporting them, whereas, in reality, Thailand has always maintained diplomatic ties with the opposing coalition of states. Thailand always strikes a balance rather than fully committing to any growing power or coalition, and in the twenty-first century, this is precisely what Thailand has been doing with the U.S. and China. The U.S. today may be misled into thinking that Bangkok is supporting Beijing. Thailand must rely on its intelligence to contend with China's rise while still cultivating the U.S. to see if the U.S. would stay in the game, given that it is a small and militarily weak country.

Numerous significant events between 2006 and 2014 relate to major changes in Thailand. There have been growing worries about the beginning of a significant economic downturn in the U.S. and, more conservatively, a complete global economic collapse since the unexpected onset of the global financial crisis in 2008. The Asia-Pacific region's great powers have experienced substantial pressures that have led them to re-evaluate their approaches globally. The switchover of leadership from Bush to Obama marked a significant turning point for the U.S. This was done in the face of criticism primarily sparked by the global financial crisis, increased political anxiety over Asia Pacific geopolitical instability, and domestic criticism of the U.S.'s failed Middle East strategies. China confidently advanced massive, ambitious initiatives, including the enormous transcontinental Silk Roads project and more than ten billion dollars worth of soft power promotion projects. Rising international pressure and domestic demand urged the U.S. to take more action than announce its pivot to Asia. The same year, the ASEAN formally approved the region's plans to create a political-economic sociocultural community, with Thailand as a critical component.

The tremendous shifts in global power in the 21st century, particularly the U.S.-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific, elevate theoretical and empirical questions that significantly impact the global order (Huda et al., 2022). Thailand, a small power nation, was impacted by the phenomenon. The critic how and in what ways the Thai government, led by Prayuth, has pursued the adaptable strategy that has helped Thailand survive amid the competition of major powers, the U.S. and China, from 2014 to the present. Thailand's ability to maintain the right balance and constructive relations with all of the superpowers and continue its success in surviving the global power evolution will be put to the test by the rise of China in the 21st century. According to the flexible foreign policy, the "bending with the wind" diplomacy practised by Thailand is a point of criticism when it comes to foreign policy administration. One explanation for this is the policy's remarkable flexibility, which enables a nation to change the flows per its national interests. Thailand is geographically and economically vital to the region as well as the world due to its central location in Southeast Asia. The "Bamboo Strategy," Thailand's long-standing foreign policy, may or not be able to enable Thailand to endure and maintain itself in the face of the influence of the big countries. Thailand must form a robust strategy that will strengthen its competitive advantage while safeguarding the interests of the country. As time went on, Thailand faced more challenges in keeping up its unique foreign policy flexibility. The world's political and economic landscape has changed due to China's ascent, particularly in the Indo-Pacific area.

Under Prayuth, maintaining the balance of power in the region is a foreign policy goal involving numerous players for both military and economic cooperation. It opened up economically to China, strengthened military cooperation, and maintained strong enough military relations with the U.S. to keep both countries in line. Prayuth's other foreign policy focused on the neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia and restored Thailand's status as the ASEAN community's "economic leader" to drive the neighbouring nations' development levels. Last but not least, Thailand saw the Eastern Economic Corridor as a way to entice investment from EU nations and East Asia like Japan (Huda, 2018). This has proven to be an effective counterbalance against China's rising regional influence and is a significant indicator of the use of the flexible diplomacy strategy. These fundamental tenets demonstrate that Thailand's current junta-turned-democratic administration, Prayuth, is pursuing a multifaceted foreign flexible strategy. It seeks to cooperate with several nations simultaneously while not giving any one nation undue influence. It also establishes its footprint through a regional alliance with other nations through an economic-driven foreign policy. To effectively adopt favourable policies to maintain the flexible diplomacy strategy, policymakers must have insights into historical and present relations with global powers like the U.S. and China.

With China's ascendance in Southeast Asia, Thailand's alignment orientation has not changed significantly. Thailand views it as an opportunity rather than a threat. Thailand is, therefore, neither balancing nor band-wagoning China. Thai foreign policy outlooks at a balanced approach to avoid taking a stance in the U.S.-China rivalry (Huda et al., 2022). It is perceived as diversifying and securing relations in times of increased uncertainty rather than giving up its long-standing alliance with the U.S. This is done to avoid involvement in the South China Sea conflict and to reduce tensions. Although Thailand's foreign policy has been referred to by many different names over the years, including bamboo diplomacy and complex engagement, its core principles remain the same even in the twenty-first century: engagement with numerous states at various levels and to various degrees to take advantage of all the opportunities and keep conflicts at a distance. The leading regional players view Thailand as a method of providing them with a secure presence in the region through forging stronger regional partnerships. Following the coup in 2014, Thailand adopted a foreign policy stance that called for the nation to preserve and balance its ties with the competing superpowers, particularly the U.S. and China. It was a cooperative strategy with a mutual understanding of numerous common concerns across nations and interdependence at its foundation.

However, there were concurrent occurrences involving cooperation and conflict among the nations with which Thailand attempted to maintain balanced relations, which made it difficult for Thailand to pursue its objectives under its evolved foreign policy. Thailand had decided to switch from a more diplomatic approach to a more hedging stance due to the problems between these countries and Thailand's economic interests. In light of this, Thailand has chosen to pursue a foreign policy of "multifaceted engagement" in its relations with the U.S. and a "convenience engagement" with China. The former relationship focuses on obtaining military security, while the latter focuses on achieving economic benefits given China's rise. As a result, these changes required Thailand to shift its foreign policy from its bamboo strategy, which mainly focused on Thailand's need to live, which was only made possible because of Thailand's close ties to the U.S. during that time.

The altering altitude of global politics has changed Thailand's foreign policy approach to other nations, particularly the rival powers of the twenty-first century, the U.S. and China. Post military coup in 2014 and the shifting global dynamics, particularly the U.S.-China rivalry,

which has been a hotly debated issue for the past years, the Thai government flew with the wind and adopted a foreign policy that was more in line with its relations with the U.S. Instead of selecting a side in the rising of China. The Thai government has embraced a strategy that will advance Thailand's economic interests. Thailand has also been able to capitalise on its economic growth and cooperation, purely economic relations with China. The Trump administration has not demonstrated that the anti-democratic tendencies of the Thai regime are a barrier to offering support for the two countries' close military cooperation. The 2014 coup weakened Thai-U.S. relations, but the pressure persisted since Thailand intended to lessen its military cooperation with China in order to balance its policies toward the two nations.

The most recent foreign policy literature argued that Thailand favours hedging rather than balancing with its international alliances. The U.S. and China put their bets in terms of trade and security, but Thailand also pursued its foreign policy toward other important players like Japan, India, and Southeast Asia. Thailand's foreign policy changed when Prayuth took charge of the Junta and won the 2019 national elections. Thailand had previously used a strategy known as "bamboo diplomacy." When a state practises bamboo diplomacy, its main objective is survival, and it makes decisions based on where the wind is most favourably blowing. It was distinct from the recently implemented balancing method. The idea of a flexible strategy is a type of alignment strategy utilised by one state towards other states by combining confrontation and collaboration; to put it another way, an alignment strategy is not focused on a single policy but rather a combination of many more. Thailand's government has not formally acknowledged the status of being a middle power, but a number of studies have found that it is one, along with Laos and Indonesia, which are between superpowers and small powers.

Prayuth marked a turning point for Thailand. Whereas the military coup's leader in 2014 aided in the country's foreign policy transition from bamboo diplomacy to hedging strategy, strengthening relations with China, a mighty economic power with the position of superpower, and assisting in the country's emergence as a middle power. Furthermore, the country has benefited from the hedging strategy because the policy has changed its primary emphasis to economic prosperity and less reliance on Western governments. Thailand's balancing act was successful because of its strong economic ties to China and its close military ties to the U.S. To comprehend the causes of Thailand's apparent movement toward China without comprehending the shift from U.S. dominance to a multi-polar Asia in the international system, the U.S. and China are actively contending for hegemony in Asia. Countries like Thailand and other Southeast Asian nations now have more freedom of movement thanks to the existence of this competition.

The U.S. should not be surprised when Thailand tries to maximise their national outcomes in the more competitive international system since a multi-polar world is more fluid, competitive, and perhaps more catastrophic. Thailand does not even "belong" to any side. Instead, Thailand wants to further its interests and dignity. The U.S.'s response to Thailand purchasing weapons from China has grown negative. Given that U.S. and China are engaged in a growing multi-polar geopolitical rivalry in Southeast Asia, this should not come as a surprise (Huda et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the Trump administration has offered additional financial and military assistance to revive Thai-U.S. relations. Presently, Thailand collaborates on security cooperation with the U.S., China, and other nations. In addition, Thailand's government type, "democracy versus dictatorship", is not correlated with its level of ties to the U.S. or China.

Some dictatorships in Thai history, like Prayuth, were more closely aligned with China, whilst elected Thai government Thaksin were more closely aligned with the U.S. According to Thai foreign policy's historical course, it may involve more attempts in the future to strike a balance between major powers, unless like in the past, a perceived national security crisis forces elite decision-makers to forge closer ties with one great power over another. At the same time, the U.S. and China will be more and more compelled to use "carrots" as opposed to "sticks" to persuade Thailand to embrace specific policy stances; merely cutting off aid would probably drive Thailand in the direction of the opposing superpower.

### **Analysis and Finding**

Diverse actors and causes have influenced Thailand's foreign policy over time, sometimes offering possibilities and other times imposing constraints on the monarchy. Since 1851, the number of elites influencing foreign policy has increased with time, from only the palace to including civilian and military officials, junta, and eventually elected politicians. As a country that has never been colonised, Thailand's foreign policy has tended to be a function of maximising the goals of a Thai "royalist-nationalist" narrative, but also to some extent allying with external great powers when they wield significant influence in Southeast Asia. Each objective complements the other. Royalist-nationalist discourse (*rachachatniyom*) regards the Thai monarchy as the hero, guide, saviour, preserver, and even apex of Thai nationalism and identity.

In contrast, the latter approach, called "bend with the wind," is a concerted endeavour to maintain independence from any superpower. Thus, despite the appearance of strong alliances with Britain at the end of the 19th century, Japan during World War II, and the United States during the Cold War, Thailand has avoided anything more than transitory partnerships with foreign powers. However, between 2001 and 2020, Thai-U.S. security relations were in upheaval. This time was marked by numerous government changes in both nations, the relative rise of China's dominance in Asia, the intensifying geopolitical competition between China and the U.S. in Southeast Asia, and a sharp escalation of Thai-U.S. tensions followed by a swift thaw.

Thailand is gratified with its diplomatic prowess, which has assisted the nation in navigating the obstacles. During the Second World War, Japan viewed Thailand as a critical strategic entrance for their expansion into Southern China and Burma. History developed the new narrative of "bending with the wind diplomacy" in the early 1970s. This emergent narrative marked a break with the dominant anti-communism discourse. Throughout the Cold War, Thailand played a critical role in stopping the expansion of Vietnamese supremacy into continental Southeast Asia. Thanat Khoman, the creator of ASEAN, described Thailand's role in mediating the dispute between Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

In reality, Thailand saw its nineteen successful military coup d'états until 2014, which deposed Yingluck's elected government. The coup's leaders subsequently established a junta, the NCPO, which was commanded by Army Chief Gen. Prayuth Chan-o-cha and stayed in power until the present, although in the shape of a junta-created political party atop a ruling coalition. This chapter will conclude the Research Project by revisiting the problem statement and research questions posed in Chapter 1 and offering some recommendations for future researchers who may want to expand on this topic after considering the data and arguments made in the earlier chapters.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, due to the absence of political stability and changing in the democratic government, Thailand's foreign policy has neglected its consistent diplomatic conduct. Thailand has proved throughout its history its capacity to bend and switch sides without undue consideration for its historical ties to other nations. A historical relationship appears to be less significant to consider. As long as Thailand remains on the winning side, enemies and allies are interchangeable. From the time of King Chulalongkorn to the present, Thailand's foreign policy has been able to adopt a flexible stance toward any government that serves to preserve Thailand's national independence due to the country's broad political orientation and ability to quickly switch allegiances.

Thailand is preoccupied with domestic political issues and power battles. It is experiencing a metamorphosis that has begun to yield new places in the political system for a broader range of interest groups, a continuing generational shift in leadership, and new norms for conducting politics within this evolving framework. In response to substantial public displays of political activity, the military has abandoned its traditional and well-established "protect the kingdom" reasoning in favour of a forceful, reactionary position. The defence establishment and foreign policy tools are weighing new security options, agreeing to increased proximity to China via naval and military joint training and pursuing military assets, and seeking a central role in the emergence of a new regional architecture, a more active and strategically significant ASEAN.

Due to their competition, Thailand has become one of the battlegrounds between the U.S. and China. Due to the fact that both antagonistic nations have taken unique strategies and intend to preserve their influence in the region, Beijing may utilise its soft skills to consolidate its power and become the regional hegemon while competing with the U.S. In truth, China's development has increased its sway over its neighbours, notably Thailand, which was formerly dominated by U.S. interests. Since competition between the two competitors has risen, it has become increasingly important for the U.S. and China to retain strong ties with Thailand. Both nations recognise Thailand's strategic significance for achieving their geopolitical dominance objectives in the framework of a power struggle. Thailand is a significant commercial and business partner for the U.S. and a key source of military positions in the Asia-Pacific region. In addition, Thailand serves as the regional headquarters for around fifty U.S. federal agencies whose activities include infectious disease research, healthcare services, and law enforcement training. Thailand has a crucial role in what is becoming a form of great game in mainland Southeast Asia, including the growth of U.S. partners and strategic alliances.

In addition, as part of its eastern and southern rim effort, China recognises Thailand's strategic significance. Thailand has been acutely aware of its position between the U.S. and China during the conflict between the two adversarial superpowers. To protect Thai's interests and guarantee its safety, it has attempted to establish a balance between the two countries by utilising a pragmatic and adaptive policy approach, which is frequently referred to as "bending with the wind." This strategy helps Thailand to maintain its good relationships with a number of world powers without fear of losing their trust or advantages. In other words, Southeast Asia nations, such as Thailand, frequently hedge against such a catastrophe. Thailand has maintained its links in a flexible and pragmatic manner by maintaining its engagements with China and the U.S. in order to offset China's influence.



## Recommendation

Neoclassical realism offers a comprehensive framework for analysing how nations conduct their foreign policy. It is underspecified for practical research, particularly in how leaders' beliefs affect their conduct, how society evaluate them, and which domestic conditions influence them, because it is a broad theoretical framework. According to neoclassical realists, governments try to utilise their power to alter the international order in favour of their own preferences and aims rather than having security as their only concern. As a result, more strong states will implement more extensive foreign policies.

However, elements at the unit level are equally important; they include state structure and the behaviour, which reflect world politics and shape reactions. Neoclassical realists therefore aim to comprehend how systemic dynamics and unit-level variables like domestic political institutions behaviour and the perceptions of decision-makers affect a nation's foreign policy. Thailand has demonstrated its adaptability and has sought a large number of relations with different states. The research concludes that Thailand has adopted a "bamboo bending with the wind" foreign strategy since the reign of King Chulalongkorn, and it continues under the leadership of Prime Minister Prayuth.

Like a bamboo plant, the policy has been regarded as pragmatic and adaptive. This behaviour has been repeated to such an extent that many academics believe it to be a fundamental and unique component of Thai foreign policy. Due to the absence of a political stability, Thailand conducts its foreign policy based on shifting situations rather than adhering to a consistent political conduct. Since competition between the two competitors has risen, it has become increasingly crucial for the U.S. and China to retain ties with Thailand. Both nations recognise Thailand's strategic significance for achieving their geopolitical dominance objectives in the framework of a power struggle. During the conflict between the two adversarial nations,

Thailand has been acutely aware of its position between the U.S. and China. To protect its interests and guarantee its safety, it has attempted to establish a balance between the two countries by utilising a pragmatic and adaptive policy approach, frequently referred to as "bending with the wind." This method helps Thailand maintain good relationships with several superpowers without fear of losing their trust or advantages.

The findings of this research are not exhaustive and future researchers interested in the Thailand foreign policy towards superpower can explore further into the role of international and regional state and non-state actor organizations. How can ASEAN contribute or play a role in Thailand's continued reforms and benefit from its development? Another question that is worth exploring is does "Thailand, turning Indochina from a battlefield to marketplace" policy remerged with China?

Thais cherish the security cooperation with the U.S., but feel that Washington's interest in Thailand's security is diminishing. They recognise that the U.S. receives the benefits of access and training opportunities and realise that Washington has a tendency to take the relationship for granted. In situations when Washington and Bangkok do not have a shared interest or where Thailand does not see its defence interests to be at risk, it has grown more difficult to convince Thailand to back U.S. policies. Thailand does not feel obliged to necessarily support U.S. stances on regional and global crises and to make contributions to international peacekeeping operations at the level the U.S. deems suitable.

What kind of actions could drive bilateral defence cooperation beyond its existing limitations and set a path for military and security engagement that both sides could embrace? Thailand must keep emphasising the strength, resiliency, and adaptability to renew

original partnership, which centred on interoperability, facility access, and joint and combined training, despite the understanding by both nations of the need to shift resources to confront regional threats and non-traditional issues like as the COVID-19 pandemic and humanitarian crises, and challenges derive from maritime claims in neighbouring countries. The task will be to find aspects of the bilateral relationship that may serve as a solid foundation for both the continuation of bilateral cooperation and the expansion of regional security and defence consciousness.

Initiatives to restore normal Thai-U.S. defence and security engagement, intensify the constructive partnerships, and preserve focus to capacity building resulted in the context of lessening perseverance in bilateral military cooperation, Thai frustration over Washington's inattention, and a growing Thai perception that its own strategic interests would be better served by foreign and defence relations with a variety of countries other than the U.S. The objective is to "renew" bilateral military exchanges, highlight multilateral cooperation in maritime security, sustain counterterrorism collaboration, promote Thai military modernisation, and strengthen Thailand's humanitarian aid and disaster response capacities.

Thailand feels it is a major actor with whom the U.S. may gain big strategic benefits in the region. The Thais have endeavoured to make it apparent that they have something to offer and welcome U.S. support and "capacity development" activities. However, Thailand must be viewed as a regionally relevant nation with the potential to make substantial contributions to the goal of a peaceful, integrated, economically viable Southeast Asia that is increasingly capable of addressing emerging military and security issues.

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