

CHAPTER 4

The United States-China Strategic Competition: A Thai Perspective *

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Introduction: The tyranny of domestic determinants

Foreign policy projection is more often than not a function of domestic considerations. Put another way, domestic determinants tend to drive any country's foreign relations. This tendency varies across countries. In the case of Thailand, it is acute and conspicuous because this predominantly Buddhist kingdom, with a population of 70 million and location as a natural hub of Southeast Asia, has traditionally pursued shrewd foreign relations in a moving balance that successfully navigated colonial subjugation and global conflicts in centuries past. As it faced a domestic conflict that has deteriorated and become entrenched over the past two decades, punctuated by two military coups and a series of authoritarian maneuvers, Thailand's foreign policy wherewithal has consequently been constrained and compelled to lean more towards China, the superpower which does not prioritize democracy and human rights in its foreign relations. Yet, when the United States rebalanced its national interests over democratic values during the shift from President Barack Obama to President Donald Trump, Thailand also recalibrated and positioned itself closer to Western democracies without alienating China. Thailand's nuanced balancing amidst the U.S.–China geopolitical rivalry and competition should also be viewed against other middle powers in the region. Knowledge of both its domestic politics, and its fluid priorities and strategies towards the superpowers, are critical to understanding Thailand's foreign policy preferences.

Having gone through so much tumult and turmoil over the past two decades—five completed elections, two military coups, and a series of judicial interventions amid street protests colored in yellow and red—Thailand remains murky and unsettled, poised to enter yet another round of confrontation in the prolonged reckoning over its political future. The structure of the Thai political conflict pits established centers

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of power around the military, monarchy, and judiciary against progressive opponents from political parties and civilians who want democratic rule, not authoritarian order. Unless reforms of traditional institutions take place to meet popular demands and expectations of the 21st century, Thailand risks sliding into longer-term autocracy and economic stagnation. Lasting about 15 years, the first round of Thailand's conflict was driven by the political and business networks that lined up behind Thaksin Shinawatra, a telecommunications billionaire who led his Thai Rak Thai Party to poll victories in 2001 and 2005; the latter an unprecedented re-election after a full term and as the first one party government. As Thaksin towered over Thai politics, his pro-establishment adversaries took him to task for conflicts of interest and abuse of power on the one hand, and for his broader challenge to reshape the status quo on the other. Consequently, yellow-clad anti-Thaksin demonstrators took to the streets, paving the way for the putsch in September 2006.¹

After the Constitutional Court duly dissolved his party, Thaksin, from self-imposed exile, regrouped behind proxy leaders and a new party banner, which triumphed in the December 2007 elections. More yellow-shirt protests followed, capped by another court decision to disband his party in December 2008, empowering an opposing government supported by the military, yellow-aligned conservatives, and royalists. At the 2011 election, Thaksin's third party, Pheu Thai, won again, this time led by Yingluck Shinawatra, his younger sister. In turn, a sequel coup in May 2014 ejected, exiled, and later, under another court judgment, convicted Yingluck for a shoddy rice subsidy program. Round two has started after a five-year interregnum under a military government led by coup-leader Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha. The junta concocted a new constitution that effectively authorized the ruling generals to pick one third of the 750-member parliament, or 250 senators, who can choose the prime minister. As the charter also weakened larger political parties in favor of smaller parties, Prayuth was able to cobble together a motley alliance of smaller parties together with the pro-military Palang Pracharat party to barely meet the simple lower house majority, forming a coalition government after elections in March 2019.² Unless, and until, Thailand's old guard can recognize an enlightened self-

¹ For more on the political events that led to the 2006 coup, see Thitinan Pongsudhirak, "Thailand Since the Coup," *Journal of Democracy*, October–December 2008.

² For Thailand's political environment surrounding the election in March 2014, see Duncan McCargo, "Southeast Asia's Troubling Elections: Democratic Demolition in Thailand," *Journal of Democracy*, October–December 2019.

interest to adjust and accommodate those who want Thailand to get back on its feet in a democratic future, tensions will continue to mount, and old assumptions about how coups can reset the scene will no longer hold. As a result, Thailand's foreign relations will crucially depend on what happens at home for the foreseeable future.

An overview of contemporary Thai foreign policy

As mentioned, the projection of Thailand's foreign policy and strategic role on the regional canvas has been held hostage by the country's domestic machinations. As a U.S. treaty ally, Thailand took sides during the Cold War, its troops in action in both the Korean and Vietnamese conflicts in an effort to thwart communist expansionism at home. But after its Cold War success, Thailand's foreign policy bearings became adrift in search of a new balance. Much of this search in the late 1980s and early 1990s was underpinned by shifting Thai-U.S. relations from patron-client ties to relative partnership on the back of Thailand's robust economic growth during 1988-95 in the absence of the communist menace.³ The turning point was Thailand's economic crisis that erupted in July 1997, sparking region-wide financial turbulence. When the U.S., under the Clinton administration, backed the International Monetary Fund's stringent and austere bailout package for the Thai economy, Thai citizens and elites mostly felt abandoned and betrayed by their American counterparts for not doing more to help a treaty ally and their "oldest friend" in Asia. Thai-U.S. relations soured dramatically.⁴

Thailand's post-1997 economic recovery coincided with Thaksin Shinawatra's rise, which in turn overlapped the terrorist attacks in the U.S. on 11 September 2001. The global war on terror (GWOT) and Southeast Asia's potential as a second front for jihadist expansionism on the one hand, and Thaksin's foreign policy framework around bilateral free-trade agreements, the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), and Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) on the other, realigned Thai-U.S. relations. Following Thaksin's June 2003 visit to the White House, Thailand fully signed on to the GWOT and was designated a "major

³ See Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand's Boom and Bust*, Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 1998.

⁴ For an overview of Thai-US relations, see Thitinan Pongsudhirak, "An Unaligned Alliance: Thailand-United States Relations," *Asian Politics & Policy*, October 2015.

non-Nato ally” (MNNA) by the administration of President George W. Bush.⁵ That year was the peak of Thailand’s geopolitical heft. Thaksin was touted as a regional leader in the footsteps of Malaysia’s Mahathir Mohamad and Singapore’s Lee Guan Yew. When Thaksin presided over the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit of world leaders in Bangkok in October 2003, the gathering reinforced and showcased his regional leadership prospects and Thailand’s elevation in the geopolitical pecking order. The only major chink in Thaksin’s armor at the time was the Malay-Muslim ethno-nationalist insurgency in the country’s three southernmost border provinces. It violently resurfaced in January 2004 after Thaksin restructured local governance framework, mechanisms, and personnel.⁶ Thailand’s southern violence became the one crisis he could not solve, and it got worse the more he tried to solve it, although it has deteriorated further since Thaksin’s demise without a foreseeable resolution.⁷

Thaksin’s record at home was flawed, especially when it involved conflicts of interest and abuse of power.⁸ But his government’s foreign policy projection and propulsion attracted global attention. Thailand’s domestic conflict, that paved the way for the cycle of coups, constitutions, and elections, as enumerated above, was thus incalculably costly because it stalled and curbed Thailand’s international standing. After Thaksin’s overthrow in a putsch in September 2006, Thailand’s foreign relations were hobbled and hindered by domestic politics. For example, the yellow-shirt street protests against the Thaksin-aligned government in 2008, including a weeklong takeover of Bangkok’s main international airport, embittered Thai–Cambodian relations over an ancient Hindu temple, because Hun Sen had sided with Thaksin.⁹ Similarly, after the party they voted for was dissolved in December 2008, red-shirt demonstrators went on a rampage and ended up disrupting the 4th East Asia Summit meeting in the seaside resort of Pattaya on the east coast of Chonburi province.¹⁰ This

⁵ Paul Chambers, “U.S.-Thai Relations after 9/11: A New Era in Cooperation?,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 26, No. 3, December 2004; see also Pavin Chachavalpongpun, *Reinventing Thailand: Thaksin and His Foreign Policy*, Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2010.

⁶ Duncan McCargo, “Thaksin and the resurgence of violence in the Thai South: Network monarchy strikes back?,” *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 38, Issue 1, 2006.

⁷ International Crisis Group, “Southern Thailand: Dialogue in Doubt,” Report No. 270, 8 July 2015, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/thailand/southern-thailand-dialogue-doubt>.

⁸ For more details on Thaksin’s flawed leadership, see “Thaksin: Competitive Authoritarian and Flawed Dissident” in John Kane, Haig Patapan, and Benjamin Wong (eds), *Dissident Democrats: The Challenge of Democratic Leadership in Asia*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

⁹ See James Ockey, “Thailand in 2008: Democracy and Street Politics,” *Southeast Asian Affairs 2009*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009.

¹⁰ See Kittit Prasirtsuk, “Thailand in 2009: Colored by Turbulence,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 50, No. 1, January/February 2010.

incident was arguably the lowest point in Thailand's illustrious diplomatic history. As Thailand was consumed by its color-coded domestic polarization and conflict, its foreign policy became reactive and risk-averse in a holding pattern.

Thailand within a geostrategic perspective

Thailand's major external partners were naturally compelled to respond to the twin coups in Bangkok. In the first round under the Bush administration, the U.S. decidedly took a lenient and perfunctory stance towards the 19 September 2006 putsch. It was seen as par for the course in Thai politics. Minimal sanctions were imposed, such as the automatic suspension of the International Military Education and Training program, but the coup-appointed government was told that the situation would normalize with the return of elections and popular rule.¹¹ The Obama administration, however, toed a more critical line as the Thai crisis wore on under growing authoritarian tendencies, recalibrating the mix of values and interests. When the follow-up putsch transpired on 22 May 2014 after American diplomats were told by Thailand's military authorities it would not take place, the Obama administration reacted harshly, warning of worsening ties in all facets, including military-to-military relations.¹² Thereafter, Thai-U.S. relations plummeted. Apart from the U.S., Western and Asian democracies, including India and Japan, were broadly in unison in their reaction to the May 2014 coup.¹³

China's reaction was different. Even prior to the May 2014 coup, Thailand-China ties had increasingly warmed, as Beijing saw Obama's "pivot" and "rebalance" as a geostrategic challenge. China took Obama's rebalance strategy to task in the South China Sea, taking over Scarborough Shoal, which was claimed by the Philippines, in April 2012. The ensuing diplomatic row eventually led to the Philippines' legal victory over China in the Permanent Court of Arbitration.¹⁴ As China ignored the

¹¹ See Benjamin Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the US and a Rising China*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017.

¹² Zeke Miller, "U.S. Condemns Thai Takeover As a Coup, Leaving Aid in Question," *Time*, 22 May 2014; Joshua Kurlantzick, "The U.S. Response to Thailand's Coup," *Asia Unbound Blog*, Council on Foreign Relations, 22 May 2014, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/us-response-thailands-coup>.

¹³ Pavin Chachavalongpun, "The Politics of International Sanctions: The 2014 Coup in Thailand," *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 68, No. 1, Fall/Winter 2014.

¹⁴ Permanent Court of Arbitration, "PCA Press Release: The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of the Philippines v. The People's Republic of China)," 12 July 2016, <https://pca-cpa.org/en/news/pca-press-release-the-south-china-sea-arbitration-the-republic-of-the-philippines-v-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>.

ruling, the Obama administration dithered. The Obama rebalance strategy compelled Thai leaders to take more notice of China's aggressive response.¹⁵ By the time of the coup in May 2014, the Thai military was not hesitant in seeking Beijing's superpower succor and embrace to face the Obama administration's tough talk and posture in favor of democratic rule. Post-coup Thailand-China relations moved from strength to strength, from senior-level official visits and public diplomacy to upgrades of military-to-military cooperation and arms sales.¹⁶ China's rise abroad and domestic polarization at home further tightened the already intimate Bangkok-Beijing axis.¹⁷ While the stock of Thai-U.S. relations remained immense, the bilateral flow of ties favored China.¹⁸

Japan was the first democracy to break ranks by accommodating Thailand's coup regime, receiving Prayuth for an official visit in February 2015. However, the Japanese government was able to entice Prayuth to state that elections would be held within a year.¹⁹ Although this pledge was the first of several election dates that were not honored, it allowed Japan to reengage with Thailand and maintain its geopolitical interest vis-à-vis China in mainland Southeast Asia and the broader ASEAN. The first Western democracy to follow in Japan's pragmatic footsteps was Australia. Foreign Minister Julie Bishop's conspicuous visit within a year after the coup caused an international stir.²⁰ It also encouraged the coup government in Bangkok. But Australia was ahead of the curve in hindsight. Eventually, the leading global democracies caved in because of Thailand's indispensable role in the regional equation, and also because democratic values had been challenged in many of their

¹⁵ Kiti Prasirtsuk, "The Implications of U.S. Strategic Rebalancing: A Perspective from Thailand," *Asia Policy*, National Bureau of Asian Research, January 2013; for more background on Thailand and China, see also Ian Storey, "Thailand and China: A special relationship," in Ian Storey, *Southeast Asia and the Rise of China: The search for security*, London: Routledge, 2011.

¹⁶ Ian Storey, "Thailand's Military Relations with China: Moving from Strength to Strength," ISEAS Perspective, Issue No 43, 27 May 2019, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2019_43.pdf.

¹⁷ See Pongphisoot Busbarat, "'Bamboo Swirling in the Wind': Thailand's Foreign Policy Imbalance between China and the United States," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol 38, No 2, 2016.

¹⁸ Benjamin Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the US and a Rising China*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017; Thitinan Pongsudhirak, "An Unaligned Alliance: Thailand-United States Relations," *Asian Politics & Policy*, October 2015.

¹⁹ "Prayut tells Japan general election to be held in one year," *The Nation*, 9 February 2015; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand Press Release, "Japan-Thailand Joint Press Statement on the Occasion of the Visit by Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha of the Kingdom of Thailand to Japan, February 9, 2015, Tokyo," <http://www.mfa.go.th/main/en/media-center/14/53609-Japan-Thailand-Joint-Press-Statement-on-the-Occasi.html>.

²⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand Press Release, "The Hon Julie Bishop MP, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Australia paid an official visit to Thailand," 8 May 2015, <http://www.mfa.go.th/main/en/media-center/28/56064-The-Hon-Julie-Bishop-MP,-Minister-for-Foreign-Affa.html>.

Western cradles.²¹ By the time Trump received Prayuth at the White House for an official visit on 2 October 2017, the diplomatic floodgates opened for Thailand's military regime.²² Barely two months later, the European Union normalized relations with a junta-ruled Thailand.²³

In other words, Thailand's coup-makers got away with their putsch because of the country's irreplaceable position in the region as the hub of mainland Southeast Asia, integral to ASEAN's undertakings. The March 2019 election enabled Thailand's military government to appear more civilianized and democratically legitimate, even though it had manipulated the 2017 constitution to ensure its continuity in office with the assistance of the military-appointed senate. When U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo visited Bangkok as part of the ASEAN-related ministerial meetings, organized by Thailand as the rotating 2019 ASEAN Chair, the Thai elections were noted as a crucial building block in the reaffirmation of bilateral relations and Thailand's key role in the U.S.' Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) geostrategy.²⁴ Reinforcing its central role in "ASEAN centrality," the notion that major regional cooperative vehicles are anchored around Southeast Asia's regional organization, Thailand as ASEAN chair marshalled through the launch of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific,²⁵ effectively a response to the U.S.-led FOIP. Apart from the U.S., the three other promoters of the FOIP are Australia, Japan, and India, comprising the so-called "Quad," whose four-way strategic cooperation on the Indo-Pacific dates back more than a decade. While Australia's posture appears in sync with Washington's FOIP view, Japan's is distinct in that it draws out its international role across Asia to Africa. India's Indo-Pacific take is similarly autonomous and tied to its broader "Act East" geostrategy, not confined to the U.S.' FOIP, although New Delhi's withdrawal from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership may impede its broader strategic role in Southeast Asia.²⁶

²¹ Joshua Kurlantzick, "The Rest of the World Has Warmred to Thailand's Military Rulers," *World Politics Review*, 10 July 2018.

²² "Trump welcomes Prayut to White House lunch," *The Bangkok Post*, 3 October 2017.

²³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand Press Release, "EU Resumes Political Contacts with Thailand," 12 December 2017, <http://www.mfa.go.th/main/en/news/3/6886/84578-EU-Resumes-Political-Contacts-with-Thailand.html>.

²⁴ See <https://thaiembdc.org/2019/08/01/secretary-of-state-michael-r-pompeo-and-thai-foreign-minister-don-pramudwinai-at-a-press-availability>.

²⁵ See https://asean.org/storage/2019/06/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf.

²⁶ See, for example, Sourabh Gupta, "India's RCEP blunder," 9 November 2019, https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/11/09/indias-rcep-blunder/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter 2019-11-10.

Moreover, it is misleading to frame Thailand's foreign policy in binary terms between the U.S. and China. In fact, the regional middle powers, such as Japan and Australia, and how they relate to one another and to the U.S. and China, have become increasingly relevant. For example, in a recent survey, both Japan and Australia are seen as major players by strategic elites and experts in Southeast Asia.²⁷ The survey suggests that over time, the U.S.' regional influence will wane and China's will rise even more, but so will Japan's. In addition, China's inexorable and spectacular rise and dominance in the region are not in dispute, but there is widespread regional ambivalence towards the nature of China's role as to whether it will become more benign or more belligerent towards ASEAN. Another example of other dynamics beyond the U.S.–China competition is the apparent and limited realignment between Beijing and Tokyo from October 2018, when Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited President Xi Jinping in Beijing. Warmer China–Japan relations may be in the offing if Xi visits Tokyo as planned in 2020, the spread of the China-centered Coronavirus Disease notwithstanding.²⁸

Conclusion

Unsurprisingly, Thai politics remains murky and unsettled nearly a year after a long-awaited general election. The military and conservative elites still hold sway, but must resort to constitutional manipulation and rely on extra-parliamentary assistance from the Constitutional Court, the Election Commission, and the National Anti-Corruption Commission. The 2017 constitution has achieved its pro-military aims of keeping political parties fractious in favor of small parties, resulting in a weak parliament. Although the majority of Thailand's electorate have voted for anti-junta parties, the conservative minority is running the country both overtly and behind the scenes. Yet the Thai economy has held up in the face of protracted polarization and prolonged instability. However, Thai economic growth is likely to stay at a subpar trend of 3% per annum over the next several years, although it could potentially become 4–6% if there are political stability and clearer policy directions. Growth strategies around “Thailand 4.0” and the “Eastern Economic Corridor” have lost momentum because of a weak and inherently unstable coalition makeup. The

²⁷ ASEAN Studies Centre, *The State of Southeast Asia: 2020 Survey Report*, Singapore: ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, January 2020; https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/TheStateofSEASurveyReport_2020.pdf.

²⁸ See <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2020/02/452e558da064-update1-chinas-xi-may-postpone-state-visit-to-japan-amid-virus-outbreak.html>.

upshot over the next two to three years is that while Thailand's Cold War trinity of military, monarchy, and bureaucracy still call the shots, they are coming under growing pressure from the enlarging majority of the electorate that want political representation and ways to progress forward in the 21st century. The younger voices behind the newcomer Future Forward Party are indicative of tensions in Thai society. It used to be along the lines of yellows versus reds, but now a new fault line has been drawn between those under 35 who have suffered loss of opportunities during the 15 years of crisis and confrontation in the 21st century, and the old guard who rose up from the Cold War years.

Accordingly, Thailand's strategic role in the region will be largely determined by its domestic political maneuvers. On the other hand, amidst widening U.S.–China rivalry and competition and the evolving rifts and realignments within Asia's geopolitical canvas, Thailand's strategic plays on both sides are likely to continue as long as the U.S. subsumes its values agenda for human rights and democracy under its interests of pushing back against China's assertive rise and regional dominance. China is the constant variable in Thailand's foreign policy mix, as Beijing deals with all regime types. Indeed, China does not export authoritarianism, but it does work better with and benefit more from authoritarian regimes. However, when Western sanctions are deemphasized and interests supersede values, Thailand has also gravitated back towards the West, as was the case with Prayuth's visit to the White House in October 2017. As long as Thailand remains under authoritarian shadows, Bangkok will tilt towards Beijing only if it cannot find acceptance and support from its treaty ally in Washington. To the extent that China is the resident superpower, Thailand will handle and accommodate it accordingly, while relying on other middle and larger powers, such as Japan, Australia, and the U.S. to maintain strategic balance. Beijing's influence and weight in Southeast Asia are inexorable and undeniable, but Thailand, as with some of its immediate neighbors, will always be on the lookout for an autonomous space above and beyond the great powers.