

Thailand between the United States and China: Does Bamboo Diplomacy Still Work?

Pongkwan Sawasdipakdi¹

1. The Return of the US and the Revitalization of US-Thai Relations

After a momentary disengagement from the region, the United States has finally pivoted back to Northeast and Southeast Asia. Since taking office in January 2021, high-level officials in the Biden administration, including President Joe Biden himself, Vice President Kamala Harris, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, and Secretary of Defense Llyod Austin, have taken turns to visit old and new partners in the region. At first, the choices of destinations in Southeast Asia appeared to include only countries most supportive of the US presence in the region, namely Singapore, Vietnam, and the Philippines (Poling, 2021). However, the more the US government stresses the importance of containing the rise of China, the wider it expands the list of high-level state visits to include hedging states like Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia and China-leaning countries like Cambodia. The goal of the United States is clear: It wants to maintain the existing rule-based international order - the one that favors democracy, human rights, free trade, and American hegemony.

For Thailand, the US re-engagement with Asia offers an opportunity to revitalize a bilateral relationship interrupted by a coup d'état in 2014. As required by the Foreign Assistance Act, the United States withdrew military aid given to Thailand and downgraded its relations with the country following the military seizure of the government. The arrival of Donald Trump in the White House relaxed the harsh measures imposed on Thailand by the Obama administration. Not a champion of human rights issues himself, Trump and his cabinet refrained from criticizing Thailand's human rights records and democratic backsliding and sought to strengthen cooperation with Bangkok. This manifested in Trump inviting Thailand's prime minister and coup leader Prayut Chan-o-cha to the White House in October 2017, making Prayut the first Thai prime minister to visit the White House in 12 years (VOA, 2017). Despite these symbolic moves, there was little substantive change in the US-Thai bilateral relations. After all, Trump never followed a promise given to Prayut that he would visit Thailand, and on top of that, he never joined the ASEAN summit again after his first participation in 2017. At one point, Prayut lamented that the US was "somewhat busy with its own issue, so there [seemed] to be some distance between the US and ASEAN" and that "China [was] the number one partner of Thailand" (Time, 2018).

¹ Pongkwan Sawasdipakdi is a Ph.D. candidate in political science and international relations at the University of Southern California and a lecturer at the Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University. Her research interests include political psychology, emotion in international relations, and Southeast Asia. She can be reached at sawasdip@usc.edu.

Will Biden's ongoing attempts to re-engage with Southeast Asia at large and Thailand, in particular, be able to transform this perception? By and large, top-ranking officials in the Biden administration have been consistent on the message about re-engaging Southeast Asia. Biden himself has participated in a virtual ASEAN summit in 2021 and hosted a US-ASEAN Special Summit in 2022. In the case of Thailand, Secretary of Defense Llyod Austin visited the country in June 2022, where he expressed Washington's interest in enhancing interoperability between the US and Thai armed forces and in assisting Thailand with its modernization efforts (Strangio, 2022). The following month, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken stopped in Thailand to discuss security and trade issues with Thai leaders after his initial plan to visit Bangkok in December 2021 had been canceled due to Covid-19 infections. Coming out of the meeting, Blinken and his Thai counterpart signed a Communiqué on Strategic Alliance and Partnership and a Memorandum of Understanding on Promoting Supply Chain Resilience.

Despite these positive developments, it is unlikely that Thailand's foreign policy direction will change much in favor of the United States. Of course, the rejuvenation of US-Thai relations may increase the maneuverability of Thai foreign policy. But Thailand, as well as some other Southeast Asian countries, will avoid picking a clear side in the US-China competition. This is for two reasons. First, Thailand is likely to stick to its well-known bamboo diplomacy - a flexible and pragmatic foreign policy practice aiming to preserve national survival and independence (Poonkham, 2022, pp. 1-4). Second, Thailand has grown closer politically and economically in the past few years. In contrast to the West, China took no issue with Thailand's military takeover and deteriorating human rights situations. Shunned away by the West, Thailand has relied on China for investment and infrastructure and technical assistance. Siding with the West, especially now, will result in a significant trade-off for Thailand and even some possible punishment from Beijing.

2. China as Thailand's Number One Partner, and the US as Thailand's Great Friend

Being "friends" with every country has been Thailand's dominant foreign policy discourse for decades. As a small country, Thailand could not afford to bet its future all on one side. In contrast, it must pursue a positive relationship with all sides, watch the direction of the wind, and bend accordingly to survive (Dhiravegin in Poonkham, 2022, pp. 27). This idea of "flexible diplomacy" was arguably conceived around the 1970s after Richard Nixon had introduced the Vietnamization doctrine and the prospect of military withdrawal from the region. Stranded by the US new foreign policy direction, Thai diplomats pursued "equidistance with the great powers, and simultaneously began the process of normalization with the communist powers" to guarantee its survival (Poonkham, 2022, pp. 16). Even in the late 1970s, when Thailand began to place countries in different tiers of friendship, Thai diplomats still emphasized the need to maintain a friendly relationship with all sides. And because maintaining a good relationship with other countries has been essential to Thailand's foreign policy, explicitly referring to a particular nation as being a greater friend than the other,

especially when the two countries are almost equivalent in their status, is thus unusual for the Thai foreign policy practice.

Why did the Thai Prime Minister do so, then? The simplest answer is that he might have carelessly slipped the words out due to his inexperience in foreign relations. But even if it was just a slip, the answer may already point to how Thai political elites viewed the importance of China in Thailand's political and economic realms. Although Thai political elites from all factions have long agreed that China is and will be Thailand's vital partner (Zawacki 2017), Sino-Thai relations has grown exponentially after the coup in 2014. When the United States decided to cut military assistance to Thailand, Beijing replaced Washington as an indispensable external partner (Rosen 2014; Han 2018). In the economic sector, China is Thailand's major trade partner, alongside ASEAN and the United States. By 2010, Sino-Thai trade had overtaken US-Thai trade, though trade with the United States was able to catch up and surpass that with China in 2019 (Bank of Thailand, 2022). In terms of foreign direct investment, Chinese FDI into Thailand through the Board of Investment (BOI) application increased tenfold from 2017 to 2019, outpacing most other countries (Siam Commercial Bank, 2019). In the security sector, China's arms exports to Thailand increased fivefold from 2014 to 2018 (Muramatsu, 2022). By 2016, Beijing had become Thailand's largest arms supplier, selling battle tanks, a submarine, and other types of weapons to the Thai armed forces. In addition, Thailand also chose to use China's high-speed train technology in the construction and operation of its northeastern and eastern high-speed rail lines despite the lack of an open bidding process (Sawasdipakdi, 2021). This is not to mention strong personal connections between Thailand's political and business elites and Chinese officials that encourage closer ties between the two countries.

Perhaps, one of the most indicative pieces of evidence showing how much Thailand has swung closer to China is the way China chooses to react to anti-China sentiments arising in the Thai domestic sphere. In addition to clarifying the point of misunderstanding, the Chinese government often includes messages seeking to reprimand the Thai public for their opinions against China and to remind the Thais of China's grateful intention and assistance given to the country. For instance, when the criticism about the efficacy of China's Sinovac arose among the Thai public, the Chinese Embassy did not hesitate war the Thai public about the "wrongful accusation" and "devaluation" of the Chinese vaccine. The statement posted in the official Facebook page of the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok did not forget to mention that the criticism was an attempt to "attack on China's good will to help Thai people fight against the pandemic" (Kom Chad Luek, 2021). More surprising was the reaction from Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Public Health Anutin Charnvirakul who urged the Thai public to refrain from criticizing the Sinovac vaccine as it might affect the Sino-Thai "sibling-like" relations. As he noted, "siblings do not criticize each other" (Matichon, 2021). Such response clearly stresses how the positive perception of China is shared among political elites other than the Prime Minister who called Beijing Thailand's number one partner.

3. Does the Bamboo Diplomacy Still Work?

Can Thailand still balance against the rising influence of China given the return of the United States to Southeast Asia? Absolutely. The history of Thai diplomatic practice tells us that Thailand can ultimately balance external pressures, especially when multiple great powers have interest in getting Thailand on their sides. Whether the Thai political elites have an incentive to do so is questionable. The Thai political elites might have already been too deeply embedded into the Chinese network of influence. After all, deals made with China do not require much transparency compared to ones with the Western countries, allowing them to potentially enjoy the fruit of corruption. Even if this is not the case, the Thai government has already shown too many signs of its willingness to respond quickly to issues that irritate its bigger partner. The recent act of accommodating the United States is probably nothing more than a projection of Thailand's friendliness that does not lead to any tangible behavioral changes in foreign policy.

The real challenge will come when the US-China rivalry becomes intensified, and Thailand is propelled to pick a side. When the time comes, the foreign policy direction of Thailand will depend largely on who leads the government at that time. The current military government might find itself more materially and ideologically aligned with the Chinese government. On the other hand, if the liberal faction takes control of the government when the time comes, Thailand might stand with the side that supports the rule-based international order.

Citations

Bank of Thailand. (2022, July 27). Trade Classified by country/economic territories. *Bank of Thailand*.
https://www.bot.or.th/App/BTWS_STAT/statistics/ReportPage.aspx?reportID=744&language=eng

Campbell, Charlie. (2018, June 21). Exclusive: Thailand PM Prayuth Chan-ocha on turning to China over the US. *Time*. <https://time.com/5318224/exclusive-prime-minister-prayuth-chan-ocha-thailand-interview/>

Dhiravegin, Likhit. (1974). Thailand Foreign Policy Determination. *The Journal of Social Sciences*, 15(2), 37-65.

Han, Enze. (2018). Under the Shadow of China-US Competition: Myanmar and Thailand's Alignment Choices. *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 11(11), 81-104.

Kom Chad Luek. (2021, September 3). Cheen thalaeng to yood doi kha "vaccine Sinovac" yuen yan mai chai vaccine kunnaphap tam [China pushed back against the devaluation of the Sinovac vaccine while confirming its effectiveness]. *Khom Chad Luek Online*.
<https://www.komchadluek.net/hot-social/481864>

- Matichon. (2021, August 31). Anutin bok pood tueng Sinovac muen pood tueng Cheen, cha doi kha wa pee nong rao mai dee maid ai [Criticism against Sinovac is criticism against China – we do not criticize our sibling, said Anutin]. Matinchon Online. https://www.matichon.co.th/politics/news_2915912
- Muramatsu, Yohei. (2022, April 12). Thailand's purchase of first Chinese runs aground. *Nikkei Asia*. https://www.bot.or.th/App/BTWS_STAT/statistics/ReportPage.aspx?reportID=744&language=eng
- Poling, Gregory B. (2021, July 30). Austin accomplishes two missions in Southeast Asia. *Center for Strategic and International Studies*. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/austin-accomplishes-two-missions-southeast-asia>
- Poonkham, Jittipat. (2022). *A Genealogy of Bamboo Diplomacy: The Politics of Thai Détente with Russia and China*. Australian National University Press.
- Rosen, Armin. (2014, May 23). US cuts military aid to Thailand following coup. *Business Insider*. www.businessinsider.com/cutting-military-aid-after-thai-lands-coup-2014-5.
- Sawasdiapakdi, Pongkwan. (2021). Thailand's Engagement with China's Belt and Road Initiative: Strong Will, Slow Implementation. *Asian Perspective*, 45(2), 349-374.
- Siam Commercial Bank. (2021). Eyes on China Inflow to Thailand: Insights and Opportunities for Investment after COVID-19. *Siam Commercial Bank*. <https://www.scb.co.th/content/dam/scb/china/investment-knowledge/eyes-on-china-inflow-to-thailand-2020-2021/eyes-on-china.pdf?form=2>
- Strangio, Sebastian. (2022, June 14). Thai PM meets US Defense Secretary in a bid to advance security ties. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/06/thai-pm-meets-us-defense-secretary-in-a-bid-to-advance-security-ties/>