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Master's Thesis of International Studies

**Thailand's Diplomatic Dance in
the midst of US-China rivalry**

미중경쟁 사이에서 조화를 이루는 태국의 외교의 고

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Thailand's Diplomatic Dance in the midst of US-China rivalry

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Abstract

It has always been challenging for any small state to conduct foreign policy in a time of great power rivalry. Diplomacy in this regard is a necessary element in countering balance with any relations between nation and nation. It is foreign policy and diplomacy that creates international affairs through negotiations which may include the way to prevent major wars and violence. Hence, a state practices a good foreign policy can ensure peace and prosperity among their people. Above all these major functions, another important aspect of foreign policy is that state can establish themselves through this element; it is how other see them, therefore, justify the quality and survival instinct of that state. The purpose of this research is to analyze how Thailand has used its flexibility and pragmatism policy to balance its relationship with the United States and China in the 21st century, especially, US-China rivalry. Strategic and security considerations play important roles in maintaining a bilateral relationship. Thailand's diplomatic relation viewed by many scholars, however, have faced a difficult time bearing its tradition of 'bending with the wind'. While in the last decade, China's rise marked a concern of its influence spread

throughout Southeast Asia and the globe. The United States, on the partnership aspect, has seemed to minimize their actions of strengthening its alliance with Thailand. This led many studies to a belief that Thailand as a key strategic partner is now shifting more on China's side. To unpack this conventional debate, a critical analysis of the diplomatic relations between Thailand-US-China will be discussed through case studies.

[Keyword]: Thai foreign policy, Thai-China bilateral relationship, Thai-US partnership relations, China's rise, 'bamboo bending with the wind'

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Abbreviations

ASEAN - Association of Southeast Asian Nations

DA- Development Assistance

ESF - Economic Support Funds

FMF - Foreign Military Sales Financing

GH - Global Health

IMET - International Military Education and Training

INCLE - International Narcotics and Law Enforcement

NADR - Nonproliferation, Anti-Terrorism (Raymond 2017)

BRI – Belt and Road Initiative

NCPO - the National Council for Peace and Order

TPP – the Trans-Pacific Partnership

Chapter I

Introduction

1.1. Research Background

For over centuries, Thailand's diplomacy has always been a master in the pursuit of strategic independence and balancing with great powers to avoid dominance (Raymond 2017). Throughout history, Thailand's foreign policy was often regarded as a nation that could 'bend with the wind'. Because of the resulting "the only country in Southeast Asia never to have been colonized", it has led many scholars to question how Thailand's foreign policy reflects a great strategy of balancing with great powers while at the same time, carefully guard its independence. Many studies mentioned Thailand's diplomatic policy as according to the "bamboo bending with the wind analogy; always solidly rooted, but flexible enough to bend whichever way the wind blows to survive."¹ This notion may as well be explained as a corresponding of a small state where such an international relation approach exists to assure the state's goal of survival in an anarchical world.

¹ William J. Klausner, Reflections on Thai Culture (Bangkok: Siam Society 1981), 79- 80.

As a country that sits in a heart of Southeast Asia mainland, Thailand (formerly known as Siam) shares a border with Burma, Malaysia, Cambodia, and Laos. In the 19th century, Siam was an open gate for equal trade and other accommodations. Despite having the most diverse economy in the region, Siam has an advantage in trading goods and commercials, especially, rice.² To some, Siam was one of the world's largest exporters of rice and rubber in that period. History has shown that Siamese was always exercising a mutual relationship with foreign neighboring countries and accepting foreign cultures to help modernize the country. Among the benefit that they gain from these were including military cooperation, trading goods, and commercials. In the time of the Franco-British rivalry, Britain colonized Malaya to the South and Burma to the West, while France enjoys dominating Indochina (Cambodia, Vietnam and, Laos) to the east³. During this time, much of Southeast Asia countries had to endure colonial rule. This was an exceptional case for Thai. Unlike other surrounding countries, the relationships were much more complicated.

² At a conservative rice consumption estimate of 110 Kilograms of clean rice per capita a year, the average total rice export of Burma, Siam, and Cochinchina 1902-1911 could feed a maximum of 35 million people.

³ Thailand: Southeast Asia's Buffer Country, How Thailand avoided European colonization (November 18,2017). The Globalist, retrieved it from :

<https://www.theglobalist.com/thailand-southeast-asias-buffer-country/>

In terms of the boundary dispute, neither the British nor the French wants to lose their part of the colonies. Though many complications, the British and French never give up on trying to exert their influence over Siam while most of the attempts were unsuccessful overall. Although, the Anglo-French Declaration of January 1896 limited Siam's sovereignty to fully command its absolute power in some areas, but it also allowed Siam to act as a buffer zone; ensuring Britain and France would not pose a threat against each other and therefore guarding Siam against other foreign interventions.⁴ By reviewing past documents in England and France, the question of how Siam maintain its independence during the interval between 1883 and 1904 did not have the proper answer to the question.

To some extent, this might be the first clue where the bamboo bending with the wind started to appear in Thai diplomacy. Surrounding by large enemies in World War II, the situation forced Thailand to demonstrate similar diplomacy to maintain its survival goal. Given that the absolute monarchy had ended in 1932, eight years later the country was renamed Thailand.

⁴ Goldman, Minton F. "Franco-British Rivalry over Siam, 1896–1904." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies (Singapore)*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1972, pp. 210–228.

During this time, much of Thailand's decision shaped by the Phibun government (Luang Phibunsongkhram (1938-44, 1948-57)⁵ who is favored fascist military rules like Japan and German. His ultimate goal was to create *sang chat*; a new nation. In the middle of World war, he agreed to sign a military alliance with Tokyo and declared war on Britain and the United States⁶.

As a result of the split between Phibun's government and the Free Thai movement (*the Seri Thai*), the United States has a different view on Thai government and did not see Phibun's government as an official government, instead, supporting *the Seri Thai*. In the end, the United States denied Phibun's action in the declaration of war, therefore, Thailand did not count as an enemy side for the U.S.

⁵ Luang Phibunsongkhram known as Marshal P., often refer to Phibun in the West, he served as the Prime Minister of Thailand and dictator from 1938 to 1944 and 1948 to 1957.

⁶ Thai declaration of war was caught up with many controversies. On December 7, 1941, Japanese ambassador informed Thai government about declaration of war against the United States and formally request the transit for Japanese troops in Indochina. Phibun was absented at the time. Instead, the foreign minister, Direk jayanama, refused the Japanese request. Upon this rejection, many Japanese already attacked several Thai military positions. The more confusion is that British forces also tried to stop the Japanese that were crossing into Thailand and Thai end up fighting both countries' armies. When Phibun came back to the capital, he reversed Direk's request and allowed the Japanese request for transit. See more at Edward Bruce Reynolds, *Thailand and Japan's Southern Advance, 1940-1945* (New York: St Martin's 1994), Kislenco, Arne. "Bending with the Wind: The Continuity and Flexibility of Thai Foreign Policy." *International Journal* (Toronto) 57, no. 4 (2002): 537. P540-541

Despite many negative effects to find the 'right' module for a country, such a crisis allows the foreign policy to be flexible and to some extent cause a very tricky action in the time of world war. Interestingly enough, Thailand managed to pose convincing agreements with both Axis and Allies (Phi bun's government on the Axis) and the Seri Thai on the Allies), as if anyone can picture diplomacy that dances along with whichever side wins. After the Allies achieved victory in world war II, Thai-US relations grew strong. With the rise of communist powers continued to spread through the Asian continent, Thailand was selected to be one of the anti-communist bastions for the U.S. and even established a military base⁷

At present, the ongoing trade conflict between China and the United States raised great concern among many countries around the world. Particularly in Southeast Asia, ASEAN member states are under high pressure due to the arrival of great power rivalry in their region.⁸ Many studies have focused on the negative effect on the overall global economy as well as the impact that could degrade the change in

⁷ Fineman, Daniel. *A Special Relationship: The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947-1958* / Daniel Fineman., 1997.

⁸ Han, Enze. "Under the Shadow of China-US Competition: Myanmar and Thailand's Alignment Choices." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 11, no. 1 (2018): 81-104.

relationship with other states. Many experts in Southeast Asia have noted that each state is dealing with the situation differently. Indonesia despite encountering several threat from China in the South China Sea, it does not entirely move closer to the United States nor support the plan of military rebalance to Asia. For better or worse, Indonesia remain its foreign policy as being independent but active foreign policy.⁹

Meanwhile, Singapore is ensuring that it can support both great powers when needed ; a balancing act between the U.S. and China rather than drawing closer to either side.¹⁰ In Thailand's case, history records have shown us that whenever two or more rising powers are conflicting with each other and, have, therefore, tried to pose a threat to a country, it is a crucial means for Thais to demonstrate policies that are flexible and can ensure the stability of its relations among these powers.

In the past century, the United States and China have always secured a long partnership with Thailand both economically and politically. With the rise of China and Trump's 'American First Policy' came great concern among many Southeast

⁹ Rizal Sukma, "Indonesia and the Emerging Sino-US Rivalry in Southeast Asia," *The New Geopolitics of Southeast Asia*, LSE IDEAS SR015 (November 2012), pp. 42-46..

¹⁰ Lim, Darren J, and Cooper, Zack. "Reassessing Hedging: The Logic of Alignment in East Asia." *Security Studies* 24, no. 4 (2015): 696-727.

Asia countries. The overall impact of the current trade war, however, had led to some degrees that could negatively affect the relationship in the long-term.

How the current US-China conflict could change the dynamic relationship between Thai, China, and the United States? Answering this question requires careful research on a subject. As previously mentioned, what makes the Thai case interesting is that, despite the ongoing tension between the two great powers, Thai neither picking a side nor distancing itself away from the situation, instead, it continues to maintain a mutual relationship with both states. Although, some scholars begin to question whether the US-China trade disputes could lead to Thai foreign policy in a new direction. The fact that Thai has been close to China historically, religiously, and economically, it can be implied that Thai would try to strengthen the relationship more on China's side. Thus, the Belt and Road initiative (BRI) and military assistance are more appeals to Thailand in recent periods.

The U.S.-Thai diplomatic relation, however, is also showing clear signs of improvement in recent years despite its downgraded relations during the military coup in 2014. As one of the oldest allies since the established relation in 1818, Thai and the United States always accompany each other, helping each other and support one another when needed. For this aspect, it is fair to say that Thailand was one of

important allies the United States had in Southeast Asia. During the Vietnam war, for example, nearly 11,000 Thais of the country's armed forces, served in Vietnam. The bilateral relationship of Thai and the U.S. has always been in a good term despite some downgraded relations in a certain period. Above mentioned, Thailand's relationship with US-China only tend to create more complication and confusion.

1.2 Research Purpose and Research Questions

This thesis paper examines how Thailand's foreign policy continued to maintain its reputation of being flexible and pragmatic whenever two conflictual powers are rising. I hypothesize that the distinct feature of Thai diplomacy skill especially on military cooperation and partnership constantly allows Thailand to play a role with both conflictual powers and not to be heavily drawn by neither of the two countries' power influences. Thus, I will also try to shed some light on the internal politics that may also have been rooted in the structure of Thai diplomacy skills.

The main purpose of this thesis is to provide a critical analysis of Thailand's diplomatic strategy toward great powers by respectively look through past case studies of bilateral relationships with the US and China. In doing so, the following literature reviews will be discussed upon significant studies such as historian papers, past critical analysis studies relevant to the topic. The next chapter will cover the

diplomatic relationship with US-China individually. The main analysis content will be based on the 44-45th US presidency, President Donald Trump, and President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China. In the final chapter, it will analyze whether the changes in Thailand's political dynamic and political crisis can cause an impact on conducting foreign policy. Last but not least, it will briefly conclude with the finding and then, provides limitations of this research.

In addition to this, the paper will give a critical analysis mainly on three criteria: Military cooperation and partnership, Economic relationship and, Thailand internal political imbalance and crisis. In short, the research will try to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the key strategies that allow Thailand to maintain a diplomatic relationship with CHINA-US in a time of great power rivalry?
- 2) Why the complexity of Thai politics could help shape foreign policy to serve national interest?

Chapter II

Literature Review

2.1 Discourse on Thailand diplomatic policy

Earlier research in Thailand's diplomatic policy has examined how Thai diplomacy relied upon two principal goals. First, it is commonly known that small and medium states would try their best to avoid conflict with major powers. Second, any external tension that could affect the country's sovereignty and nationality security will be carefully maintained through foreign policy.¹¹ While this could simply be related to a small state's behavior trying to survive in the international system.¹² Within this context, Keohane(2012) once mentioned that small states can never act alone if they want to create a significant impact on the system. This is partially true considering certain factors that small states need to rely on great powers. If they are not careful in interfering with great power rivalry, there is a high

¹¹ Busbarat, Pongphisoot. "Bamboo Swirling in the Wind": Thailand's Foreign Policy Imbalance between China and the United States." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 38, no. 2 (2016): 233-57.

¹² Waltz, Kenneth Neal. *Theory of International Politics* / Kenneth N. Waltz., 1979, p126

possibility of the state's losing its national sovereignty and in the worst case, negatively affect the whole system of that country. This is perhaps one of many reasons why countries in Southeast Asia have a difficult time in selecting the appropriate policy to adapt to great powers' influences. However, adapting does not necessarily mean to 'bend' but rather choosing what is best for their national interest which sometimes means relying on one side or avoid becoming close to neither side. Among Southeast Asian states, considering the complexity, and in some sense unique skill of diplomacy, Thailand was no doubt a number one of the lists. Yet, not to be distinguished from other small states, Thai foreign policy behavior as described by Corrine, to fulfill national interests and minimize threats. The key survival of the small state is implementing reacting and passive policy, the country then chooses whether to bandwagon or balancing with great powers depending on the circumstances.¹³

¹³ Corrine, P. (1999). Thailand's Foreign Policies: The Four Decades After the Second World War (1945-1989).

Define the concept of a diplomatic dance

Why studying diplomatic relationships matter for the small state? To fully answer the question, we must first understand what diplomacy means to the international system. To preface, the definition of 'diplomacy' does not convey a fixed concept, but it can be closely related to the following quotations:

It is "the management of international relations by negotiations, the method by which these relations are adjusted and managed by ambassadors and envoys, the business or the art of the diplomat." (Nicholson,1963:4-5).¹⁴

And more extensively,

It is the application of intelligence and tact to the conduct of official relations between the Government of independent States, extending sometimes also

¹⁴ In the Oxford English Dictionary, Diplomacy mean 1. "The management of international relations by negotiation" 2. "The diplomatic body," and 3. "Skill or address in the management of relations of any kind; artful management in dealing with others." And 4. "Diplomatic," a usage stated to be rare.

to their relations with vassal States; or more briefly still, the conduct of business between states by peaceful means. (Satow 1979: 1).

Many scholars have defined the term. The highlight meaning lied in the heart of conducting foreign policy, diplomacy is the element of methods and techniques that help to make foreign policy work more productively. To this end, foreign policy and diplomacy accompany each other to reach certain goals.¹⁵ More to the point, diplomacy is different from foreign policy. To avoid mistaking the meaning; clarifying both meanings is necessary. Foreign policy has its highest goals to perceive what is best for national interests as Sir Harold Nicholson indicated that “Foreign policy is based on a general conception of national requirements”. It consists of strategic plans to use with other countries while diplomacy is more like “the art of relating states to each other by agreement rather than by the exercise of force.”¹⁶ The main reason why diplomacy and foreign policy matter in the international system is because it is how others recognize you. It is how state show

¹⁵ "International Politics: Concepts, Theories and Issues. 2nd Edition." 2018, no. 13 (2018): ProtoView, 2018-03-01, Vol.2018 (13).

¹⁶ Kissinger, Henry. *A World Restored : Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace, 1812-22* / Henry Kissinger. 2017.

off what they have and how they send a message saying they are a part of the system, and what they do matter. A good diplomat who carries smart policy can save his country in the time of the most despair. In the anarchical world, the international environment depicts the direction of foreign policy for most states. Likewise, surviving is no doubt the most important objective for a small state. By making an appearance on the international stage, others then recognize its existence.

Then, why choosing ‘Diplomatic Dance’ in Thailand? the word ‘dance’ in this category is a metaphor that the author believes illustrates the best picture of how Thai’s foreign policy and diplomacy conduct throughout the whole history. Dancing is a purely physiological action in its origin, dance by its definition is an art form of movement rhythmically. The movement sometimes expressing feelings, releasing energy and behind every dance movement, it symbolizes the important meaning in its way. In the same way, Thailand's foreign policy tends to depict best with this word.

The historical legacy of Thailand diplomatic relation

The Thais have held an impression of a long-standing mutual relationship with external powers, if not admiration, for its diplomatic skill that values flexibility and pragmatism. As many researchers believed that the traditional culture of bending with the wind was deeply constructed within the system. (Klausner 1981; Kislenco 2012). To begin with historical legacy, it is important to note the skill of diplomacy is deliberated from the absolute monarchy era to the constitutional monarchy era (Thai modern-day). This meant that the technique of conducting flexible policy has been practicing from the old day to the very present-day despite many changes in the political system. By reviewing Thai historical papers, it became clear that much of the writing has indicated the importance of diplomatic relations with foreign powers. It is not wrong to say that foreign policy was the most important factor to secure the peace and prosperity of the country in the old era. One example of this is the royal letter written by the monarchy of Thailand (King Mongkut) in sending diplomats over British and French during his rule. The important part of the letter translated as following:¹⁷

¹⁷King Mongkut, (1958) Royal letter from King Mongkut to foreign countries part 1: Silpakorn (The Fine Art Department),110-114.

“This time I have sent Thai diplomats to Paris to negotiate with French elites and wishing that French diplomat would help arrange the meeting with British diplomats in London. It would be rude for Siam not to send an appropriate greeting to Britain since we have traveled far to Europe. As Siam is only a small-country power, we sincerely need help from both countries. If the permission is granted by French. We will also want to open negotiation on one deal, hopefully, Britain will accept our request” (King Mongkut)

Noted that, King Mongkut’s message underlines the first key strategy of diplomacy skill. Instead of sending diplomats separately. King Mongkut has ordered his people to first accompany French diplomats to Paris and send a royal letter to the French ruler to help arrange a special meeting with the British ruler on his behalf. Another example of King Mongkut’s letter to a Siamese ambassador to France, in 1864

“I think that now is the chance for Britain to put into practice her policy of bringing Siam under her protection, since Siam is being harassed by the French on one side, with the British colony on the other...It is for us to decide what we are going to do; whether to swim up the river to make friends with the crocodile or to swim out to sea and hang on to the whale...The only weapons that will be of real use to us in the future will be our mouths and our hearts constituted so as to be full of sense and wisdom for the better protection of ourselves. (Busch, 1959, pp. 67-68)”

This is not only to allow Thai diplomats to meet with the British but also letting the French to be involved in the situation during their worst relationship at the time. Yet, Siam’s diplomacy technique is not new. Thus, to resist the British and the French, King Mongkut employed a flexible diplomatic skill. Although, many historical records have been missing, pieces of these papers have been written according to the same context.

What factor might influence the King’s action to continue his friendship aboard? There are several factors, but perhaps the most legitimate reason is securing the level of partnership between nation and nation. If we study Thai history, sending Thai diplomats abroad is not Thai’s only option. Because the Siamese king realized

that sending diplomats alone will not be enough. In addition to this, sometimes, the king along with his royal families visit other countries to maintain the royal relationship with the foreign monarchy.

According to Kislenko's article, Thailand has a long-cherished diplomacy practice that reflected the traditional culture and religion. The foreign policy according to Thai nature is well calculated, carefully taking grant at issues that lie ahead and push actions more toward negotiation rather than risking the nation into an unnecessary war. Despite having many political reforms, Thailand's ability to conduct a well-cautious plan abroad proved that Thailand emerged as a considerable regional power of the 21st century.¹⁸

Looking at Kislenko's study, the paper mostly focuses on historical perspective in a well-explained manner. From the political perspective, however, Kislenko believed that Thai foreign policy always acts as opportunism, taking advantage of opportunities at any circumstance when possible. In supporting his argument, Kislenko connects a historical event from the beginning of Ayutthaya

¹⁸ Kislenko, Arne. "Bending with the Wind: The Continuity and Flexibility of Thai Foreign Policy." *International Journal* (Toronto) 57, no. 4 (2002): 537.4

period (14th century) to the arrival of European powers. Considering the Thai ‘myth’ of preserving independence. Kislenko clearly explains the diplomatic skill of the Kingdom’s rulers during the era of European colonialism. Thai position during world war I and II are also briefly mentioned. Overall, this study represented a clear story on the historical legacy of Thailand diplomacy, but simply looking at history made the paper more descriptive. In the end, Kislenko does not provide a clear answer to how Thai manage to survive during the foreign powers’ rivalry.

2.2 Literature on development of Thailand diplomatic relations with US-China

Previous research on Thai’s diplomatic relations with great powers focused on how Thai managed to shape its foreign policy like ‘bamboo in the wind’. Historically, Thai has consistently crafted a well-calculated foreign policy which allow Thai to guard its independence (Kislenko, 2002). This reflects in the current Thai foreign policy conducting abroad. Taking a step forward to the evolution of the studies on Thai diplomatic relations from the old era to US-China rivalry, the article by Busbarat Pongphisoot summarized well in capturing Thai positions in the 21st century.

In his article, he argued that Thailand's foreign policy in dealing with both China-U.S. has constantly been changed over time due to many aspects such as the rise of China and the nationalistic sentiment. The article also indicated that Thailand does not always accommodate American policies like other US allies in Asia but tends to act in favor of China instead. Thailand does not act like bamboo bending with the wind anymore, but it is rather 'bamboo swirling in the wind' instead. In the recent debates, more people are paying attention to the power of China rising and that it is now challenging the old superpower the United State. Again, the story is not entirely surprising. When Busburat stated that "China is the new Asian powerhouse of the twenty-first century", it is not all accurate. In fact, China is not the new power and has always exercised its power over Asian continent for centuries. Yet, in some sense, it is true that China's rise is new if we are referring to this context at a global level. Nevertheless, what concerns us the most is how Chinese's policy has become more intense in recent decades. With China's influences spread across Asian continent, small states face the greatest fear of losing their autonomous to Beijing's national interests. (Busburat,2016). Meanwhile, the United States is taking a different approach in dealing with China's rise as well.

Apart from the existing research, many policymakers are speculated that the international trade conflict between the U.S.-China will result in a negative effect rather than a positive one. With some possibilities, Thai could face both direct and indirect impact. The first encounter direct effect is the mutual tariff-imposition that cause many products to be dumped in Thailand, as a result, the domestic products will face a high competition in the market.¹⁹ Furthermore, Trump's economic policy adjustment of a foreign trade deal will create an obstacle for importer and exporter from Thailand. In short, the existing literature mostly focused on the nature of Thai foreign policy; how the policy was conducted outside the country but failed to connect the myth behind this tactic. Secondly, much of the literature found on secondary data is purely based on an international perspective. Only a few studies critically analyze the context from Thai's perspective.

A previous literature review shows that past studies are often focused on international politics impacts and most updated research tends to believe that Thai foreign policy has now moved closer to China. While few studies conducted in this area included Thai's political sentiment and internal phenomena (i.e., political crisis,

¹⁹ Sangasilpa,Lerdsak. "The impacts to Thailand from the impending US-China trade war (2018)

military coups). As previously mentioned in the introduction chapter, explaining Thai diplomatic relations with foreign nations requires more than just looking at the external environment. It is important to also focus on what is going on inside the country.

2.3 Research Methodology

The central question of this study is to explore the key strategies that allow Thailand to maintain a diplomatic relationship with CHINA-US in a time of great power rivalry while remaining as a close ally. Though this, Thailand needs to take good consideration of how the current U.S.-China conflict affects Thailand's alignment choices. The current study also has an aim to represent the point that previous studies may have not yet represented. This research is primarily based on the qualitative methodology which incorporates analysis of Thailand's diplomatic relations in the time of great powers rivalry, the case study through historical papers, and political science research. In the same way, it also critically examines Thailand's foreign policy behaviors by bringing different aspects to shape a better understanding of Thai foreign policy in its nature. In finding important resources, the data gathering for analysis is found on online search engines and domestic library. Most of these resources are including royal letters, historical record documents, a comparative

study on Southeast Asia alliances with the U.S and China, government reports, policy reports, and scholarly journals. The literature reviews are found from late 19th century published papers onward, however, the analysis will be mostly based on the current era. This research structure is following these steps: first, the paper will explain why looking at the nature of Thai foreign policy allow us to understand more about how small state is adapting with greater powers. The unique instrument that Thai diplomats use, signified the importance of conducting a good diplomatic strategy in the international system. Then, the study will briefly review the historical legacy of Thailand's diplomatic relation from the past to the present as well as explaining the concept of ‘Diplomatic Dance’ in this criterion. It will be followed by the reviewing of the continuity of Thailand alignment’s choice deliberated from its traditional diplomacy, proving that the nature of Thai diplomacy strategy deeply constructed within the system and does not easily change. Thus, more discussion on the current topic that triggers the bilateral relationship with US-China will also be reviewed. In short, a critical analysis will be made to explain how the current Thai foreign policy is shaped and whether Thai will play the same game or abandoning its traditional diplomacy.

Research Framework

Considering an appropriate framework for this study, the author takes the respective strengths of Thai diplomatic skills from the past as an effectiveness to the current day diplomacy. It could be concluded that Thailand has long traditional diplomacy that prioritizes a peaceful relationship with foreign powers. Despite many phenomena events that risk the change in such priority, Thailand's diplomatic skill, however, remains untouched. As many committed to such belief, history has shown that this diplomatic skill of conducting flexible and pragmatic policy has been served as principles and practices for over centuries, whereas slowly show a sign of path dependence. By definition, 'path dependency' usually begins with the assumption that 'history matters'²⁰. To our understanding, the path dependency theory often refers to several key concepts, but the main setting is to look at specific patterns of timing and sequence which can be seen from similar conditions, a wide range of social outcomes may be possible; large consequences may result from relatively 'small' or contingent events and this setting shape the basic contours of social life (Pierson 2000,251). Pierson implied that path-dependency is characterized as an

²⁰ Liebowitz, S.; Margolis, Stephen (2000). Encyclopedia of Law and Economics. p. 981.

“increasing returns”, “positive feedback” or “self-reinforcing” process. This meant that early events matter and can explain why sometimes people decide to follow the same path rather than risking the change. As for the main conceptual framework, Thailand's foreign policy continues to rely on flexibility and pragmatism when it comes to diplomatic relations. Thai diplomats and policymakers resist changing the direction of policy simply because of how the existing policy has been served well from past to present.

For this study, the research will focus on this conceptual framework. The following chapter will begin to explain why path dependency plays a role in Thai foreign policy.

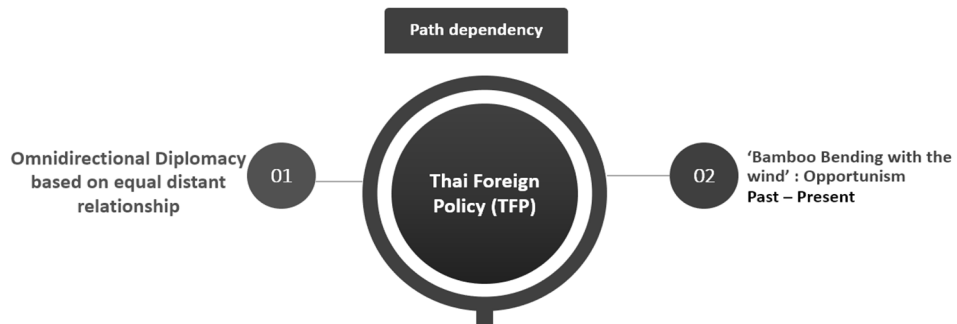


Figure 1. the diagram shows path dependency allow omnidirectional diplomacy and opportunism to coexist.

In later chapters, the case studies will explain how Thai foreign policy result in omnidirectional diplomacy with minor related to equidistant policy and to what extent that Thai still depicts its traditional diplomacy culture of ‘bending with the wind’ as opportunism.

Chapter III

Thai diplomatic relation with the US

3.1 Overview of Thai-US alliances: Historical perspective

The history of U.S.-Thai relations can be traced back to 200 years. The term “*Maha Mith, Great and Good Friend*” is how President Abraham Lincoln used to address His Majesty King Mongkut – Rama IV – in February 1862 when he replied letter to thank the King for sending “rich presents ... as tokens of goodwill and friendship for the American people.”²¹

Thailand, nevertheless, is a long U.S. military ally and a significant economic partner. Their first contact was recorded in 1818. It was not until 1833 that the first agreement was made. The 1833 Treaty of Amity and Commerce, approved by King Rama III (*Phra Nang Klao*), Edmund Roberts appointed by President Andrew Jackson, and President Van Buren. The foundation U.S. security relationship with Thailand covered joint efforts in many significant wars including the Vietnam War, the Korean War, and 1991 Persian Gulf War. Over 6,500 Thailand

²¹ Davies, Glyn T. *Great and Good Friends: 200 Years of U.S.-Thai Friendship*

troops were sent during the Korean War, where the Thai force suffered over 1,250 casualties.²² In the Vietnam war, more than 50,000 U.S. troops were operating their base in Thailand and it was also this time that the U.S. is assisting to help Thailand fight against its domestic communist problem.²³ On this matter, Thailand ensures the support of military troops to help the U.S. in Vietnam and Laos as well. In 1954, the Cold war defense agreement was signed.

As the cold war come close to an end, the United States claims a new position as a global leader. Some might even agree that the U.S. served as a hegemon at the time. This is no doubt, was beneficial for Thailand as the diplomatic relationship of the two countries grew incredibly strong. In fact, The United States has chosen Thailand as one of the military operations aboard to overlook activities of the communist power in Asia. The bounding military-to-military relationship continues to grow strong as Thailand was designated US “major non-NATO allies” in the years of the “Global War on Terror” (GWOT), granting Thailand

²² See [<http://korea50.army.mil/history/factsheets/allied.shtml>] (official public access) (...continued) website for Department of Defense Commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Korean War).

²³ *The Eagle and the Elephant: Thai-American Relations Since 1833* (Bangkok: U.S. Agency for International Development, 1997)

access to priority delivery of, military assistance, defense material, and aid.

²⁴As such, the U.S. hopes for Thai to represent the democratic module in Southeast Asia. A statement is written in the U.S. Department of the State as follows,²⁵

“Our partnership with Thailand is bilateral and regional in scope. U.S. support is geared toward reform of the criminal justice system; the promotion of good governance through democracy, human rights, and civil society activities; humanitarian assistance for displaced persons; and the prevention of infectious diseases and emerging pandemic threats.”

The statement mentioned above labeled the priority goal behind securing the bilateral relationship. Democracy, security, and cooperation. In accordingly, if Thailand follows the basic requirements of practicing democracy and not disturbing the existing bilateral security cooperation, the United State will continue to provide support on the most regular basis of shared economic and strategic interests.

²⁴ Bush designates Thailand as new ‘Deputy’ (dec,2003), retrieve it from :
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2003-12-31/bush-designates-thailand-as-new-deputy/113092>

²⁵ U.S. relation with Thailand. Bilateral relation fact sheet (May 7, 2020) retrieves it from:
<https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-thailand/>

In **figure 2.** show the data of the U.S. assisting Thailand during 2007-2014 in several sectors,

Account	2,007	2,008	2,009	2,010	2,011	2,012	2013 estimate	2014 request
DA	0	0	4,500	6,151	5,051	5,051	4,826	5,051
ESF	990	0	2,500	2,500	0	0	0	0
FMF*	0	423	1,600	1,600	1,568	1,187	1,424	988
GH	1,400	1,492	1,500	1,500	1,500	1,500	1,000	0
IMET	0	1,202	1,459	1,571	1,568	1,318	1,234	1,300
INCLE	900	1,686	1,400	1,740	1,740	1,740	1,740	1,466
NADR	2,100	2,483	2,700	3,300	1,541	1,450	1,152	1,320
Peace Corps	2,144	2,278	2,815	3,064	3,300	3,000	3,100	3,700
Totals	7,534	9,786	15,659	18,362	12,968	12,246	11,376	11,275

Figure 2. the U.S. aid to Thailand 2007-2014, sources: U.S. Department of State: USAID²⁶.

As the table indicated, million dollars various forms of military assistance was provided to Thailand each year. In the military area, the United States has provided funds for Thailand to be accessible in the purchase of weapons and other necessary equipment needed to guard its national security. This process is a program known as Foreign Military Financing (FMF). Yet, The United States was one of the major competitors in the military market simply because others are more interested in agricultural products. By granting funds and allowing Thailand to purchase, transferring, and practicing military along with the U.S., the military relationship was one of the key factors that help build the bilateral relationship we see today.

Taking a closer look at the current debate, Thai-US relations under Donald Trump's administration have undergone some changes. After world war II has ended, Thailand and the United States have always accompanied each other friendship. It is not all wrong to say that the modern Thai nation was a part of the U.S. product. During the rise of communist power in Asia, the U.S. foreign policy was represented

²⁶ U.S. Assistance to Thailand 2007-2014, sources: U.S. department of State: USAID

in the way to secure as many allies on the continent as possible. Ultimately, The United State decided to choose Thailand as a ‘forward base’. As written in Fineman's book, the formation of a “special relationship” with Thailand, particularly the military cooperation.²⁷ The relationship expanded on the area of economic (trading and investment) and security interest. The strong ties between Thai and U.S. military relations are undeniable. The continuity of military-to-military cooperation allows Thailand to serve as an important strategic partner in the Asia-Pacific region. From this era onward, Thailand became a U.S. security ally where the partnership shares diplomatic, security protection, and commercial relations. However, what triggers the change is not the act of the U.S. alone but in fact, many studies believed that Thailand is the one who pulls the trigger. After the result of the military coup has taken over a democratic government came out in 2014, The U.S. observation was not entirely pleased, if not a disappointment. Will the 200 years of friendship end? The answer is ‘no’, but there is a high possibility of change. In the past few years, this predictability starts to become more realistic when Thai royal military ordered a military coup in 2006 and 2014, it has marked a concern of U.S.-Thai relations to

²⁷ Fineman, Daniel. *A Special Relationship: The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947-1958* / Daniel Fineman., 1997.

further downgrade because Thai political modal is facing away from the democratic system. Despite the excuse reason for restoring peace and stability of Thai kingdom, the U.S. Department of state was quick in action, over US\$3.5 million in aid was cut. The annual funding for the International Military Education and Training program (IMET) for Thai was ordered to be terminated. As Pentagon press secretary John Kirby stated “While we value our long friendship with the Thai people, this act will have negative implications for the U.S.–Thai relationship, especially for our relationship with the Thai military....our own democratic principles and U.S. law require us to reconsider U.S. military assistance and engagement...”²⁸ Yet, the US-Thai combined military exercises were rescheduled and some are plan to cancel. In response to this, general Prayuth (currently Prime minister of Thailand) made a statement with a reason why the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) is necessary to secure peace. Ironically, he mentioned the political imbalance in Thai institutions is being undermined by citizens, and therefore, ordering NCPO was to take control of the national administration to stop the violence.

²⁸ U.S. Department of Defense. “Coup Leads U.S. to Curtail Thai Military Engagements.” May 24, 2014. See more at : www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=122328.

Above all, the appearance of general Prayuth was already signaling a risky change in the bilateral relationship with the United States.

Ironically enough, military relation on the other hand was not. Despite many concerns from the United States side, Thai-US military-to-military continues. An example of this is an annual joint military exercise between the two countries, known as Cobra Gold²⁹, it was first believed to be pushed back by the United States, however, the joint exercise goes as originally planned on February 9, 2015.³⁰

Prior to Trump administration, it is more than obvious that the Obama Administration had a stronger focus on the alliance system with Southeast Asia. Not only the United State under Obama's foreign policy played a stronger role in preventing conflict in Asia. His 'pivot' and 'rebalance,' were on the road to begin the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue. Obama was aware of How the United States is still distancing itself from SEA regions. So, the U.S. at this time

²⁹ Cobra Gold is the largest annual Asia-Pacific military exercise. Its stated goals are to improve the capabilities of participating nations to plan operations and conduct them together, build relationships and enhance maritime security and response to natural disasters. See more : <https://www.stripes.com/news/pacific/cobra-gold-one-of-world-s-largest-multinational-military-exercises-kicks-off-in-thailand-1.568443>

³⁰ Nueman, Scott. "Thailand's military moves closer to China" (Feb 6, 2015). Retrieved it from: https://wamu.org/story/15/02/06/thailands_military_moves_closer_to_china/

wants to engage more attention to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation established by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).³¹ As this was part of the U.S. national security strategy goals³²

“Strengthening regional institutions such as ASEAN, the East Asia Summit, and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation to reinforce shared rules and norms, forge collective responses to shared challenges, and help ensure a peaceful resolution of disputes.”³³

“Promoted stronger trade and investment links, principally through the new, high-standard Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) with eleven other countries, to deepen economic integration and establish unprecedented environmental and labor standards.”³⁴

³¹ Liow, J. C. (2017). U.S.–Southeast Asia relations under the trump administration. *Asia Policy*, (24), 53-58. Retrieved from <http://lps3.www.proquest.com.libproxy.snu.ac.kr/docview/2125226494?accountid=6802>

³² “National Security Strategy.” The White House ,February 2015 https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf

³³ The White House, Fact sheet: advancing the rebalance to Asia and Pacific (Nov 16, 2015) retrieved it from : <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/16/fact-sheet-advancing-rebalance-asia-and-pacific>

³⁴ Ibid.

Trump, on the other hand, was not. His ‘America first policy’ was already signal a change in the U.S. less interfering with other states. Trump’s priority is to pursue what is best for the United States and cut all unnecessary ties. According to the national security strategy, there are four pillars.³⁵

1. The protection of Homeland, the American people, and the American way of life serve as the highest priority
2. Promote American prosperity
3. Preserve peace through strength
4. Expand and advance American influence to the globe

Trump’s foreign policy was obvious, he expected other countries to start relying on themselves rather than letting the United State carry its burden on the shoulder. By withdrawing its membership from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in early 2017, we know that the United States and trade relationship with Asia will not be the same. In his view, President Trump perceives trade as a zero-sum game.

³⁵ The White House. “National Security Strategy.” December 2017
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

On top of his agenda is to stand against China, Trump is only interested in bilateral and fair trade solutions rather than multilateral cooperation which is one reason why he starts withdrawing the U.S. from many trade deals. In another word, he is interested in ‘deals’ than following international trade law, and most importantly, the policy must advocate “America first” in the global trading system.³⁶

In contrast, Trump’s foreign policy might seem to disturb the alliance system on the large scale, but the tariff fight between the U.S. and China does benefit some countries including Thailand. According to Standard Chartered’s Clive McDonnell, Thailand is a “leading beneficiary”. When Beijing and Washington are slapping higher tariffs on each other’s good. Many companies had to manufacture their facilities elsewhere to avoid being victims of those tariffs. Among many issues that affect the world economy, Thailand has increased its role by providing a base for many manufacturing goods to be exported to both America and China. No doubt that the winners here are Thai industries that export their products to both China

³⁶ Federation of German Industries : BDI (2020) “America First”-U.S. Trade Policy under President Donald Trump , retrieved it from : <https://www.wita.org/trade-news/america-first-u-s-trade-policy-under-president-donald-trump/>

and the U.S., while the losers of this game are those who choose to export intermediate goods for processing only to one of the two.³⁷

There is no simple answer to the question of a decline in U.S.-Thai relations when taking the history, political context, culture change, different identity. However, when considering the kingdom of Thailand, a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary form of government, the United State believed that Thailand could eventually transform political modal to a full version of a democratic state. Such a belief created a fault in the relationship. The origin of Thailand's political system was already a monarch rule. In changing from the absolute monarchy to the constitutional monarchy system, much of its ideological beliefs, culture, and identity of elite rulers are still heavily affected Thai political system. This brings us to the reason why many times the United States feel disappoints in Thailand's action in dealing with its domestic crisis and as a result, had a clear impact on the bilateral relationship.

³⁷ The Nation Thailand news, "How Thailand is affected by US-China trade conflict" (Jan 02,2019), retrieved it from : <https://www.nationthailand.com/opinion/30361505>

Chapter IV

Thai diplomatic relation with China

4.1. Historic origin of diplomatic relation

To give an overview, China, a regional power with the world's largest population, has been a very important partner to the Kingdom of Thailand since the ancient time from the Sukhothai (1237-1350AD) to Ayuthaya (1350-1767AD), Thonburi (1767-1782Ad) and the current Bangkok (1782AD-present).³⁸ As quoted “Thailand's close relationship with China - arguably one of the closest in Southeast Asia - sits alongside an alliance relationship with the United States. Thailand, unsure of either China's ultimate reach as an emerging superpower or China's ultimate intentions toward the region, has set itself on a course where it hopes to accommodate China's rise.”³⁹

³⁸ See Suebsaeng Promboon, *Khwaamsamphan nai rabob bannakan rawang jin kap thai 1289–1853* [Sino-Siamese Tributary Relations 1289–1853] (Bangkok: Thai Wattapanich Press, 1982).

³⁹Smith, Anthony “Thailand's Security and the Sino-Thai Relationship”, Association For Asian Research (AFAR) Feb, 2005

Significantly from history, China built its bilateral relationship first by trade and later expand through other areas such as culture, religion, and military relationship. In the time of Western imperialism, for example, many Chinese had migrated to Thailand to escape poverty and in turn, they create a bounding relationship with Thai people. However, when China's politics turn toward communist ideology, Thailand at this time was in line with the United States and viewed China differently.

After the cold war ended, China has finally built its relationship with Thailand, constructing a political connection with Thai elites. Today, the Chinese community was commonly seen in any place in Thailand. That is to say, the ethnic and Chinese identity is well integrated with Thai society overall. With this in mind, the Sino-Thai always maintain the rule that both will respect each other, and that China will not intervene in the internal matter in Thai. Through this, it allows China to step ahead of Japan as Thailand's largest trading partner since 2012. This "comprehensive Strategic Partnership" indicates the closeness of the two countries help create a healthy and stable bilateral relationship. Nowadays, more Chinese nationals are residing in Thailand, of those that are business dealers and those who

decided to live in the country. According to the survey in 2006, more than 400,000 Chinese were the residence of Thailand. Not to mention, Thailand has listed China as the number one tourist visiting Thailand regularly and help raise Thailand's economy ever since.⁴⁰ In 2019, the number of Chinese tourists visiting Thailand was over 10.98 million. (estimated 28% of all international tourists visit Thailand). 4.2% increased from 2018.⁴¹ As the present, China is now the top exporter and importer partner of Thailand which surpasses the United States in recent years.

4.2 China-Thailand after the 2014 coup

Underline Thai prime minister statement “China is the No.1 partner of Thailand” sparks the heat and confusion with the United States. When speaking of military cooperation, the most important objectives are lined beneath the goals of peace and cooperation. In 2015 Thailand and China marked 40 years of diplomatic relations. Official statements spoke of a “close and cordial relationship, based on the solid foundation and deep bonds of affinity and cultural ties rooted since

⁴⁰ Chachavalpongpan, Pavin, Thailand in the midst of a US-China rivalry (2020) see more at : <https://sr.sgpp.ac.id/post/thailand-in-the-midst-of-a-us-china-rivalry>

⁴¹ See more at.. Royal Thai Embassy, Beijing website

time immemorial.”⁴² Not long after, the Junta government announced their plan of purchasing three Chinese Yuan-class submarines that cost over \$1 billion. Because of Thai receiving heavy critics from the United States, on the concern of democracy in the country. Prime Minister Prayuth suddenly make a step toward China. Unlike the United States, the Junta government admired the Chinese emphasis on sovereignty and “non-interference”.

As early mentioned, China’s influence has started from economic factors over the past century. This meant that Thai gains a large benefit from China’s growth. In sum, China’s influence is now served a part of many families in Thailand. This is because the two countries' cultures are close in ideals, unlike the United States. The Sino-Thai community maintains a strong relationship through this value of understanding and respecting each other cultures. Many schools are allowing Chinese language to be taught as a third language option apart from English. Many Chinese festivals are held in major provinces every year.

⁴² ‘Congratulatory messages on the 40th Anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Kingdom of Thailand and the People’s Republic of China. on 11 August 2017.

Again, this can be easily interpreted for some people as to why Thailand could now move closer to China rather than the United States. It is, however, to be noted that this connection of Thai-China was a key to hold two countries as friendship, but it does not mean that this will downgrade Thai relationship with the United States. Very often, the cause of weakening its relationship does not come from strengthening its relationship with China but rather, it was simply how Thai-US consistently testing its relationship upon each other. The 2014 coup was a good example to differentiate how Thailand is responding to China and the United States differently. For China, the response was quite supportive of Junta's government as China believed that preserving peace for people was the most important. At this point, it can be concluded that China and Thailand shaped their foreign policy by looking at economic partnership, cultural heritage closeness, and preservation of 'non-interference'.

Chapter V

Case Studies and critical analysis

Military and partnership

5.1 Thai strategic and military culture with the United States

The post-cold war period to the 21st-century relation- Cobra Gold military practices example case study

To begin with, Thailand and the United States have a long tradition of friendship from a stranger to a close ally since 1954. The U.S. ‘pivot’ strategy towards the Asia-Pacific allows improvement in its security alliances with its partners in the region. (Julius Cesar I. Trajano, 2012). During this period, Thailand accommodated the United States as a military alliance to help whenever the U.S. calls in need. This is including the support of the U.S. war effort in Vietnam. Thai diplomatic relations with the United States are often viewed as a broad-based relationship, rather than just a security partner.⁴³ Although, Thai perception has both negative and positive to American action. Many times, Thais believed that the United States failed to respect the longstanding of the bilateral relationship. Very often, the

⁴³ Dalpio, “The United States-Thailand Alliance: Issue for a New Dialogue”, 2011 p.7.

United States has on many occasions failed to support Thai ally in times of need. On the other side, Washington often criticizes Thailand's internal issues such as human trafficking concerning human rights. The critique becomes more intense when the 2014 military coup took control over the street of Bangkok and overthrew a democratically elected government. All these negative perceptions have created complications in the bilateral relationship. What surprising is that despite all this, military alliance continues to play a large role in preserving good relationship with the United States. As Panitant Wattanayakorn , a security advisor stated “Thailand must be careful that the adjustment should not affect the Thai-American military relationship which is Thailand’s first priority”. Historically, the U.S.-Thai military relationship is important not only to strengthen the bilateral relationship between Thailand and the United State but also, allowing the U.S. to oversee what happens in Southeast Asia as well. As we can take an example from one of the statements published by the U.S. Department of state.

"One of five treaty allies in Asia, Thailand hosts over 40 joint military exercises, provides crucial access to Thai facilities when needed, and has contributed troops to U.S.-led coalition operations. Thailand hosts Cobra Gold, our largest multi-

national exercise in Asia, and, by so doing, allows us to engage with the Thai military, but also the militaries of Singapore, Japan, Indonesia, and others. Thailand has made critical contributions to the War on Terror, including allowing access to its airspace and bases for OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM and OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM as well as deploying military engineers and medical personnel to Iraq. Thailand permitted the United States to use Utapao Naval Air Station as the hub for relief operations in response to the December 26, 2004 tsunami that devastated the Indian Ocean region in Operation Unified Assistance.”⁴⁴

To clarify more detail, the Cobra gold is an annual military exercise co-hosted by Thailand and the United State. The main objective of this military exercise is to strengthen the capabilities of participating nations to plan and conduct joint operations, at the same time, maintain a good relationship across the region. In fact, the Cobra gold was among the most important military practice in Indo-Pacific region. “Cobra Gold is a tremendous opportunity to reinforce the relationship with

⁴⁴ U.S. Department of State, Foreign Military Training: Joint Report to Congress, Fiscal Years 2006 and 2007, (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, August 2007) (accessed February 6, 2008).

the Kingdom of Thailand and the Royal Thai forces," (U.S. Army Brig. Gen. Josh Rudd,2020)

In contrast, the conventional debate over China's rise was already in place. Many Thai foreign policymakers are worried that Chinese political influence in Thailand would undermine Thailand. Yet, the main reason this case study is the key to understand why Thailand and the U.S. military alliance prove to be the strongest factor concerning the rise of China. The finding showed that despite many downturns of the U.S.-Thai relationship, military-to-military alliance remains active. This evidence is very visible, Thailand as the original modal country in the U.S. mind to first successfully free itself from the authoritarian system, had undergone much political crisis and had not yet to be fully democratic. Due to this reason, the U.S. always ordered a sanction anytime a political crisis break out in the kingdom but in the end, allowing military practices on most regular basis. In this dilemma, it is possible to conclude that the reason why the U.S.-Thai military cooperation will continue to be strong is that the U.S. simply, does not want to lose Thai, especially, in a time where China is challenging the power of the United States. As Thai military is now leaning toward China. The U.S. knows that if Thailand decides to pay most

of military alliance to China's side. This will not only support China's rise, but the effect on the United State control in the region will also be downgraded. On the same hand, Thai also know the risk of losing alliance as this is not in line with Thai diplomatic culture.

5.2 Thai-China Military and economic relation under Junta's government

Thailand's Chinese submarine purchase signal US drift

Another interesting case study in the military relationship came recently when the government of Thailand decided to buy three Chinese submarines.

In 2015, Thai government made a closer step toward China by deciding to buy three Yuan Class S26T submarines from China. The first submarines had already been purchased at 13.5 billion baht(about \$434 million). The order of the two remaining submarines will cost about 22.5 billion baht (\$723.5 million) which to expect to be paid later.⁴⁵ In fact, this was a surprise to many observers. China was not the only bidder in the table, yet there are others like Sweden and Germany,

⁴⁵ Staff, Reuters, Thailand delays China submarines buy amid public outrage(August 30, 2020), retrieved it from : <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-china-defence-idUSKBN25R1JN>

according to the committee member, the response to a question of why Thai accept Chinese's deal is simply because China has offered the best value in transferring military technology as well as provide training as part of the package, while, compared to other offers, the extra charge will be required. In contrast, the reason that delays the purchasing of the other two submarines is the central discussion of this part of the analysis.

As much as the military is happy claiming the new submarine from China, the public opinion, however, is not. The question 'Does Thailand need submarines?' needs a more reasonable answer rather than just a convenient use for military practice. The public backlash has gained more tensions in the last few years, with much of disapproving in spending country budget on the area that does not need it. Many people believed that Thai government should pay attention to other factors apart from military requests. In many sectors such as education or medical are far more important and in fact, such a budget can further push the development. On the same hand, critics agreed that the current government reason for purchasing the Chinese submarines needs better explanation. When looking at diplomatic relations, Junta government did not like the U.S. action of intervening with the political crisis in

Thailand. The Bangkok Post written statement in 2015 response to government action: “China’s Defense Minister Chang Wanquan also took pains to stress that Beijing has no plans to ‘interfere’ with Thailand’s military regime, something the Thai government feels its long-time ally, the United States, did last month during the visit of a high-ranking diplomat”.⁴⁶This was part of the reason why Thai government is so keen to take China’s offer. Ironically, the purchasing of submarines can be viewed from two perspectives. From the outsider, there is nothing unusual about Thailand’s action to flip its policy toward other major countries when seeking its best interest. As historical evident ‘myth’ of ‘bamboo bending with the wind’ has always somewhat engaged in Thai foreign policy. However, the insider has more story to deliver. First, the government's action to strengthen Thai military cooperation with China is purely the government's intention. This has nothing related to Thai public opinion. According to the People poll result on the matter of Thailand purchased submarines, vast majority of people are opposed to the government’s plan:

⁴⁶ The Two-way, Thailand’s military moves closer to china (Feb,2015) , retrieved it from : <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/02/06/384306120/thailands-military-moves-closer-to-china>

over 66.8% said 'no'; 22.7% said "yes";10% were uncertain, and 0.5% did not provide answer.

To the question "Do you agree with the navy's 36-billion-baht purchase of three submarines", The reveal of 90.4% majority people said "no"; only 5.1% said "yes"; 4.3% were uncertain or need more information; and 0.2% (5) decided with no answer.⁴⁷ To clarify, much disagreement from the public backlash eventually forces Thai government to pause its action. Furthermore, not only outsider is worried that this action signifies the shift of Thai-US alliance but also, the real deal engaged more in a serious internal conflict. To give a brief analysis, Thai public opinion did not trust government action. Whereas the government does not want the U.S. to interfere with internal chaos and has made a sudden turn toward China simply because the Chinese did not do so. Despite the government claimed that more interference might disturb the peace of the country, the public opinion said such action is only the excuse for Junta government to remain in charge with the parliament.

⁴⁷ Poll: Most people oppose submarines purchase plan, the Bangkok Post, retrieved it from : <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/1075793/poll-most-people-oppose-submarines-purchase-plan>

Case study: Belt and Road initiative

While considering other factors apart from military relations, China's Belt and Road initiative (BRI) is a long-term development policy program which aims to improve and promote the infrastructure development that will allow better economic integration of countries in the route of historic Silk Road.⁴⁸ There are two combined initiatives, first, the Silk Road Economic Belt, comprising six development corridors, and second, the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. It was first introduced in 2013, President Xi Jinping announced, 'One Belt One Road (formerly name of BRI)' and later known as Belt and Road initiative (BRI) after the official outline was successfully issued. Upon his visit to Asian countries, he demonstrates to build a stronger relationship with the silk route through this initiative. Interestingly, Thailand response to the BRI program quite positively. Prime Minister Paryuth Chan-ocha publicly announced that Thailand will be willing to participate in "the Belt and Road initiative". The main area of cooperation is in the field of railways,

⁴⁸ The Silk Road is a network routes which connected [East Asia](#) and [Southeast Asia](#) with [South Asia](#), [Persia](#), the [Arabian Peninsula](#), [East Africa](#) and [Southern Europe](#). The routes were center of expanding economic, cultural, political and religious interactions from the 2nd century BCE to the 18th century. See more at Elisseeff, Vadime (2001). *The Silk Roads: Highways of Culture and Commerce*. UNESCO Publishing / Berghahn Books.

communication, and tourism. According to Junta government, the BRI will be a challenging task in strengthening Thai-Sino relationship and to promote interconnectivity within the region.⁴⁹ In addition, the Belt and Road Initiative has been maintained by five cooperation priorities⁵⁰:

1. **Policy coordination** (Promotion of intergovernmental cooperation, multi-level intergovernmental macro policy exchange, and communication mechanism)
2. **Facilities connectivity** (Improvement of connectivity of infrastructure construction plans and technical standards systems)
3. **Unimpeded trade** (Reduction of investment and trade barriers, promotion of regional economic integration)
4. **Financial integration** (Coordination and cooperation in monetary policy, set-up of financing institutions)

⁴⁹ Xinhua News Agency. Xi Jinping meets with Prime Minister of Thailand, Ba Yu. Xinhua, 23 December 2014

⁵⁰ Belt and Road Initiative retrieve it from : <https://www.beltroad-initiative.com/belt-and-road/>

5. People to people engagement (Exchange in culture and academic dialogue as well as media cooperation)

The important reason why the case study of ‘the BRI’ is interesting because this initiative has expanded greatly in recent years and continuing to spread the Chinese’s sphere of influence. The BRI programs allow Thai to invested in big projects. For example, Thai government signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with China in 2017. With \$101.2 million contract for Bangkok-Nakhon Ratchasima high-speed railway.⁵¹ Moreover, the BRI initiative will be served as an open market for Thai investors for better connection with nearby countries like Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. If the BRI runs smoothly, there will be more trade and investment in the region. It would also allow more expansion in exports to countries outside SEA regions such as Africa. (Terrabkk,2019). Nonetheless, the BRI project impact is two folds. Whereas most projects that are carried out to support big investment in other silk road countries, it is being questioned by critique whether this could create the so-called ‘debt diplomacy’ which in turn pose negative effects

⁵¹ China’s Belt and Road Initiative to reshape routes in Thailand and the broader South-east Asian region, retrieved it from : <https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/analysis/road-china%E2%80%99s-belt-and-road-initiative-reshaping-south-east-asia-2>

on BRI and other states overall. Likewise, the BRI is one of the important projects that not only challenge the United States but also brought a great fear to many ASEAN states as they somehow may lose their economic autonomy and eventually fall into a trap of 'China's colonialism'. In the worst-case scenario, critique believes the BRI is an open road to modern China strengthen its power over Southeast Asia.⁵² In term of Thailand role, Thai hope that the BRI initiative will allow Thai to be an open hub for Southeast Asian as well as help to raise a positive image of Bangkok being as a potential leading country for ASEAN. At the present, Thailand is cooperating on a large scale of many infrastructure projects. For example, Bangkok-Nong Khai high-speed railway with a total distance of 627 km. The plan was expected to be finished by 2023. If the construction runs smoothly, the railway will connect northeast Thailand on the Laos border – China-Laos which will also allow more railway connection from Bangkok to Vientiane capital of Laos, and finally, the route to Kunming China. The beginning of this project comes with some difficulties such as a change in the dynamic of Thai politics (; Military coup in 2014) and Thai

⁵² Soong, Jenn-Jaw. "Perception and Strategy of ASEAN's States on China's Footprints under Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): Perspectives of State Society Business with Balancing Bandwagoning Hedging Consideration." *The Chinese Economy Ahead of print*, 1-8.

government itself felt that many infrastructure projects managed by Thai and China are sometimes overcome by Chinese control. In a strategy term, Thai would consider more negotiation to maximize its benefit and would not allow the project to continue if the negotiation is not well completed. If China takes this chance, not only that it will increase Thailand's role in the international arena, but also it will be powering up China-Thailand relations (Punyaratabandhu & Swaspitchayaskun, 2018).

Although, Thailand will likely gain more benefits than losing its benefit. Many critics warn that too much Chinese influence could pose a negative impact on Thai in making decisions for the future. On the other hand, if Thailand successfully cooperates with China in the BRI program, the economy will gain a large benefit from opening new market areas and trade especially now that the commute is accessible. Above all, this could strengthen the relationship between Thai and China and even allow more future trade to be introduced. By reviewing the BRI strategy, Thai government is expecting that the result will benefit the country greatly and thus, allowing the Sino-relationship to obtain more cooperation and development in the future. Additionally, Thailand will largely gain benefits from five aspects. (Department of Trade Negotiations, 2018).

- 1) BRI will allow better development for the future industry of Thailand.
- 2) There will be more infrastructure development plans. This is to create transportation networks to increase future trade and allow investment opportunities
- 3) Digital and internet data will also be acknowledged. Through BRI initiative, it will help develop in this area as well as supporting the modern form of commerce through digital payment.
- 4) It will improve the development of SMEs and new Start-Up company in the way that the BRI allow a sharing economy
- 5) It will allow a wider exchange of learning in education and culture as well as expand the knowledge of science and technology

It is confirmed by both leaderships, President Xi Jinping and General Prayut Chan-ocha that China is now offering more cooperation opportunities with Thailand. The four aspects that serve as a core of cooperation are (1) High-level government policies cooperation; (2) economic policies both trade and investment; (3) Increasing

the support of new entrepreneurs to invest in the EEC; (4) enhance tourism and support education. Nevertheless, various projects and cooperation are still in early development and many are behind schedule. Despite its grand strategy comprising mega projects, more negotiations still need to be made. With much positive benefit Thai could receive, the Thai government sector is also aware of the risk that the BRI could take over. For one, Thai in its traditional diplomatic culture, although is welcoming and open-minded to foreign countries in nature, Thai does not easily allow outside influences to violate its sovereignty. That is to say, there is no guarantee that Thai will always accompany China's request. The key negotiation that Thai had been carried a long way from the ancient time is to make an equal distance. In short, Thailand-China relations have moved closer in a form of mutual economic interests. Thailand always views China as an important economic partner. At the end of the day, the negotiation matter, therefore, must be in great care that both China and Thailand are equally benefited.

5.3 US-Thailand economy in the era of Trump's administration

'American First' policy against China's rise and its effect on Thai relations

To begin with, Trump has long believed that other allies are taking advantage of the United States and has continued to demand further unrealistic requests from its allies. Trump quoted allies as “freeloaders” and complaining that the United States is getting “ripped off” and that “these rich allies should be paying more for U.S. forces that defend their country”. As quoted “We reject globalism and embrace the doctrine of patriotism,” This was a clear message that go against the international order. Yet, Trump believed that all nations should have their version like his “America First” policy approach.⁵³ Trump's declaration of “America First Policy” nationalism over globalism. His plan to terminate the deal from multiple global institutions including INF, U.N. Human Rights Council, and WTO has marked the return of American isolationism by ignoring the American duty in the world order. His revisionism on a trade deal is shaking the balance of global

⁵³ W.J. Hennigan, “‘We Reject Globalism.’ President Trump Took ‘America First’ to the United Nations,” *Time*, September 25, 2018, <https://time.com/5406130/we-reject-globalism-president-trump-took-america-first-to-the-united-nations>.

market systems⁵⁴ and undoubtedly, building a fear to Thai foreign policymaker. To recall what has already been mentioned, Thailand's relations with the United States after the 2014 coup was downgraded. While Thai political tension continues to rise, unlike President Obama, Trump had no concern for Thailand. For Trump, what more important is American statecraft. With this perception, Thailand was able to rebalance toward the United States after leaning toward China earlier.⁵⁵ Yet, this does not conclude that Thai will gain the most benefit out of the trade war but it meant that Thai will have impacts on both positive and negative on its economy. To clarify more detail, as the United States prefer its trade policy to guarantee and protect its trading interest. The impacts of trade protectionist measures on the Thai economy indicate as following monetary report from Bank of Thailand as an example case study,⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Anne Krueger, The Global Trade System Could Break Down, project syndicate, Sep 17, 2018

⁵⁵ Lohatepanont, Kent. A look back at the Trump presidency and Thailand (Nov 13, 2020), retrieved it from : <https://www.thaienquirer.com/20685/a-look-back-at-the-trump-presidency-and-thailand/>

⁵⁶ Bank of Thailand, The U.S.-China trade war: Implications on the global economy and Thailand (June, 2019), Monetary policy report. retrieved it from : https://www.bot.or.th/English/MonetaryPolicy/MonetPolicyComittee/MPR/BOX_MRP/BOX1Chinatradewar_EN_June2019.pdf

- (1) Impact on merchandise exports: Thai merchandise export was effect by these channels: world trade volume effect, supply chain effect: for Thailand, the supply chain affect 0.1% to the contraction in Thai exports value in the Q1 of 2019, the most affected categories were electronic and optical instruments. This also meant that Thailand is now facing both direct and indirect impacts. The most obvious direct impact is the decrease in the number of Thai exports to China while the indirect effect is Thai export left in other countries.⁵⁷ However, a decline in U.S.-China trade also allows Thailand to export goods of the U.S. market in China as well. Consequently, the international trade outlook will remain highly uncertain.⁵⁸
- (2) Impacts on domestic traders: there is a possibility that China may leave products in the Thai market. Therefore, the price of a certain product will be cheaper for locals.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 11

⁵⁸ Ibid. 12

- (3) Impacts on domestic manufacturing and employment: when considering the possibility of global trade deteriorate because of the trade war, there is a high possibility that some manufacturing sector in Thailand would cut employment

- (4) Impacts on private investment: as the U.S.-China trade war is on, many foreign firms that were originally located in China may consider relocating its production base to cheaper tariff countries so that it has a better opportunity for investment in a long term. This is of course a benefit to a country like Thailand and Vietnam

In short, there will be an increase in foreign direct investment in the electronics sector.⁵⁹ For one, the trade protectionist measures will continue to pose impacts on the Thai economy. Other impacts would also include 1) Chinese dumping products in Thailand could pose a high competition in the local market (2) some manufacturing sector especially in production will highly be affected. This might lead to a cut of employment; people lost their job. (3) Thai will likely to gain benefit

⁵⁹ Ibid. 13

from foreign firms because of its relocation to avoid tariff impacts while it also might cause trouble to some Thai industries in term of competitiveness.⁶⁰

However, if we follow the current trend, the following **figure 3.** illustrates the imports from Thailand in the United Stated from (2012- Nov 2020).

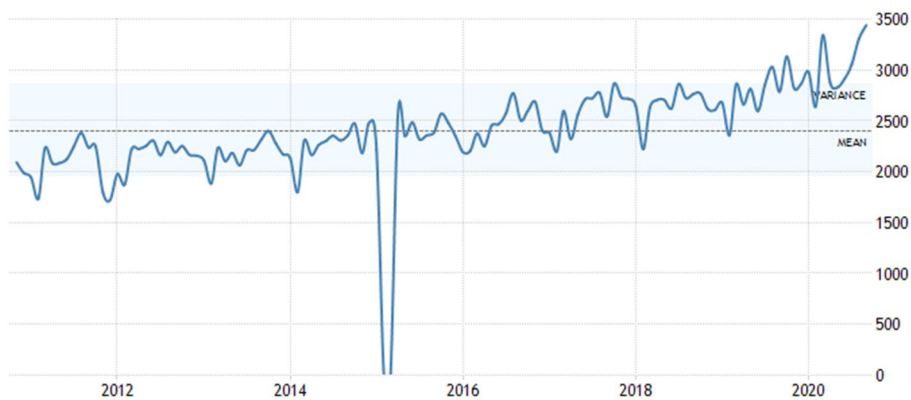


Figure. 3 United States imports from Thailand 2012-2020 data. Made by tradingeconomic.com, U.S. census bureau⁶¹.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ See more at <https://tradingeconomics.com/united-states/imports-from-thailand>

From 1985 to 2020, The average number of importing from Thailand in the United States is about 1409.10 USD million. The highest number was 3440.43 USD million (2020) as show in the graph and the lowest imports (estimate 0.10 USD million) was no surprise that it drop rapidly the year after military coup back in 2014.⁶²

In sum, Thailand as a trade partner of both the United States and China will be affected by the trade war. In the short run, the direct impact will fall on Thai exporters in the supply chain for both countries. On the other hand, Thai consumers and producers may enjoy lower prices for some products that could be dumped from the Chinese export to Thai market. In the long run, however, the trade war will open an opportunity to gain more investment diverts to Thailand. If the U.S. and China continue to put higher tariffs on certain goods, some companies may relocate their manufacturing in the region as well. Again, the result can be varied with the new administration, as the current data signals that the import data might dramatically

⁶² Ibid.

drop because of Trump's most recent action in suspending USD 1.3 billion worth of duty-free trade from Thailand. According to the US trade representative's office, the move amounted to a suspension of USD 1.3 billion in trade preferences for Thailand under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) program at present, the GSP covers around USD4.5 billion of Thai exports which will take effect in six months. As a result, most effects take about a third of Thailand's products especially seafood exports.⁶³ In sum, Thailand will have to first manage a new plan to minimize its effect. While Trump is still in office, there is no guarantee that Thai will be able to negotiate a better deal but one thing for certain, this will affect the overall economy greatly. If President Trump wins the second election, the prediction above will not fade away, meanwhile, if other candidate wins the presidency, Thailand may have a chance to revive trade ties with the United States.

⁶³ Thai exports will suffer from GSP cut decision by US President Trump,(Oct,2019), retrieved it from : <https://www.thaipbsworld.com/thai-exports-will-suffer-from-gsp-cut-decision-by-us-president-trump/>

5.4 Analysis of internal political breakdown and military coups

The unfinished political structure

Earlier chapters in this research have already emphasized the importance of Thai uncertain political system. That is a part of how Thai manifests their foreign policy in countering the great power rivalry. It was critically stated in **Chapter II** that most scholars are ignoring what happening in Thailand that triggers the major powers to quickly questioning the status of their relationship as seen in **Chapter III**. And **IV**. Without realizing this factor, only a few studies have mentioned the connection. Underlying such ignorant, this study found that by looking at past military coups and the nature of Thai political structure all along, the result of these internal crises made a significant change in Thais' relationship with others. Thai monarchy, its council, political elite, and the army have largely dominated Thai politics since the 1970s (Riggs 1966; McCargo 2005).

Based on a historical study, the government relationship with citizens is always seen as hierarchical based. There can be separated into 3 groups: 1) Thailand is governed by a constitutional monarchy. The King is the Chief of State and the

Monarchy is hereditary. 2) The Prime Minister serves as the Head of Government and has all the executive powers 3) Citizens of Thailand is served as public opinion. Thailand's domestic politics often involved a clash between the three groups mentioned above. The complication begins when these groups are entitled to their own set of rules and beliefs.⁶⁴ As a result, it created the instability of political structure and consequently, weakening the power of the democratic system overall. Considering 13 successful coups and many more coup attempts since the beginning of the 20th century. Indeed, Thailand has developed what many experts call a “coup culture.”

Thailand does not appear to be responding to economic downturns or specific threats to the nation’s security. Instead, Neher (1992, 585) quoted a change in Thai government is best viewed as “an unpatterned, ad hoc event dependent on changing allegiances and power advantages held by various elite groups, such as politicians, bureaucrats, capitalist business leaders, and military officers”.⁶⁵ Why

⁶⁴ Chanlett-Avery, Emma., Dolven Ben and, Mackey Wil. Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations(Dec 13, 2018), retrieve it from : <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF10253.pdf>

⁶⁵ Farrelly, Nicholas. "Why Democracy Struggles: Thailand's Elite Coup Culture." Australian Journal of International Affairs 67, no. 3 (2013): 281-96.

would the instability of political structure affect foreign policy and diplomatic relationships? Simply, the changes in government whether democratic or autocratic will form Thai foreign policy according to their interests in the short term. These interests often lead to different directions. The most obvious example is Junta's government. When many experts are predicting that Thailand is now moving closer to China both economically and politically, whereas it is a military decision to strengthen military ties and empower military forces. Not only military bureaucrats had intervened with the political system, but the action had created a fragile in the system itself to move further away from democracy value. After the coup in 2014, Junta's military coup had announced the change in section 279 of the constitution to avoid further conflict and corruption. The new constitution, however, was supervised by the military itself and the law will take effect from 2017 election onward. Under this supervision, the rule of election changes. The army can nominate 250 members for a joint sitting of the senate, and the 500 members in the House of Representative are directly elected. Because of the change in the constitution, general Prayuth only needs 126 votes out of 500 members of the lower house to reach the

combined threshold and then will become a prime minister.⁶⁶ In other words, the election after the coup 2014 was designed to ensure a military lock on power. The following diagram (**Figure. 4**) explains the dynamic change of Thai politics in recent periods.

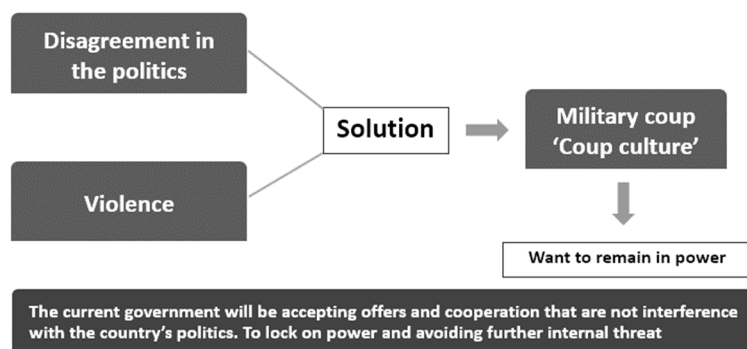


Figure 4. The diagram explains the dynamic change of Thai politics in recent periods.

According to the diagram above, it becomes more obvious whenever Thailand face disagreement in politics, it is common to see many protesters come

⁶⁶ Merieau, Euginie. “How Thailand became the World’s last military dictatorship” (Mar 20, 2019), The Atlantic, retrieved it from : <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/03/thailand-military-junta-election-king/585274/>

out on a street for the demonstration against the government, sometimes, peacefully, other times end in violence causing the loss of many lives. Note that, such a tragic event often ended with military intervention. What is more interesting is the fact that the military was not acting on its behalf, sometimes, was the order of higher authorities whose we may refer to as the chief of the state. For most of the bloody coups in a historical event, military intervention has one goal which is to deliberate any actions that may bring the country into misery and guarantee peace and safety for Thai citizens. Of course, all action executed by the military was a clear rejection of the democratic system. The question of democracy was full of ambiguity and controversy as we speak. With more and more military intervention in Thai politics, 2014 coup marked a new direction for Thailand itself and even distancing the democratic ideal further away. To understand Thai political cultures, one cannot simply make a judgment by looking at one group alone. Taking into consideration of all events and actors that involve in this change, the power of old authorities never disappears. Perhaps, such an unfinished structure was a cause of all uncertainty in the political system. Yet, it all depends on what side image we perceived. If the discussion is based on military and the elite groups, the answer will be different from the one that based on people's perspective. Above all this, Thailand never take advise

from neither the United States nor China. In the negative view, this uncertainty will continue to damage its political system, however, the positive consequence, as one can perceive, is that such certainty allows Thailand to conduct foreign policy the way it wants to be.

2014 Military coup reflected the bilateral relationship

Since the end of absolute monarchy in 1932, Thailand has experienced many military interventions, with 13 successful coups and coup attempts over decades. As Powell, Jonathan and Clayton stated “Thailand is the most economically developed country among the countries in the post-Cold War era in which military coups have been successfully staged. Moreover, since the late 1990s, Thailand is the only country, except for Burkina Faso, in which elected governments were overthrown by direct military coups twice in less than a decade”.⁶⁷ As earlier mentioned, the quick negative response from Washington implied that the military coup damaged the U.S.-Thai relationship. Not only that Washington has suspended military

⁶⁷ see Powell, Jonathan and Clayton Thyne, “Coups d'etat, 1950 to Present” dataset. Available at http://www.uky.edu/~clthyn2/coup_data/home.htm (accessed 2 June 2017).

assistance and arms sales for Thailand, but it has also continued to criticize the Junta government act on disregard democracy value.⁶⁸

In 2015, US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, Daniel Russell, criticized Thailand's martial laws publicly during his visit to Bangkok. He mentioned, "Our relationship with Thailand has been challenged and affected by the military coup that removed a democratically-elected government, we are concerned about significant restraints on freedoms since the coup, including restrictions on speech and assembly."⁶⁹

Two key issues that will influence Thailand's relationship with the United States are the future direction of Thai domestic politics and Sino-US competition in Asia. The current Thai military worried the United States because the government has determined to stay in control for a prolonged period. As early mentioned, the new constitution that changes the rule of the election in Thailand, had helped the current junta leaders retain power. The army can now appoint the members of the

⁶⁸ "One Year after Thai Coup, No End in Sight for Military Rule," Voice of America, May 20, 2015

⁶⁹ US Embassy in Thailand, "Remarks of Assistant Secretary Daniel Russel," <https://th.usembassy.gov/remarks-ofassistant-secretary-daniel-russel/>

Senate, who have veto power over the House of Representatives. Thus, the Prime Minister does not need to be a member of any house.⁷⁰ Yet, the bilateral relationship only restores when the Trump administration lowers the importance of democracy and less interference with Thai politics.

In contrast, China supported the coup. This became the main reason why the Junta government has made some concessions to China.⁷¹ Thailand is now acquiring new military stockpiles which include many weapons and equipment and three submarines from China.⁷² Thus, the economic deal is expand rapidly as China quickly invests over \$15 billion in high-speed rail project and take this opportunity to engage with Thailand. In short, China and the United States both fall into trap of Thais' domestic crisis. They both are seeking a way to account for this issue. To put it into assumptions, the article on the future of Thai-U.S. best captured this result.⁷³

⁷⁰ "Thailand Unveils New Constitution Draft to Public," Deutsche Welle, March 29, 2016

⁷¹ Ian Storey, Thailand's Post-Coup Relations with China and America: More Beijing, Less Washington (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2015).

⁷² Busbarat, Pongphisoot, "Thai-US Relations in the Post-Cold War Era :Untying the relationship" (2017)

⁷³ The Future of Thai-US. Relations, view of Thai and American Leader on the Bilateral Relationship and ways forward (Aug,2018). The Asian foundation. P-20

(1) Thailand's priority is to carefully balance major power and avoid taking a side. The historical document showed that Thai diplomacy always rely upon geopolitical balancing. This was obvious since the colonial era. Which in line with path dependency conceptual framework. To this analogy of 'Bamboo bending with the wind', Thai diplomat embrace Thai diplomacy as a country that can cooperate, negotiate and be friend with everyone. The soft approach comes with the expectation that Thai would create good relations among foreign nations. This 'omnidirectional diplomacy' allows Thailand to balance its policy with great powers. It captured best in the statement given by Former Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman in 1999:

“When we know that great powers always compete for power, we must fall into nobody's arms, but maintain the policy of equidistance — not leaning too much towards anyone who will tie us so tightly that we

cannot breathe comfortably. This is the principle that always guided me when I was responsible for Thai foreign affairs”(Thana Khoman,1999)⁷⁴

- (2) Thai threat perceptions are largely focused on internal and non-traditional threats. With Thai busy dealing the chaotic in the country, despite publicly rejecting foreign countries to intervene, Thai diplomatic relation was automatically driven in its way. In this category, Thailand has similarly constructed an alliance with China as it had done with the United States.

Thailand’s domestic politics, and in particular the state of its democracy, will continue to influence its foreign policy perceptions. Unlike some neighboring countries that depend on their foreign policy on great power influences. On the bilateral relationship aspect, the result of the political crisis within Thailand has been a major key to shape Thai foreign policy with great powers, particularly, the United States. While this perception allows Thailand to constantly rebalance and reengage

⁷⁴ Thanat Khoman, “The Initiative of Establishing the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)”, in *Collection of Articles and Speeches on Thai Foreign Affairs from the Past to the Present [in Thai]*, edited by Corrine Phuangkasem, et al. (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 1999), pp. 186–87

its foreign policy with major powers. The future trajectory for Thai democracy remains uncertain.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Blaxland John, Raymond Gred. Tipping the Balance in Southeast Asia? Thailand, the United States and China (November , 2017), retrieved it from : http://bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/uploads/2017-11/cog_37.pdf

Chapter VI

Conclusion

6.1 Future direction

Taking the analysis into a future direction of Thailand's foreign policy in dealing with China and the U.S., there are numerous reasons why Thailand would continue to practice its 'myth' of diplomatic dance. For one, Thailand will continue the fundamental policy that flexibility and pragmatism guide Thailand's foreign policy in dealing with both powers in the time of uncertainties in the regional order.⁷⁶ Path dependency plays an important role in understanding Thai foreign policy and how it continued to reconstruct throughout history. The Key strategies that Thailand diplomacy holds in maintaining a mutual relationship with the U.S. and China can be summarized as follows.

- (1) Military-to-military alliance: the study found that the military aspect was indeed the strongest factor in maintaining the relationship with the U.S.

⁷⁶ Michael R. Chambers, "'The Chinese and the Thais Are Brothers': The Evolution of the Sino-Thai Friendship," *Journal of Contemporary China* 14, no. 45 (2005).

Despite many post-coup sanctions from the U.S. Thai and the U.S. militaries continues their usual practice. This can be seen in the annual Cobra Gold exercises in 2015. It is also undeniable that Thailand's alliance with the United States has remained an important element for the country's security. While in the present time, Junta government is not hesitant to increase its military partnership with China as well. Through this aspect, Thai will not lose its security ties with the United States or China.

- (2) Economic partnership: Thai-Sino relations will likely gain more momentum than the image of Thai-US relations after the post-Cold War era. Considering many decisions made by Thai government to strengthen economic ties with China rather than with the United States. A clear example is given in the case study such as the BRI initiatives. On a larger scale, the impact of the U.S.-China trade war will be both negative and positive to Thai importers and exporters. Yet, the future prediction is out of scope for this research.
- (3) Internal political imbalance: because of many take turns democratic v. military government. The imbalance of the internal political structure resulted in forming different policies depending on the current needs.

Therefore, it benefits in term of projecting different directions to other foreign powers within a short term, depicts the ‘flexibility’ and ‘pragmatism’.

All in all, Thailand has indeed drawn closer to china over the past decades. However, this does not mean Thai has abandoned its tradition of great power balancing. So far, Thai has not yet lean heavily on any side but continue to maintain what once already have. Despite many downturns in the relationship with the United States since the military coup in 2014, the military tie between Thai and the U.S. remained strong, so as with China in terms of economic partnership and maximize military cooperation. What is more important for Thailand is not only to balance itself with major powers but to concentrate on the domestic chaos within the country.

6.2 Conclusion

To summarize, the introduction chapter revealed how Thai successfully escape European colonialism and was served as a buffer zone for the British and French. In the half part of this study, it also unpacks the story of how Thai become an important partner to the United States and China. During the cold war, Thailand has also proved to be a pivotal partner to the United State, accommodated in many

major wars situated in the Southeast Asian continent. Likewise, the Sino-relationship continue to grow surprisingly in the few decades.

All in all, the study argued that the behavior of Thai state determines the direction of its foreign policy. In general, Thailand's foreign policy option is to not take sides but rather maintain foreign relations that best promote its national interests. From 'Bamboo bending with the wind' to 'Diplomatic Dance'. Such analogy manifests the path dependency framework where historical decisions do matter to how Thai deal with major powers. For the first part of the analysis, the findings suggest that the bilateral relationship with the United States is starting to drop but to some extent rebound the tie. Meanwhile, Thai government continues to move closer to China.

Through discourse analysis, many scholars believed that the 21st-century witnesses the challenge of China's sphere of influence over the Southeast Asian continent. The United States, on the other hand, was becoming less and less dominant in the region because of Trump's decision to prioritize 'America First' policy in place. In addition, Thailand foreign policy, as many others believe, is now stepping closer toward China, leaving the long friendship with the United States behind. Whether this belief will become more visible in the upcoming years or not,

the perspective of viewing such a foreign policy shift is two folds: external and internal. In order to critically analyze Thai diplomatic' s skills and foreign policy in dealing with great power rivalry, all factors need to consider both external aspects and internal aspects. In this study, the author found that the two most important factors that allow Thai to continue balancing with US-China are the military-to-military long time alliance and the uncertainty of Thai national interest that is driven by the complicated political system within the country as a result of much political crisis. With many unpredictable futures to come, for now, Thai will continue to serve as an important partner to China and the United States. As they need the support of both countries as much as China and the U.S. need them.

6.3 Limitation of the research

As previously mentioned in the conclusion section, Thai diplomatic skill strategically depends on three important aspects which are politically, economically, and military, Although, this study has a number of implications, it is important to note the limitation of the analysis. The first problem of this study is there are not enough observations to cover all the detail that is already outdated by the literature. Another concern is lacking accessible resources, some government data was not entirely accessible, while other important historical documents are partially missing.

Finally, the limitation also concerns the political dimension of Thailand, it is to be understood that the political system in Thailand is always complicated. I will not deny that Thai military government has acted in favor of China in recent years. But my argument stands the same, Thailand will likely maintain the traditional strategy despite the ongoing conflict of US-China and yet domestic politics has largely played a role since the end of world war II. Likewise, the political crisis in Thailand continues to grow strong as more protesters are taking place all over the country, requesting Prime Minister Junta to quite the position. On the other hand, the next elected U.S. president may signal the possibility of change in state relationships not only for Thailand but the globe overall. Given that, the structure of this research, by design, it addresses mainly on the most recent debates and many given data are showing the statistic from 2000s and of those significant changes up until 2019. Future research on this topic should focus on extending this scope by looking through 2020.

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