CHOOSING BETWEEN “FAMILY” AND “FRIEND”:  
A PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION OF IDENTITIES IN THAI FOREIGN POLICYMAKING  
TOWARDS CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES

Introduction
This paper proposes to examine the role of identity in Thailand’s changing relations with China and the US as an underexplored factor that helps provide context for understanding differences in the development of these relationships. Two major materialist approaches, neo-realism and liberal institutionalism, largely dominate the current scholarship explaining Southeast Asia’s international relations. Both agree on one fundamental assumption that flexibility and pragmatism guide Thailand’s foreign policy towards both powers with a goal of balancing their influence and hedging against uncertainties in the regional order in the context of China’s rise. While neo-realism highlights politico-strategic interests in these relationships, liberal institutionalism adds the effects of economic interdependence as another aspect of this strategy so that Thailand benefits from China’s economic growth.

To date, however, neither of these approaches explores the role of ideas observable in Thailand’s perception of its relationship with the two powers. That is, Thailand on many occasions adopts a family image/identity with China, while only refers to the US simply as a friend. Although the use of metaphorical images may simply be a rhetoric in the conduct of diplomacy, metaphors demonstrate how policymakers “recognise patterns and relationship amongst concrete and conceptual categories” or “similarities and differences in what they encounter in both the old and the new,” Without an adequate analysis of these ideational factors in Thailand’s foreign policymaking, we undervalue their impacts in current policies leading towards concession, cooperation, tension, and conflict between Thailand and these foreign counterparts.

In a nutshell, the author argues that the family image of Thai-Sino relations gains more powerful momentum in Thailand’s foreign policymaking than the friendship image of Thai-US relations in the post-Cold War era. These identities influence Thailand’s continuous efforts to maintain a smooth relationship with Beijing while having a relatively lax attitude towards the US despite the existing Thai-US security alliance.

Explaining Discrepancies in Thailand’s Relations with Beijing and Washington: A Room for Ideational Approach

From the perspectives of the dominant International Relations (IR) literature, Thailand’s developing close ties with both powers is part of its hedging strategy, which serves national interests. Form the realist approach, Bangkok’s main objective is to preserve status quo both domestically and internationally. Maintaining security ties with the US will keep the regional order and help hedge against Thailand’s future dependence on China. The institutionalist school agrees with the general hedging policy approach. Instead of strengthening security alliance, however, it offers a more cooperative approach through diversifying economic engagement with multiple partners and engaging China into regional institutions. Whilst engaging China will ensure Thailand’s continued economic growth, trade diversification will also help create economic interdependence. Ultimately, this strategy will help China realise that cooperation through regional institutions offers more benefits than it does otherwise.

These dominant approaches share the view that identities are exogenous to foreign policymaking and merely a policy tool to achieve politico-strategic and economic interests. Although there is a growing number of studies applying ideational approaches, particularly social constructivism, to analysing relations in Southeast Asia, the main research agenda is primarily regional. It focuses on the construction of a regional identity through regional norms so that the region can will achieve a common policy stance to regional challenges including China. At the same time, it also offers a policy that encourages the engagement of China into regional institutions so that it will learn how to adjust to regional norms and expected behaviour. This will eventually help shape China’s positive and responsible roles. While this focus has provided an outlook of regional attempt to maintain regional peace and prosperity, it tends to overlook the internal dynamics within the group. Despite regional pushes, building regional common identity is still embryonic. Each actor’s policy and behaviour towards both powers may determine the success or failure of this collective action. As a result, the study of individual countries offers this merit and can fill this significant gap.

In this regard, the dominant IR approaches remain unclear concerning Thailand’s evolving relations with the two powers despite the fact that maintaining close ties with both powers may be the optimal policy option. First, in certain circumstances deepening ties with China...
negatively affects Thai-US relations, hence diverging from the optimal policy. Second, even without the China factor, Thai-US relations have been relatively static and lacked a clear direction notwithstanding the existence of military alliance. The Thai-American relationship even has experienced frequent ups and downs in the post-Cold War era, which is opposite to the smooth Thai-Sino relationship. These issues raise a significant challenge to the conventional understanding of Thailand’s flexible foreign policy that aims to maintain the balance between external powers. Thailand’s position appears to have gradually developed into a realm of policy bandwagoning with China. This paper, therefore, explains this ongoing development of Thailand’s policy direction through examining ideational elements, particularly, identities that Thai policy elites hold when they view their country in relations with China and the US.

It is important to note here that this paper does not take identities rigid or unchanged. Collective images are conditioned by the historical structure and changed through times. Despite their fluidity, “there are periods and places where these ideational elements are stable enough so that observers can analyse them.” At the same time, collective images may be several, some of which may be opposed. Thus, the conflict of rival images at a particular time may indicate the potential change in material and institutional foundation for the new structure. Against this understanding, this study firstly traces the origins of the images that Thai policy elites uphold about China and the US, and then examines their strengths and weaknesses of their influence in Thai foreign policymaking at different times and issues. Moreover, the research also recognises the emergence of competing images and perceptions that are developing within the Thai society about both powers. For instance, Beijing’s increasingly unaccommodating policy towards Thailand has started to weaken the positive effects of the family image. The change in American politics and Thailand’s future pathway towards installing democratic processes may help strengthen a positive perception of the American great friend. This new development will, therefore, constitute further changes in Thailand’s policy preferences and position in the future.

Research Design and Methodology

The observation above regarding Thailand’s foreign policy orientation towards the two powers points to a guiding research question: Does the family image have more positive impacts than the friendship image on Thai foreign policymaking? In other words, in the eyes of Thai policy elites, does this images create a ‘special relationship’ between Thailand and China? If so, how does this kinship image affect the value of Thailand’s security alliance with the US? To execute this research project, I firstly identify how these identities Thailand holds with both great powers emerged. Given the existing of them, then, I will analyse how these identities impact Thailand’s relations with both powers.

This research focuses on Thailand’s policy positioning towards both powers, hence paying a primary attention to policy elites. Policy elites in this project include members of political, economic or professional networks that directly conduct policy or influence its formulation and decision-making. In Thailand, foreign policy elites largely include political leaders, government officials in foreign policy affairs including those in the Foreign Ministry, Prime Minister’s Office, the military, and other planning agencies such as the National Board of Social and Economic Development, Thailand’s International Cooperation Agency. The members of the Thai royal family are also part of this group, which has asserted their roles on different occasions in Thailand’s foreign relations with both China and the US. The project also takes into account the role of pertinent actors including businesspeople, policy think tanks, and academics. These actors are involved in promoting certain policy directions or giving advice on specific issues as part of the policymaking process.

For this analysis, state identity is defined as a set of broadly accepted representations of a country’s cultural and societal beliefs about its own orientation in the international political arena, as manifested by the rhetoric of official policy, academia, and popular culture. This interactive view necessitates exploring not only the rhetoric of political elites but also reaction from a broad swath of the public, including commentary from scholars in the press, public opinion polls, and posts on the internet. This project will, therefore, adopt a qualitative method with an interdisciplinary approach that combines insights from not only international relations and political science, but also history, anthropology, and cultural studies in order to understand these complexities and their implications for Thailand’s self-images vis-à-vis China and the US.

The principal methodology employed in this project involves document research from various sources and elite interviews as far as access is allowed. The interview and archival research will unveil Thai policymakers’ interpretation of its self-images in relation to both China and the US, how these identities influence their policy framing towards the two powers. Unofficial voices from policy elites and commentators in the media are also useful in illuminating the emotional factors at play behind the official rhetoric. Potential sources of materials can be found in the newly accessible archival collection at the Thai Foreign Ministry. Since the promulgation of the Official Information Act of 1997, access to declassified documents at the Foreign Ministry is made possible. Researchers can obtain primary documents, which have not yet been fully analysed in the literature on Thailand’s politics and foreign relations. Newspapers and other online sources that involve discussion of the Thai public’s views on China and the US will also help expand our perspective on the convergence and divergence between the images constructed amongst elites and ordinary people.

---

Thailand’s Constructed Images of China and the United States

The long history of interactions between Thailand and the two powers yield an interesting observation. Historically, Thailand had longstanding experiences with the two countries prior to the end of World War II. Thailand was the first Asian country that established formal diplomatic ties with the US in 1883, while the Siamese kingdoms had diplomatic and trade contacts for centuries with imperial China.13 Both powers have also played significant roles in many episodes of Thailand’s security, politics, and development since World War II.

Yet, Thai policy elites and even the public display their affiliation with each country in different ways. Although “friendship” and “partnership” are generally found in most diplomatic language, the language used in the Thai-US relationship never transcends into any kin terms found in the Thai-Sino relations. Thai elites have often referred to China as a family member. This closeness has generated the expression that “the Chinese and the Thai are not remote but of the same family” (ไทย-จีนใช้อื่นไกลพี่น้องกัน--Thai chin chai uen klai phi nong kan in Thai or 中泰一家親--Zhong tai yi jia qin in Chinese).14 For the Thai-US relations, American contributions to Thailand security and economic development throughout the Cold War era has encouraged the viewed that the US is the “Great Friend” or Maha Mit (มหามิตร) in Thai.15

Interestingly, the image of China in Thailand is relatively more positive as we can see from the family metaphor. This is quite remarkable considering the fact that Thailand has mixed experiences with China encompassing both animosities during the Cold War and amities thereafter. Bangkok’s perception towards Beijing could have been more suspicious as we see in other Southeast Asian countries regarding its support of communist movements in the region during the Cold War. Since the Cambodia Conflict in the 1980s Sino-Thai relations has been strengthened and conflict and tensions are less outstanding. Compared to China, the experience Thailand has had with the US both within policy elites and the public is also positive as the US has never posed any security threats to the kingdom. However, regardless of their long-term friendship and close cooperation, particularly, during the Cold War, the US image in Thailand fluctuates and turned negative in the early 1990s and has plummeted since the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 and, again, after the military coup in 2014.

The question arises why foe becoming friend is easier than friends maintaining close friendship. To explain this critical juncture, I look at Thailand’s self-images or identities associated with both China and the US through its historical and social interactions.

---

14 The Central People’s Government of the People's Republic of China, "Prem Li Ke Qian Meets with Princess Sirindhorn: Reiterates “China and Thailand Are of the Same Family” Has Passed on from Generation to Generation," The Chinese Central Government Network, http://big5.gov.cn/gate/big5/www.gov.cn/lhdz/2013-10/12/content_2505388.htm. It is noteworthy here that the Thai equivalent of this expression uses the word Phi Nong (elder and younger brothers), which signifies hierarchy in the relationship. More discussion on the possible origin of this usage can be seen in
China’s Evolving Image in Thailand: From Suspicion to Trust

Conventionally, the policy elites and the public usually resort to explaining this intimacy based on a smooth assimilation thesis based on Thai society’s acceptance of its ethnic Chinese. It also refers to their mutual politico-strategic and economic interests that have existed since the 1980s Cambodia Conflict. However, it is not necessarily that such a close cooperation in the Cambodia issue within a decade could easily transform hostility and suspicion to friendship to the degree that Thailand comfortably identifies itself as China’s relative. In international relations where states are equal, it is quite remarkable to see a country would subsume itself into such a hierarchical relationship as implicitly prescribed in “family” term. Other countries do not describe their relations with China using a kin relationship. Even Singapore, a country with an ethnic Chinese majority, has been very careful not to adopt the “kinsman country” in its identity with China.

Contrary to the above belief, the Thai state was relatively ambivalent in adopting its kinship image with the Chinese in its major historical narrative. In most part, Thai society viewed the Chinese as the other under the Thai feudal (prai) system. In the nineteenth century, the divide between the Thai natives and the Chinese immigrants was also reinforced by the treaty with the European powers, under which some Chinese opted for the colonial protection to secure their economic interests. Despite the long history of intermarriage between the two groups, the Chinese still remained the other until they assimilated into the Thai socio-legal structure. In such case, they subjugated their formal Chinese identity and adopted Thai ones such in as names, practices, and norms, to secure their political and economic privileges.

Moreover, the Thai state also remained suspicious of its Chinese minority throughout the history. Many Chinese groups control major economic activities in Thailand such as rice trade, major export crops, mining industry, port operation, and banking. In the past, some Chinese also engaged in illegal businesses such as opium dens, gambling houses, and protection rackets. Conflicts between clan groups occasionally escalated to violence or even riots, both in Bangkok and other port cities, and these bring headaches to the authorities. In the early twentieth century, the Thai state was also concerned about growing republicanism amongst the Chinese in the kingdom which was associated with Sun Yat Sen’s political campaign against the Qing Dynasty.

Similar security unease was also felt after World War II when China explicitly supported the communist movements throughout Southeast Asia. Therefore, the Chinese in Thailand had been subject to state monitoring, control, and regulation. This is evident in anti-Chinese policies in different periods, including King Rama VI’s anti-Chinese sentiment, the nationalist Phibun government during World War II, and the anti-communist policy in the Cold War. Under these
circumstances, the Thai state forced the Chinese, for example, to naturalize, cede their Chinese practices and education, and nationalize their businesses. Given this history, the otherness of the ethnic Chinese in Thai society continues to the present day.

Rather than the product of Sino-Thai relations in the late 1980s, the author is of the view that the family identity/image building amongst Thai elites is the Thai state’s strategy to cope with its internal consolidation of power. Moreover, identity formation is an interactive direction. That is, it is not only the Chinese who transformed themselves to be Thai according to the assimilation thesis, but the Thai themselves also embraced Chinese-ness as part of their identity. Certainly, close intermingle between the two groups help facilitate this process. Although it is largely a product of internal socialisation, the image has become a normative order in which the Thai state later adopted to socialise with China in the foreign policy arena. Thailand has determinedly introduced this family image to represent its good ties with China especially in recent time.

The role of the Thai Royal Family as part of the reconstruction of this image is important, particularly, Princess Sirindorn and Princess Chulaborn. The former has studied Chinese culture and language and has extensive travel across China. She was awarded "Chinese Connection - Top Ten International Friends of China" in 2001. Her sister, Princess Chulaborn also promoted cultural links between the two nations. She initiated the organisation of cultural performances under the banner “Chinese and Thai are family” in 2001. In several contexts, the metaphor becomes a reassurance for the Thai elite who sought political endorsement and recognition from Beijing both in civilian and military governments since the 1980s. For instance, former Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan stated “Thailand and China are brothers” to describe the bilateral ties during his visit in 1989. Former Prime Minister Prem Tinnasulanond also adopted a similar expression during his visit to China in 1992. He stated that “bilateral ties have been strengthened regardless of changes in our internal politics. This is because the Thais and the Chinese have close historical bonds, which can be regarded as brothers.” Interestingly, Premier Li Peng did not respond with the same tone, but only focused on mutual interest.

Though not adopting the similar expression in the early time, China has practically allowed Thailand to frame the relationship within this kinship image. This image has gained more recognition in recent years as official statements from China show the adoption of this expression more frequently. The statement of former Vice President Xi Jinping in 2001 during his visit to Thailand demonstrates this tendency.

[The phrase] “China and Thailand are of the same family” has represented a broad consensus of the two peoples…The Sino-Thai friendship passed down from generation to generation is the shared aspiration of the two peoples. I believe that China and Thailand are always in harmony, sharing weal and woe of good neighbours, good partners, good friends and relatives.

---

21 The Royal Thai Embassy in Beijing, A cable from the Thai Embassy in Beijing to the Foreign Ministry, 20 April 1992, No.69/2535.
American Image in Thailand: A Friend in Doubt

In contrast to the bumpy development of Thailand’s relations with China and the Chinese at large in history, Bangkok’s view towards the American counterpart was relatively positive. Thailand was the first Asian nation that established the diplomatic relations with the US in 1883. There were not major diplomatic tensions between Siam and the US as the latter had no colonial interests in the region unlike other European powers, particularly, Britain and France. Commercial activities dominated the historical relationship, while the American missionaries faced less obstacles for their religious and charitable activities in Thailand. The end of the Second World War opened a significant chapter between the two nations, which deepened the bilateral relationship. Washington denounced Thailand’s war declaration towards the US during the wartime. Unlike other Axis powers, Thailand was not treated as a war belligerent and Thai political structure remained largely intact. Therefore, the American image amongst the Thai elites and the public was quite positive as a saviour rather than a threat.

The context of the US anti-communist campaign in Southeast Asia largely framed the postwar relationship in which Thailand became a major US ally in Asia. This Cold War episode developed a symbiotic and “special relationship” between the two nations. While the US gained access to Thai military facilities for its war operations in Indochina, Thailand received enormous military, financial and technical assistance. The withdrawal of the American troops in Thailand in the late 1970s did not have a strong impact on this special relationship as the US continued lending its political support to the Thai elites. Particularly, Washington also backed Bangkok’s position on the issue of the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia throughout the 1980s, including the inclusion of the Khmer Rouge fraction into the negotiation party.

However, the relationship started to experience negative impulses during the late 1980s onwards. As the golden days of the Thai economy, Thailand gained larger trade surpluses with the US. As a result, it received regular pressures from America, especially, on the issue of unfair trade and the violation of intellectual property rights. The US became more aggressive in enforcing free and fair trade with Thailand to rectify US trade deficits under the Omnibus Trade Bill. The US threatened Thailand it would use Special 301 provision that allows the US Trade Representative to impose retaliation such as the suspension of Thai exports under the GSP-eligible product list. The pressure forced Thailand to rectify its laws governing the protection of intellectual property rights and open market access. As a result, many Thai policymakers viewed US policy as bullying and insincere. The former economic and foreign minister Surakiart Sathirathai opined that American protectionist policy led to misunderstanding and friction in the bilateral ties. A survey by Congressional Research

---

24 Considering the atrocity during the student massacre in 1976 by the military, the American remained relatively silent. No political sanction or reprimand and military cooperation continued as seen from the start of joint military exercise Cobra Gold in 1982 that continues until today. The US military also gains access to Thailand’s U-Tapao naval airfield in Thailand’s eastern seaboard upon request.
Service also suggested that this resentment was widely held among the Thai public since the end of the 1980s.\footnote{Raymond J Ahearn, "US-Thai Economic Relations in the 1990s : Views of Some Members of Thailand's Economic Elite," in \textit{CRS Report for Congress} (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 1992).}

Moreover, the overall Thai-US relationship has lacked vigorous development despite the continuity of the security alliance and annual military exercises. The alliance does not always guarantee Thailand’s willingness to accommodate American policy in the post-Cold War era. Critics often see Thailand as a “reluctant ally” and point to the fact that the relationship suffers from the disappearance of common threat, which was the basis of close ties during the Cold War. Apart from the lack of positive dynamics, suspicions, conflicts, and misunderstandings are easily observable in the Thai-US relationship.

The upsurge of anti-American sentiment amongst the Thai public in the past two decades since the end of the 1990s has also complicated the ties. The sentiment mainly grew out of the disappointment on US cold-shoulder reaction to Thailand’s economic difficulties during the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997. The US was criticized not only for its minimalist help to Thailand but also backing the IMF’s austerity program. The IMF rescues package was mainly derived from the IMF, ADB, and Asian countries led by Japan and China but not the US.\footnote{David Sanger, "First Part of Baht Bailout Is Authorized by IMF," \textit{The New York Times}, August 21 1997.} By contrast, the US responded quickly to the case of South Korea where substantial American troops and banks were situated. US Treasury advised Western financial institutions there not to pull out; that did not happen earlier to Thailand.\footnote{Kishore Mahbubani, \textit{The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East} (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), 120.} Therefore, the unenthusiastic assistance by the West and the US in the AFC upset many people in Thailand and unveiled true friendship and leadership to the Thais. Thai policymakers, therefore, doubted the US commitment that they had positively experienced during the Cold War. Thai policy elites have confirmed an understanding that Thailand no longer constitutes a significant place within the American policy. The US was not only constrained to provide security assurance but also reduced its economic concession and aid to Thailand. The Thai disillusionment on their “Great Friend” has widened the trust deficit on its American ally.

The relationship gained positive momentum due to the consolidation of Thai democracy in the early 2000s and Thailand’s cooperation in the US Global War on Terror (GWOT). However, it swiftly changed following the two military interventions in 2006 and especially in 2014. In this episode, the Thai policymakers started to cast doubt of the friendship it has with the American. US pressure on Thailand against the military role has received enormous complaints from both Thai establishments and the public. They expected the US to show more sympathies to its small ally rather than pressures. Therefore, the perception of US as a benign power that showed resilience in the transition of leadership in Thai politics since the Cold War met with the opposite reality. The US disciplinary approach, especially since the Obama administration to political changes and human rights problems in Thailand, became a source of weakening Thai inspiration of the American leadership and its “Great Friend”.

---

\footnotetext{28} Kishore Mahbubani, \textit{The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East} (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), 120.
The Influences of Thailand’s Images on Its Policy Towards China and the United States

Given the aforementioned images Thailand holds with regard to China and the US, it is interesting to observe how they impact Thailand’s relationship with both powers. Despite the fact that both images of kinship and friendship are positive identities, there are nuances between them that these identities effect Thailand’s policy direction in different ways. The author proposes that the family image has a greater policy effect as it helps maintain the smooth Thai-Chinese relations in the post-Cold War period, while friendship image with the US is less powerful reinforcement.

Although the Western concept of modern state system governs contemporary international relations, the degree of which it penetrates each region or country varies. Therefore, pre-existing practices and norms may influence the cognitive settings that direct or shape policymaking’s worldview. As state interaction is ultimately the product of human and social interaction at large. International Relations and Foreign Policy Analysis subfield can benefit from studies in other disciplines that may lend relevant analytical lenses to understand the nuances between social relations based on kinship and friendship. In this regard, sociological research suggests that humans tend to be more loyal and cooperative within the same kin group. Whilst relationship between different groups can also be cooperative, it is prone to competition and conflict if reciprocity of benefits is not achieved.29

The observance of social relations also corresponds to several concepts in Chinese and Thai cultures. In Chinese society, the concept of social network or Guanxi (關係) governing different types of relationships depends on the level of trust between people. In one aspect, family bonds have a special status, hence assuming closer ties within guanxi.30 Similarly, the concept of family or krob krua (ครอบครัว) in Thai society also gives more importance towards members who are related by bloodline.31 In addition, the expression of politeness and consideration become an expected social behaviour as expressed in the notion of keqi (客氣) in Chinese society and kreng jai (เกรงใจ) in Thai society. Keqi shows in the forms of deference, gift-giving, and using kinship terms to address non-kin relationships,32 for example. Kreng jai in Thai, however, can go beyond showing such politeness and simple consideration. Kreng jai implies a sense of consideration or care of others more than that of oneself. One may concede his/her own interests to facilitate the other’s needs so that he/she can maintain a good relationship.33

In this connection, the author is of the view that political actors are not isolated from such social norms and expectations. Therefore, these cultural cues can enter into foreign relations between Thailand and its counterparts. They can perform such social norms through the process of self-identification in relations with other actors within their own society or with foreign counterparts.

Therefore, self-identities or images can play a significant role in determining the interests that political actors may define with different actors they are interaction with. Whilst friends can cooperate for mutual benefits, family members may concede or compromise their interests to maintain family ties.

From the above perspective, the images Thailand has with both powers reinforce the pre-existing socio-cultural norms governing interpersonal and social relations in Asian societies. By self-identifying as a family with China, not only can Bangkok frame a policy discourse that help smoothen its relations with Beijing but also shapes its foreign policy behaviour. Close ties with China may offer venues to political and economic benefits such as accessing to the Chinese market and enhancing political and economic cooperation. Kinship affinity also comes with an expectation that members of the family respect the hierarchical structure of the group. As a greater power in every term, China is expected to assume a role in a higher hierarchy, e.g. as the “big brother”, while Thailand thinks of itself or is thought as a subordinate or “younger brother”.

By contrast to China, it is unimaginable to think that Thailand would identify itself as a family member with the American. Racial elements certainly prevent thinking of such ideational construct. For the Thai-US relations, as Hans Indorf puts it, “friendship remains important but is governed by the prescriptions of the national interest.” Therefore, the image of friendship implies a more equal status. Although the US may hold a great power status and could use its material power to force Thailand to shape its policy according to what it wants, such coercion is not sustainable. Tension, conflict, and rebellion occur when material force is weakened or when smaller states feel intimidated. Although the US is Thailand’s long-term friend, its past negative interactions with Thailand have reduce the degree of trust and friendship. In contrast, Thailand’s self-identification as a family member with China helps shape its positive interactions with China, particularly, when China has shown the willingness to help when Thailand is in need. Therefore, Thai elites tend to be willingness to cherish their ties with China and accommodate Chinese demands as the way to show their feeling of keqi and kreng jai.

Foreign Policy Directions

Based on the understanding of international relations as another aspect of social interactions as mentioned above, several observations can be drawn from Thailand’s policy directions towards China and the US. It is no doubt that as a smaller state Thailand’s optimal foreign policy is to maintain equidistance between the two powers. Thailand keeps friendly relations with both powers when there are no critical forces to push Thailand to choose between the two. This is a general policy direction that corresponds to the hedging strategy thesis and Thailand’s conventional posture of flexibility and pragmatism. A good example is evident in the fact that while Thailand maintains security arrangements with Washington, it has deepened ties with Beijing in every arena including security. Thailand’s joint military exercise with the US (Cobra

---

Gold) has continued until today since the early 1980s, and recently expanded to include multiparty participants including China as an observer. At the same time, Thailand and China also signed a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2012, one of which areas of cooperation is defence.

However, more interesting possibilities are different variations from or exceptions to this generalisation of policy direction. That is, Thailand can be reluctant to accommodate the US when such policy may be interpreted as part of the encirclement of China. In many circumstances, not only does Thailand observe Beijing’s stance but also compromise its interest to maintain the Sino-Thai relations by accepting China’s demands.

**Reluctance to comply with the US**

Thailand is hesitant to support the US policy when Thai policymakers perceive their policy may send a signal to Beijing that Thailand joins America’s strategic encirclement of China. There are several cases that indicate such tendency since the early post-Cold War period both in military and economic arenas. These include Bangkok’s denials of American access to U-Tapao naval airfield and the reluctance to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Agreement.

**Denials of US access to U-Tapao naval airfield:** Although the US no longer has a permanent military base in the kingdom since the late 1970s, its political and security commitment continued through diplomacy, military trainings and other assistance to Thailand. The US military generally gains access to Thailand’s U-Tapao naval airfield in Thailand’s eastern seaboard upon request. U-Tapao has provided an important facility in the region within the overall US new strategy of forward deployment in the post-Vietnam War context.

Nevertheless, the civilian government under Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai in 1994 refused to allow the American vessels to preposition in the Gulf of Thailand despite the fact that Thailand had just signed an agreement in 1993 with the US to provide logistic support for the American military. This can be viewed as a combination of economic confidence, the changes in domestic politics, as well as China’s growing presence and as a potential alternative to American power in the region. At the regional level, Thailand was concerned that the access to Thailand’s waters could disturb the closer ties between Bangkok and Beijing cultivated throughout the Cambodian Conflict and potential economic benefits from the growing Chinese economy. The US increasing pressure on trade issues with Thailand led to bilateral disputes since the late 1980s also added up a domestic pressure to give a tough response to America. It was reported that this decision was directed by Thai Army Commander in Chief, General Wimol Wongwanit, and was applauded as a declaration of independence from Washington. Therefore, Thailand’s denial of the US access this time demonstrates a deeper structural change governing the bilateral relations. As a result, it facilitated a growing divergence of perception and understanding of what the mutual interests between Thailand and the US.

Another denial took place during the Yingluck Shinawatra government (2011-2014). Yingluck’s support for NASA to use U-Tapao for scientific and climate studies in 2012 was delayed and halted due to the opposition forces both in and outside the parliament. The opposition and many critics raised the question of American strategic intention against China.
that Thailand should avoid. It is undeniable also that this issue is entangled in Thailand’s political polarisation and China factor can influence the government’s decision. These events point to the fact that such a longstanding issue of common strategic interest as in this nature of military cooperation became questionable in Thailand even within the military, who had been a cornerstone of sustaining the Thai-American ties.

**Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP):** Thailand refused to participate in the TPP arrangement for a number of reasons. Firstly, there was no agreement among domestic stakeholders on whether the TPP would benefit Thailand. While gaining wider market access was the main reason to join, many criticised that the rules and regulations in TPP, including patient access rights to generic medicines, higher labour costs and environmental standards, government procurement, would eventually prevent Thailand to gain such benefits. Thailand was also concerned that the TPP may overshadow ASEAN “Centrality” in the regional economic integration. Thailand’s preference for ASEAN to be in a driver’s seat of regional processes, in turn, allows China to gain advantage and influence to the region as a locomotive for economic growth. Many arrangements in East/Southeast Asia since the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 have evolved without American involvement such as ASEAN-China FTA, ASEAN+3 FTA or, recently, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Therefore, many countries viewed that the American push for TPP, which excluded China, was part of its balance against China’s rising influence in the region. In response to the TPP, Beijing has expressed its support to RCEP, which includes China but not the US. In this connection, Thailand has been unenthusiastic to partake in the TPP, despite being approached by American officials for many times.

Although, politically, Thailand agreed to consider its participation in TPP, Thailand never progressed substantially towards joining the TPP in practice. Thai officials even denied participating in TPP talks. For example, it is reported that the Thai officials was slow in pushing for progress and sometimes even denied Thailand’s involvement in the TPP. This denial was against the evidence shown on the official website for the TPP negotiation round in Peru in April 2013, which indicated that Thailand was part of the discussion.35 Thai politics reached a stalemate after November 2013 when anti-government protests occupied government offices and major streets in Bangkok for almost six months. The military coup in May 2014 stalled the progress even further as Washington suspended high-level contacts with the Thai junta. This domestic disturbance caused a significant delay in decision-making within the Thai government. Although the government of Prime Minister General Prayuth Chan-o-cha expressed its willingness to join the TPP on several occasions —such as at the US-ASEAN Special Leaders’ Summit in February 2016—a final decision had never been made.36 Therefore, it can imply that in terms of geopolitical perspective Thailand was also concerned that China could feel unhappy if it had jumped into TPP like its Southeast Asian counterparts, such as Singapore, Vietnam, and Malaysia.

Acceptance of Beijing’s leadership and demands

Thailand may even grant concessions to Beijing to smoothen and avoid conflicts even it may clash with Thailand’s optimal interests. The concession can be in forms of implicit acceptance of China’s leadership in the area where Thailand traditionally asserts its role. For accepting China’s demands, Thailand is willing to receive suboptimal benefits from cooperation. A number of cases indicate this policy direction including in the regional leadership in the Mekong Sub-region, and the Sino-Thai high-speed railway project.

Leadership in the Mekong Sub-region: Thailand has aspired to assume a leading role in building sub-regional cooperation since the early 1990s. Corresponding to its economic expansion in the late 1980s, Thailand eyed mainland Southeast Asia as its backyard that could offer bigger markets for Thai exports. Following the new foreign policy of “Turning the Battlefields into Marketplaces” during the Chatichai government in the late 1980s, Bangkok has initiated numerous sub-regional initiatives throughout the post-Cold War period. In 1993, Thailand established Quadrangle Economic Cooperation (QEC) that aimed to open economic opportunities for both Indochinese countries and China’s less developed southwestern regions, including Yunnan and Guangxi provinces, through building transport network. In 1997, Thailand’s Indochina Policy asserted its influence on the issue of ASEAN’s admission of Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos, including the group’s extension of programmes to help build transport network in these countries. In the early 2000s, the Thaksin government also proposed another major sub-regional initiative—the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Co-operation Strategy (ACMECS).

Although having already involved in the QEC and other activities under the ADB’s Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) framework, China has recently asserted its direct role in the sub-regional arrangement through Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) established in 2015. Although the original idea emerged from the Thai side, China practically claims its leading role. The significance of the inaugural meetings in different stages may symbolise China’s assumption of this leading status in the group. The first LMC senior official meeting was held in Beijing in April 2015; later in November 2015 the first ministerial meeting took place in Jinghong, Yunan Province. Eventually, and the leaders’ summit was eventually held in Sunya, Hainan Province in March 2016.

Importantly, Thailand has given a tacit consent to China for claiming the ownership in the LMC whereby less official statements referred to Bangkok’s preliminary idea. Previously, China had participated in Thailand’s initiated QEC but it could not assert direct influence. This is due to the complexities of the arrangement that was later integrated into the larger framework under the ADB with multiple donors, especially Japan. Also, China is a member of the Mekong River Commission (MRC)—another sub-regional arrangement governing the resource management in lower Mekong River. Instead, Beijing mostly opts for bilateral deals with riparian states and pursues unilateral actions to manage the river including building dams along the river in its own territory. Therefore, LMC offers an opportunity for Beijing to directly influence the sub-

---

region without external involvement especially from Japan, 38 who has a longstanding role in the economic development of mainland Southeast Asia. Moreover, mainland Southeast Asia is also one of the core economic corridors within the Belt and Road Initiative. The ability to directly assert an active role in the sub-region through LMC will facilitate the implementation of China’s recent strategy.

**Thai-Chinese high-speed railways project:** This case demonstrates that Thailand compromises its optimal interest to maintain a good relationship with China. Instead of opening for best partnership to build the new high-speed train, Bangkok has given China to monopolise the construction and operation of the project.

The first attempt to build the railways took place during the Abhisit government in 2010. Both countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to set up a joint-venture company by which Thailand would hold 51% of the share. Thailand agreed to give concession to China to utilise the land along the existing railway routes for 50 years. However, the agreement was aborted due to the parliament was dissolved. The second attempt was pushed during the Yingluck government when it finalised a comprehensive infrastructure development plan. Yingluck eyed at inviting China to co-invest in the North-eastern line as it would connect to the China-Laos high-speed railways running from Kunming to Vientiane near Thailand’s border. However, the project received public criticism especially from the anti-government segment due to the cost of the project and potential corruption opportunities. The plan was rejected in the parliament amidst political conundrum surrounding the Yingluck government. Yingluck was finally ousted by the military coup led by General Prayut Chan-ocha in May 2014.

After the coup in 2014, the military reviewed the project and aimed to start the Thai-Chinese high-speed project in May 2016 as a commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the diplomatic relations between China and Thailand. A new MOU was signed in late December 2014 to let China build the train with Chinese loan. A long process of negotiation rounds took place. Both parties, however, could not agree on what proportion both sides should co-invest. China also requested the same benefits as it received in the Chinese-Laos railway project should it hold more shares. That is, China would get the rights to develop the land along the railways and stations for 50 years. Also, Thailand also wanted China to lower the loan interest rate from 2.5% to 2%. In early 2016, China agreed to reduce the interest to 2% but proposed to scale down the project from dual tracks to a single track due to rising cost.

However, the joint venture idea was terminated by Thailand during the LMC Summit in March 2016. The Thai Prime Minister announced that Thailand would finance the entire project through domestic loans. However, Thailand agreed to let China co-invest in the work of rail system and train operation, including the construction of bridges and the tunnel excavation. However, the negotiation of detailed work has continued.

---

During the 17th meeting of the Sino-Thai joint committee on rail collaboration in April 2017, there are still a number of unresolved issues on which the Chinese will not give. It was reported that the discussion focused on the difficulty in coding the materials from Chinese system to Thai system. The Thai Transport Ministry accepted that “this detail and design process is complicated…The material standard needs to be transformed into Thai system and check whether everything is available in Thailand. We cannot use Chinese materials.” However, it is reported that the latest 18th meeting on 24 May 2017 suddenly almost reached the conclusion. Thai Transport Ministry revealed all the problems were also resolved and agreed to submit the detailed project to the Thai cabinet for approval in June, and the project can start around July or August. This sentiment of the 18th meeting turned very positive and promising only within a month apart.

Interestingly, China organised the Belt and Road Summit nine days before the 18th meeting. However, Thai Prime Minister was the only mainland Southeast Asian leaders who was not invited. In the context of close ties between Thailand and China, the absence of Thai Prime Minister in the summit posts a question among observers. The Thai Foreign Ministry has stated that there is no political implications and has reaffirmed Beijing’s appreciation of Bangkok’s support for the BRI. It has also explained that China has invited the Prime Minister to the Ninth BRICS Summit in Xiamen later this year. For these reasons, Prayut’s attendance at a summit in China was unnecessary at this time.

It appears that the unresolved deal and uncertainties in the Sino-Thai joint project on the high-speed railways construction, in fact, becomes an irritation for Beijing and the reason for the omission of the Thai Prime Minister in the summit. The author interviewed a Thai government official in an economic and monetary related agency in the Thai government who involves in the agency’s international negotiation. He states,

> From my conversation with people from other ministries, the high-speed railway issue is the reason. Although the overall direction of the deal is finalised, the Chinese side will not give in other unsettled issues such as bringing in Chinese workers and other issues that contravene domestic laws and regulations.

At this juncture, it may imply that the lack of Beijing’s invitation of the Thai leader has a strong influence on the acceleration of the project within a short period of time from 17th meeting in April to the 18th meeting in May 2017.

Although the detailed of the agreement is not revealed, there is a tendency that Thailand will facilitate China’s requests. In early June 2017, the Deputy Prime Minister stated that he consulted Thailand’s Councils of Engineers and Architects to resolve the unsettled technical issues that have prevented the conclusion of the project. He has also proposed the Prime Minister to help solve the bottleneck by exercising his Executive power under Section 44 in the Constitution. Section 44 empowers the military coup leader to issue any orders deemed

---

39 “Sino-Thai joint meeting during 9-10 June expects to conclude the design of the high-speed railways and specify the medium price for the 3.5km initial distance,” *Manager Online*, March 31, 2017.

40 Personal communication, 25 May 2017.

41 Somkid proposes exercise of Section 44 to solve Thai-Chinese Railways deal,” *Post Today*, June 7, 2017.
necessary for the national interests which can overrule any pre-existing laws and regulations. On 8 June 2017 during the address to the National Assembly, Prime Minister Prayut mentioned about the three-year delay of the project with an irritating tone:

I have lost my face so many times and we [Thailand] couldn’t reach the deal. I will exercise my prerogative on this Sino-Thai railway project. It must be started within this year. If it [the project] isn’t born, people involved in this project wouldn’t be either!42

Therefore, the claim of Chinese leadership in LMC without crediting Thailand and the quick push for the railway project show Thailand’s observance of Beijing’s demands. In order to maintain the smooth ties and repay Beijing’s support for the military junta, the Thai elites have chosen not to resist but compromise Thailand’s interests. Particularly, in the case of railways deal, Thailand could have opened opportunities for other countries to bid for a better deal after announcing that it would self-finance the entire project.

The Projection of Thailand’s Relations with China and the United States

The above description of Thailand’s policy direction in several cases shows that Thailand has departed from its previous policy aiming for maintaining a balanced position between Beijing and Washington. Despite the longstanding security alliance between Thailand and the US, the development of mistrust, suspicion, and dissatisfaction on the American counterpart has added difficulties for the revival of “special relationship.” Although both parties attempt to search for new areas of cooperation as can be seen from the annual meeting of Thai-US Strategic Dialogue since in 2005,43 no tangible directions were implemented. In contrast, the uninterrupted development of close ties between Bangkok and Beijing since the Cambodia Conflict has reinforced its pre-existing narrative of the Thai and Chinese are of the same family. This image, in turn, facilitates the deepening of the bilateral relationship in the post-Cold War era.

The above issue also links to the Sino-US power competition in Asia. Certainly, Thailand especially under the junta has created the issue of international recognition of the regime longer than other coups did in the past. Therefore, the legitimacy issue has influenced the direction of Thai foreign policy. As China accepts the coup, the junta has found a cushion to ameliorate the political pressure from the Western nations especially the US. The wider trust deficits between Thailand and the US, the narrower gap between Thailand and China. Similar to the negative attitude in the context of Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 that influenced Thailand’s refocusing its foreign policy towards Asia and China, the current attitude will be expected to have a similar effect that further deepen China’s influence in Thai land. Besides their already close ties, Thailand and China are deepening its security relations through various activities.

42 “Big Tu [Prayut’s nickname] pushes by himself, Thai-Chinese Railways promises have broken his face in the past 3 years, and never starts. But it must start in 2017’ Matichon Online, June 9, 2017

In order to maintain a good relationship with China and support from Beijing, the junta has given more concession to China in many respects. This can be seen also from Thailand’s accommodation of Beijing’s request to repatriate the Uighur migrants and a number of political dissidents in 2015. In the case of the Uighurs, Thailand’s nonchalant approach to human rights created a diplomatic tension with Turkey and concerns within the international human rights community. On the security area, the recent development of the Thai-Chinese military cooperation may also weaken the Thai-American military cooperation. This scenario will likely to be possible considering the fact that President-elect Trump’s foreign policy towards Asia will either pivot away from the region or reassert American unilateralism at the expense of security alliance system and regional order. The Thai-Chinese military cooperation has already been stimulated in recent years highlighted by the joint military exercise, Blue Strike. In 2016, Blue Strike remarked the comprehensive exercise the two have ever had, including land and sea operations, and humanitarian relief training,\(^{44}\) which potentially expands and competes with the Cobra Gold in the future. Moreover, Thailand have also acquired new military stockpile, many of which are Chinese weapons and equipment, including three submarines and the new order of 49 tanks. Washington’s potential inward-looking policy under Trump can leave the vacuum of the American military role in Thailand unfixed. This strategic environment will deepen a belief that Thailand can and should seek other alternatives to America.\(^{45}\) China and other powers such as Russia have been within the junta’s radar.

In the long term, the continuing distrust of American friendship may push Bangkok even closer to Beijing, hence trigger the regional drift within Southeast Asia. There is a tendency that the region is developing different policy orientation. Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, the Philippines, and, recently, Malaysia is considered Beijing sympathisers in different degrees, while the rest of ASEAN member countries is suspicious of it. If this trend continues further, it will affect ASEAN’s ability to be in a driver’s seat in the Asia-Pacific regional architecture. Its role in maintaining peace and stability in the region will be tarnished, while the American role in the region is likely to be waning or ambiguous. This could, furthermore, accentuate ongoing arms race in Southeast Asia when the region is uncertain, and the regional grouping can no longer offer effective political resolutions to regional problems, such as the South China Sea dispute.

**Conclusion**

In a nutshell, the current stage of Thailand’s relations with the US and China can be seen as part of the adjustment process. In this process, the lingering old perception of a *Great Friends* between Thailand and the US has created the expectation that Washington ought to respond to Thailand in a supportive manner. However, this expectation is not met on many occasions in the post-Cold War period. This has revealed to the Thai, particularly, through the American reactions toward Thailand’s financial difficulty in 1997 and the military coup in 2014. For


Thailand, these two important events reconfirmed the US weaker commitment to its oldest friend in Asia. The Thai perception of the US intolerance and abandoning Thailand has cast doubt to the merit of American friendship and leadership. With such realisation, the Thai policymakers are not hesitant to hide their irritations and dissatisfaction on the American counterpart and to seek other foreign powers to support their domestic standing.

Therefore, Thai policy elites have sought alternative great powers who can offer a similar assurance. Beijing leadership is increasingly appealing as it is buttressed by economic and military might commensurate with what Thailand needs. China also shares a closer cultural affinity and shows political resilience and understanding to changes in Thailand. The pre-existing image of kinship between the Thai and the Chinese based on the Thai state’s attempt to respond to its domestic challenges, has therefore remerged to support this positive tendency. The supports that China have offered to Thailand in the 1980s during the Cambodia Conflict, in the late 1990s during the economic crisis, and political support to Thai military coup in 2014, have reinforced and deepened this ideational construct in Thailand’s interactions with Beijing. It is not a surprise that Thailand has been willing to show its “consideration”—kreng jai and keqi to Beijing. As a result, it has compromised its national interest by accepting demands and leadership of the “big brother.” Should this positive reinforcement of the bilateral relationship continue, Thailand will likely enter Beijing’s orbit fully as a Thai security and military expert Surachat Bumrunsuk has predicted. The friendship between Thailand and the US will certainly continue, but it will not be as “special” as it was in the past. Eventually, “family members” matter and choosing “family” over “friend” is the right way to do.

-------------------