

The Effects of Great Power Competition on Thai Foreign Policy from 2001 to 2024¹

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Abstract

Growing competition between the United States and China is quickly becoming a defining feature of the 21st century international system, much like that of the United States and the Soviet Union defined the latter 20th century. Thailand's deep historical, economic, and political ties to the great powers, and its central position with the Greater Mekong Subregion, make it ripe for an analysis of how great power competition is affecting its foreign policy. This work fills a gap in the existing literature on Thai foreign policy by taking an expansive backward look at nearly two decades of policy actions and reactions by the United States, China, and Thailand to identify patterns across multiple governments. The information gained through a deep reading of primary and secondary sources on Thai policy is then used to determine plausible future outcomes for Thai foreign policy in a continued environment of great power competition. This work establishes a clear and increasingly explicit commitment to strategic hedging by Thailand despite significant changes in domestic political alignments, the rise of a new great power in the immediate region, and an intensifying competition between vital and longstanding economic and security partners.

Keywords Thailand, Great Power Competition, Hedging

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1. Introduction

Thailand views geopolitical competition between the United States and China as the single biggest external concern (National Intelligence Agency, 2023). Similarly, according to their national security strategies, white papers, and public statements, each of those countries views competition with the other as a principal national security concern (RAND, 2016). The 2017 and 2022 United States National Security Strategies center competition with China as the defining challenge facing the country (White House, 2017). For its part, China's actions since 2001 increasingly reflect its desire to match or surpass the United States as a global superpower. The United States is unambiguously framed as China's primary adversary, ideologically, economically, and militarily (United States-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2020).

This competition is playing out around the globe, but Southeast Asia and the Greater Mekong Subregion represent a particularly important arena for competition for both the United States and China as well as the countries of the region. This is true for none more so than Thailand. The country prides itself on a historical legacy free of colonial conquest and consistently asserts itself as a regional leader in modern Southeast Asia. Thailand is a treaty ally of the United States and has more than a half century long record of military cooperation with that country. At the same time, it has deep economic and cultural ties to China and relies heavily on maintaining a healthy relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC) for its economic vitality. As competition has increased between the U.S. and China, it becomes increasingly important to understand how this important regional ally and partner for both great powers has been impacted in order to better understand what actions the country may take in the future.

2. Definition of Terms

Greater Mekong Subregion: This work adopts the Asian Development Bank (ADB) developed term for defining the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS). This use is not meant to limit the scope or focus to ADB relevant policies, political groupings, or initiatives. For the purposes of this work, the GMS includes "the People's Republic of China (specifically Yunnan Province and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region), Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam (Greater Mekong Subregion, n.d.)." For ease of reading and comprehension, the names China (or PRC), Laos, and Vietnam are used in place of official names.

Great Power Competition: Great Power Competition is a relatively new term in the public discourse that has become widespread in Western security analysis and mainstream media in the last decade, though it has roots in longstanding academic theories of great power politics. It seeks to expand the scope of study to include competition between states that takes place below

the level of armed conflict. Within this framework, competition takes place not just between militaries, but also in the diplomatic, economic, social, technology, and cultural domains as well (Pierce, 2021). The specific focus is on states who can credibly claim super-power status, for which access to nuclear weapons or economic might are not sufficient alone. There must be a confluence of many capabilities that lend a global reach. This is most often defined as the United States, China, and Russia due to “their ability to compete on nearly any dimension—information, economic, military, political, and legal (meaning ability to set or influence international policies and rules), against any other country in the world and on any continent (Pierce, 2021).” Other nations may be able to compete regionally, like Thailand, but not globally, while former great powers like the United Kingdom and Germany may maintain economic power but lack a truly global military capability.

3. Background: Why the Greater Mekong Subregion?

The Greater Mekong Subregion is an economically vibrant region, with a variety of systems of government, a strong and relevant regional integration effort in the form of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and a dynamic political environment characterized by diverse government systems and alliances. Studies on the impact of U.S.-China competition on the GMS are rare and often limited to perspective pieces or political analysis rather than in-depth works with academic rigor (Hoang, 2023; Teo, 2022). Moreover, academic and policy precedence is often given to maritime competition in the South China Sea (SCS), limiting focus on the GMS (Duong, & Thi, 2021). This work deliberately eschews a focus on maritime security issues in the SCS due to the already robust coverage of that region in the existing literature (Congressional Research Service, 2023; Global Conflict Tracker, 2024; Zhang, 2021).

The United States has deep historical ties to the region, including high intensity war in Vietnam that had direct military effects on Laos and Cambodia and a decades long military alliance with Thailand. Today, the United States sees the region as a key to global markets and an area ripe for democratic balancing against China. For its part, China increasingly sees the region as its backyard and as subject to its hegemony. The specific policies of these two countries are developed in depth below, but it is increasingly clear that competition is placing the two great powers on a potential collision course in the region. For this reason, understanding the effects of this growing competition on the GMS, including how it developed and how states within the region have or will respond is both timely and relevant.

Thailand is chosen as the focus country due to its central role in regional institutions like ASEAN and the Lower Mekong Initiative, its economic

importance, and its history of pursuing a “bamboo diplomacy” that bends with the shifting winds of geopolitics. It has deep economic and cultural ties to China while also maintaining close, if sometimes strained, ties to the United States and its military. With the highest standard of living in the region and one of the largest militaries, it is a key driver of regional policy (International Monetary Fund, 2023). Furthermore, the Thai government actively pursues a leadership position in the region, making understanding the effects of great power competition on its foreign policy priorities and actions all the more important.

2001 was chosen as the chronological starting point for this work due to the alignment of significant events and leadership changes the United States, China, and Thailand alike that forced changes in foreign policy approaches and actions. In the United States, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 ended the decade long period of peace following the end of the Cold War and dramatically reoriented the priorities of President George W. Bush, who had to that point been principally focused on domestic policy.

The subsequent launch of the “Global War on Terror” saw Thailand’s elevation to “Major Non-NATO Ally” status for the United States and led to deepening cooperation between the two countries that would only wain years later with the 2006 and 2014 coups. For Thailand, 2001 saw the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra to Prime Minister (PM), which represented a large change in political orientation and a more hands on approach for the PM in foreign policy than traditionally seen in Thailand (Chachavalpongpun, 2010). Shinawatra’s “Look West” policy expanded Thailand’s external ambitions and increased its desire to play a significant international role (Rana, 2009). Similarly, Hu Jintao rose to power in China in 2002. Hu’s “Peaceful Development” foreign policy principle prioritized engagement with neighbors and superpowers to find integrated solutions to economic, environmental, and social problems.

Each country has seen significant policy changes across successive leaders in the two decades since 2001. This breadth of coverage therefore ensures that effects and reactions can be evaluated for not just intensity but also duration, and they can be evaluated as either lasting impacts or as a possible result of the discrete policies of a single administration. Adding historical depth additionally helps ensure that major trends are observed in terms of relatively stable national interests rather than through the idiosyncrasies of individual leaders or points in time.

4. Great Power Competition: U.S. and Chinese Policy in the GMS

U.S. policy in the GMS

The United States' involvement in the Greater Mekong dates back over 200 years, but it remained in a relatively minor role through the colonial and pre-WWII eras (United States-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2020). Following the Allied forces-led expulsion of the Japanese occupation and the beginning of the Cold War with the Soviet Union, the United States began to engage more fully. Thailand opted into the United States' defense umbrella and invited U.S. troops to open bases on its territory in an effort to balance against spillover from a newly communist China (Rana, 2009). At the same time, the United States backed French efforts to maintain their colonial holdings in Vietnam and defeat the communist insurgency in that country. That backing ultimately led to the United States' direct involvement in the war. To this point, diplomatic and military engagement took priority. In the years following the war, economic concerns took on a much more significant role. Under the George W. Bush administration that took office in January 2001, the United States showed interest in balancing an increasingly complex Sino-American relationship through security, economic, and trade cooperation in the GMS (Garrison, 2007). U.S. efforts included participation in mini and multilateral institutions described below, but the rise of the so-called global war on terror and large scale conflicts in the Middle East ensured that the GMS remained a relatively low priority through the end of the Bush Administration in 2008 as evidenced by its absence from major policy documents like the National Security Strategy (NSS). The 2002 NSS cites "the possible renewal of old patterns of great power competition" with China (the first such mention), but focuses on the need for cooperation against transnational threats including disease and terrorism. Thailand, the Philippines, and Singapore are mentioned in the context of counter-terrorism cooperation, but Southeast Asia and the Greater Mekong Subregion are omitted entirely (White House, 2002).

The 2006 National Security Strategy marked a significant increase in attention towards Southeast Asia. In it, the Bush administration highlighted the importance of regional institutions and cooperative economic and diplomatic frameworks, including APEC Secure Trade and the APEC Region Initiative, citing the value of democracy promotion and increased economic activity. Notably, the military government in Burma is briefly addressed as a point of concern while nearly a full page is dedicated to the need for China to promote democratic reform (White House, 2006). Partnerships with individual countries in the GMS are noted, but largely in the context of U.S. military support following the 2004 tsunami. The focus on open institutions as a key vector for engaging the region, and the framing of Southeast Asian issues in the context of China policies will become enduring hallmarks of U.S. policy in the region from 2001

to the present. Open institutions are defined as those that welcome participation from countries outside the region as participants or observers and are distinct from closed organizations like the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation mechanism discussed below that are limited to only those countries directly involved (Busbarat, et al., 2021). To wit, the 2006 NSS directly argues for the use, reformation, and/or expansion of “appropriate institutions, regional and global, to make cooperation more permanent, effective, and wide-reaching (White House, 2006).” This immediately precedes a core priority of democracy promotion that indirectly implicates China.

Following the 2008-2009 financial crisis, the Obama administration made concerted moves to reassure allies in the Pacific of U.S. commitments to the region during his first term (Chen, 2013). The 2010 NSS is a tangible example of the increased rhetorical weight placed behind the effort. Engagement with ASEAN, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, proposed free trade pacts, and regional summits are given significant focus (White House, 2010). So too are the growing influence of China in the region and the need for “comprehensive engagements” with regional partners and allies to ensure the preservation of U.S. interests in the region (White House, 2010). The administration announced that “the center of gravity for U.S. foreign policy, national security, and economic interests is shifting towards Asia,” and began a concerted campaign to dub the shift as either a pivot to the Pacific or a Pacific rebalancing (Manyin et al., 2012). Support for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) (later abandoned by the Trump administration) and trade deals with South Korea and Thailand were partnered with diplomatic statements in support of freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and a reaffirmation of support for the mutual defense of Japan, including for the islands in the southwest archipelago under dispute with China (Lieberthal & Wang, 2012). With the exception of the November 2011 announcement of a rotational deployment of U.S. Marines to Australia’s Northern Territory, efforts to live up to the White House promoted moniker of being the “first Pacific President” relied primarily on diplomatic moves in lieu of military strength.

These rhetorical moves and trade deals were not immediately supported by a rebalancing of tangible assets or resources, military or otherwise, in the region. Writing in 2011, senior fellow emeritus of the U.S.-based Brookings Institution and expert on U.S.-China relations, Kenneth Lieberthal, noted that “Rhetoric and diplomacy... can shape perceptions and expectations and thus are important determinants of foreign-policy outcomes. But over time credibility is crucial, and credibility requires demonstrably having the resources and capabilities to implement the overall strategy over the long run.” As of his writing, there had been few concrete moves made by the administration to achieve that credibility and no clear break from similar initiatives under the previous administration (Chen, 2013). Military elements were present amongst rhetorical and diplomatic elements of the pivot, including an announced realignment of 60%

of navy assets to the Pacific. They were delayed by the 2014 outbreak of conflict in Ukraine, the Arab Spring uprisings across the Middle East, and the emergence and rapid expansion of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. Further resource constraints imposed by the then recent economic crisis and ongoing recovery also slowed efforts to operationalize the pivot (Saha, 2020).

The Trump administration's foreign policy and defense establishment, led principally by then Secretary of Defense James Mattis and then National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, immediately reinvigorated the national security community's focus on the Pacific. Despite the administration's withdrawal from the TPP and broader retrenchment from international organizations, engagement in the theater received new emphasis. The 2017 National Security Strategy and 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) codified the rhetorical shift towards the Pacific. In particular, they identify the Indo-Pacific, and the Southeast Asian subregion in particular, as of particular interest due to their strategic location as connections between the Indian and Pacific Oceans and key routes for global commerce (Saha, 2020).

The 2018 passage of the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act improved support to the State Department and United States Agency for International Development, but lacked significant tangible investments in regional defense spending (Inhofe & Reed, 2020). The bill "reiterates the US [sic] commitment to the freedom of navigation under international law and the peaceful resolution of maritime and territorial disputes, stressing on the need to enhance security and defence [sic] cooperation with allies and partners and to maintain a strong military presence in the Indo-Pacific region (Saha, 2020)." In pursuing these goals, it promotes the elevation of diplomatic and economic relations with ASEAN members and traditional allies and a multi-track effort to expand U.S. commitments in the region (U.S. Senate).

This trajectory of increasing attention and resources for Southeast Asia and the GMS continues under the current Biden administration, as does the growing priority on competition with China in the region and around the world. Southeast Asia is highlighted alongside pacific islands as a key point of emphasis for U.S. activity to counter Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific (White House, 2022).

Within U.S. Southeast Asia policy, the GMS as a unified region generally takes a lower profile. Top level strategy documents in the U.S. like the NSS do not mention it explicitly, favoring instead larger regional constructions and, like the Chinese, focusing more extensively on security threats in East Asia and the South China Sea. In what amounts to the most significant national security document released by a U.S. president's administration, inclusion and omissions are scrutinized heavily. This makes a region's inclusion or exclusion indicative of the relative importance given to it in the broader policy context (Lettow, 2021). Despite this, engagement with the GMS followed the same trajectory as broader regional policy. Jittipat Poonkham wrote in June 2022 that the United States and

its western aligned allies in the region backed an increasingly complex system of subregional cooperation mechanisms and frameworks in efforts that steadily accelerated following the Obama era pivot to the Pacific (Poonkham, 2022). He finds that efforts like the Trump administration's Mekong-US Partnership that sought to upgrade the Lower Mekong Initiative (created by the Obama administration in 2009), sought to "strengthen America's leadership role in the Mekong and to counterbalance the spread of China's influence down the river and into mainland Southeast Asia (Poonkham, 2022)." Such efforts continued and accelerated under the Biden administration and included the U.S. Secretary of State's call for a "free and open Mekong" (echoing the U.S. "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy) at the 2021 East Asia Summit.

This focus on multilateral institutions remains a dominant focus of the United States and overshadows other policy areas, including economic development and free trade agreements. The George W. Bush administration sought a free trade agreement with Thailand in 2003 (Congressional Research Service, 2004), but the 2006 coup in Thailand is credited with that effort's demise. The U.S. and ASEAN signed a trade agreement, formally known as the US-ASEAN Trade and Investment Facilitation Agreement (TIFA) in 2006 as a preparatory measure for a broader free-trade agreement, and ASEAN was the United States' fourth largest trading partner as of 2019 (ASEAN Briefing, 2023). Efforts to expand the agreement into a more comprehensive free trade agreement have not materialized, and significant headwinds exist for any additional expansion of formalized free trade regimes. This is a result of significant shifts in U.S. public and elite opinion away from free trade agreements that accelerated during and following the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Macdonald, 2023). This phenomenon corresponds with the withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership by the Trump administration, and the Biden administration has shown no signs of re-engaging on the issue. Notably, the United States is absent from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which was developed as an ASEAN-centric free trade agreement and includes both close U.S. allies and trade partners (Australia, Japan, South Korea) and its chief competitor China (Rillo et al., 2022).

With the Global War on Terror behind it and competition with China clearly framed as the defining foreign policy issue facing the United States, there is little reason to expect the trend of greater focus on the region to change in the near to medium terms. However, the U.S. has a reputation within the region for inconsistency of focus and for being easily distracted by emerging issues in other parts of the globe (Busbarat, 2020). Direct security threats outside the GMS will very likely continue to draw significant resources as well, which makes focusing on institutional cooperation mechanisms a cost effective approach. Moreover, it lends itself to the preferences of the U.S.'s largest partner in the GMS, Thailand, which will be discussed further below. The domestic roadblocks to greater formal

trade integration in the form of free trade agreements reinforces the primacy of diplomatic engagement and cooperation as well. Finally, the focus on working through, upgrading, and renewing minilateral institutions in the GMS that are open to the involvement of outside countries, including principally the United States and its ideologically aligned partners like Australia, Japan, and South Korea stands in stark contrast to China's emphasis on closed groupings that is explored immediately below.

Chinese Policy in the GMS

This work will treat the People's Republic of China's founding in 1949 as the starting point for assessment of PRC policy due to the distinct break from previous policies led by the Republic of China and the dynastic eras that preceded it. For the first three decades of its existence, the PRC maintained a closed system that shunned interaction with the outside world diplomatically, economically, or socially (Meisner, 1986). That began to change following Mao Zedong's death and the ascension of Deng Xiaoping to leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and the PRC. Deng's efforts were largely domestic, but they created a new entrepreneurial class that numbered nearly 4,000,000 people by 1985 and led to a significant rise in incomes across the country (Meisner, 1986). External trade and investment remained dominated by the state however and were focused principally on heavy industry and technology transfers from major industrial powers, making the GMS a relatively minor player (Lardy, 1995). Security cooperation was similarly limited. Thailand purchased military aid from China at reduced prices from the 1980's, but purchases were often symbolic in nature and military to military ties have continued to lag behind the U.S. through the present day (Chachavalpongpun, 2011). The PRC's focus on rapid industrialization had massive benefits at home, but it left little time for fostering closer formal economic ties with its neighbors to the South in the GMS. This began to change as economic changes consolidated in the 1990's and the PRC began more deliberately reaching out to its regional neighbors diplomatically and economically.

PRC participation in regional cooperation during the 1990's and early 2000's was relatively minor and emphasized transnational issues along the frontier, including combating avian flu, tackling drug and human trafficking, and maintaining biodiversity (Summers, 2008). This was primarily done through formal institutional cooperation (as categorized by those mechanisms with defined memberships, supporting organizations, and charters as opposed to informal groupings like "the QUAD" grouping of Australia, Japan, India, and United States or the "BRICS" grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa that cooperate on a less rigidly defined basis), and was dominated by efforts made through the Asian Development Bank led "Greater Mekong Subregion" grouping. This grouping included Yunnan and eventually Guangxi provinces as sub-national

members alongside Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. Early economic efforts by the PRC were focused on lowering trade barriers and increasing both overland and riparian trade (Summers, 2008). During this period, PRC policy was dominated by the idea of “promoting political relations by developing economic cooperation (Lu, 2016, p. 4).” The 2004 ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement is emblematic of the policies of this period (Po & Primiano, 2021, p. 327). It lowered trade barriers amongst ASEAN members and China to almost zero across the vast majority of traded goods, promoting economic growth but providing little room for further enhancing cooperation through trade. Military and security cooperation was not a significant part of PRC outreach to the GMS during the 1990’s or early 2000’s.

Lu Guangsheng, Chief Expert in the Center for China’s Neighbor Diplomacy Studies and Director of the Institute of International Studies at China’s Tsinghua University, wrote in 2016 that by the 2010’s, already low or eliminated trade barriers and increasing power disparities between the PRC and GMS countries led to diminishing returns for policies that emphasized economic and trade cooperation (Lu, 2016). This created a need for alternate methods of deepening cooperation and connectivity to the GMS. The 2013 launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) provided an opportunity to reorient policy toward developing infrastructure and institutional connections with the GMS under the umbrella of the global program. This reorientation became more pressing given the roughly simultaneous United States’ “pivot to the Pacific” under the Obama administration that raised the specter of increased competition along the PRC’s southern and maritime borders.

Political considerations initially limited cooperation with Vietnam due to South China Sea disputes and Myanmar due to the then nascent democratic transition. This led to a focus on a “central path” focused on Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia (Lu, 2016). BRI projects in the region included the now operational high-speed rail between Vientiane, Laos and Yunnan province, numerous bridges spanning the Mekong river, and hydroelectric dams on the Mekong and its tributaries. The PRC’s rapid industrialization and infrastructure development provided a competitive advantage in those areas in comparison to its western competitors. The acceleration of rail projects in particular during this period drove closer social and economic connectivity with the PRC and provided domestic development benefits by connecting the less prosperous inland provinces of Yunnan and Guangxi with access to growing markets and ports (Lu, 2016).

For the last decade, infrastructure development has been paired with a spate of multi and minilateral institution building. To wit, the United States initiated the development oriented Lower Mekong Initiative in 2009 and upgraded it to the Mekong-U.S. Partnership (MUSP) in 2020. The MUSP is considered an integral part of the broader Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy that is designed to check the PRC’s rise (Po & Primiano, 2021). This era was marked by the rapid

proliferation of multi and minilateral institutions in the region, including those backed by external western-aligned countries like India, Japan, and South Korea as well as those proposed indigenously like Thailand's Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) (Po & Primiano, 2021). Thailand in particular "has always regarded the Mekong region as its traditional sphere of influence in the region..." and is concerned by the growing power and influence of the PRC (Po & Primiano, 2021). In response, the PRC worked to blunt Thai efforts at balancing by coopting existing efforts or creating parallel ones.

For example, the PRC's Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) initiative in 2015 grew out of Thai efforts at regional institution building and has become a policy focal point for the PRC (Lu, 2016). The stated policy priorities at its founding were "(i) political security, (ii) economical sustainable development, and (iii) social culture," each of which is nested within the broader ASEAN priority set. This effort marked the first proactive attempt at regional institution building by the PRC and notably excludes the United States and its partners (Busbarat, 2021). The broad reach of the organization, which covers "not only economic but also political and security areas... [makes] the LMC the first institution of its kind in the Mekong Subregion." Moreover, it was noted that this effort was the "most important forum for China in Southeast Asia" by a PRC diplomat in Bangkok (Busbarat, 2021).

Chinese leadership in the LMC, and the absence of the United States and its partners within it is of key importance. Despite Thai and Vietnamese led efforts to include development partners from outside the region in the organization, much like other more limited coordination bodies, the PRC maintained its insistence that participation be limited to direct members of the region (Busbarat, 2021). This preserved PRC influence and excluded those of western aligned countries. Moreover, "the [PRC]-led LMC process, in short, was a symbolic move through which [the PRC] claimed a *droit de regard* in its backyard as a normal great power that had *de facto* legitimacy to claim a sphere of influence of its own." Additionally, the formation of the LMC "has served to lay the institutional groundwork for building the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor (CICPEC)..." under the BRI framework (Busbarat, 2021). Taken collectively, these efforts represent a growing "Sinocentric regional architecture" for cooperation that excludes the United States and other western-aligned countries who are active in the region like South Korea and Japan (Busbarat, 2021). Forcing the use of these mechanisms for dealing with water-flow concerns and other Mekong river issues further cements the role of the PRC as the central partner for GMS issues.

From a security perspective, the GMS has consistently been a lower priority for the PRC than threats in other regions. M. Taylor Fravel, an expert on Chinese defense issues at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, writing in

early 2020, found that conflict over Taiwan and territorial disputes in the South China Sea remain the operational priority for the PLA, and that “so long as [the PRC’s] major sovereignty disputes remain unresolved, especially Taiwan, its military strategy will continue to emphasize East Asia over other regions (Fravel, 2020). In 2010, China offered to sponsor joint military exercises for ground, air, and naval forces similar to those Thailand conducts with the United States, but they did not and have not since grown to match the scope or scale of existing Thai-U.S. military cooperation events (Chachavalpongpun, 2011).

Equally important, Busbarat, Bunyavejchewin, and Suporn (2012) noted that “maintaining a strategic balance between the United States and [the PRC] has been a top priority for Southeast Asian states. Given the combination of increasing tensions in Taiwan, longstanding policies of military neutrality in Vietnam, the decades-long military alliance between the United States and Thailand, and this emphasis on strategic balancing by the largest countries in the subregion, it is unlikely that large scale military-led security efforts would be effective or efficient in the GMS. That notwithstanding, security efforts focused on combating transnational organized crime and building law-enforcement partnerships remain in place and effective (Lu, 2016).

Effects of U.S.-China Competition on the GMS

2001 marked a watershed moment in the United States and China that brought both a political change of power in the PRC that cemented the new outward orientation of that country and a radical reorientation of U.S. policy toward external threats as a result of the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001 in the United States. As early as 2002, it became clear that the United States and China had begun preparing for greater competition (White House, 2002). As developed in detail above, each country worked extensively from 2001 to shape dynamics in the region in their favor through the use of competing regional groupings and institutional balancing (Pich, 2022). The result is a “complex spaghetti bowl, including rivaling and parallel institutional fora and frameworks... [that] comprises approximately 14 transboundary cooperation mechanisms (Poonkham, 2022).” Australia based Kai He (2023) describes this in Foreign Affairs in July 2023 as exclusive versus inclusive institutional balancing, and China based Zhang Li (2022) describes it as regionalization versus internationalization. He argues that rather than being a cause of conflict, “institutional balancing has increased, not reduced, stability and security.” Pursuant to this idea, U.S.-China competition has strengthened regional institutions like ASEAN, led to infrastructure improvements, and fostered significant economic development.

Despite He’s optimism, it is clear that the two great powers offer starkly different paths forward for the region. Given this disparity, it is important to understand how countries in the region are responding. Brian Eyler of the U.S.

based Stimson Center argues that “Currently, the U.S. government and Americans broadly enjoy a relatively favorable reputation in the subregion and are favored with a degree of soft power that China does not possess,” and that “The United States is generally seen as a benign offshore balancer that plays a constructive role in enforcing regional multilateralism and ASEAN centrality (Eyler, 2022).” It is suggested that GMS countries like Thailand take advantage of the U.S. position and its institutions in an attempt at balancing or hedging against China’s rise in the region. This is echoed by Thailand based Pongphisoot Busparat, who finds that GMS countries attempt “to pursue not only security cooperation but also to deepen economic engagement...” in order to “...prevent the dominance of any power while creating economic interdependence and reaping benefits from cooperation (Busbarat, 2020).”

China’s economic might and geographic proximity are undeniable, but so too are the longstanding trade, defense, and soft power relationships offered by the United States. It is important, therefore, to gain a better understanding of how key players in the region are being affected by the growing competition in order to better understand likely future policy positions and outcomes.

5. Research Design and Theory

The research underpinning this article is rooted in documentary analysis of primary and secondary sources on Thai, American, and Chinese foreign policies. When possible, strategy documents, policy statements or speeches, and published initiatives are assessed in conversation with expert analyses from the small but dedicated community of scholars working on Thai foreign policy and security issues. Structured analytic techniques, informed by interviews with academic experts, are then applied to the findings from that research in order to forecast possible future directions for Thai policy. The analysis for this work is rooted in neo-realist theory. This theory builds on the classical realist beliefs that the international system is inherently anarchical and that the distribution of power and capabilities throughout the system has a determinative effect. Unlike classical realism however, neo-realism sees this state as a product not of human nature but instead as a result of a lack of overarching higher power or authority that can direct state behavior and provide protection. As such, the structure of the international system takes a higher priority in neo-realism. Additionally, neo-realism promotes a broader definition of state power than classical realism. Economic, social, cultural, and institutional power all contribute to influence in the international system and therefore enhance or degrade relative power. Moreover, neo-realists recognize that internal domestic considerations are relevant to nation’s external policy choices, though they don’t take a dominant role (Korab-Karpowicz, 2018).

Kenneth Waltz remains the dominant thinker associated with neo-realism and this work will rely heavily on his concepts. He initially laid the foundations of

neo-realism in his seminal 1959 work titled “Man, the State, and War” wherein he develops three images of the international system: individuals, the state, and the international system (Waltz, 2001). Through these three images, he explores principles of classical realism (the first image), liberal state based concepts centered on economic imperatives (the second image), and a final systemic explanation for conflict that, while incorporating elements of the first two images, posits that the anarchic structure of the international system is a more compelling explanation. This work argues that only a world government could bring true peace and stability in an ideal state, because it would theoretically eliminate the competing interests that drive conflict. However, he acknowledges that even this ideal is impossible due to the differing internal motivations and interests across the different regions and subunits of any potential world state. Key here is the recognition that internal factors and differing national interests, whether driven at a state level like the economy or due to the whims of a particular leader or elite class, have an impact on external actions and can drive conflict.

In his follow up works, including his book “Theory of International Politics,” Waltz develops this further. He argues that states act with rational self-interest, like economic actors and will choose survival or to manage the distribution of power over other goals like power maximization (Korab-Karpowicz, 2018). Specifically, he wrote that “Internationally, the environment of states’ actions, or the structure of their system, is set by the fact that some states prefer survival over other ends obtainable in the short run and act with relative efficiency to achieve that end (Waltz, 1979).” Importantly, in a nod to his initial conception of a world government, his refined theory argues that international institutions serve to shape and constrain state actors even in an inherently anarchic system. This is supported by the robust use of multi and mini-lateral institutions as policy tools by Thailand, China, the United States in the Greater Mekong Subregion as discussed elsewhere in this work.

The importance of national interests and national security in neo-realism

National interests as used in this work are understood to be the “aspirations and goals of sovereign entities in the international arena.” These interests drive foreign policy decisions that seek to protect and promote these interests. To wit, Waltz argues in “Man, the State, and War” that “Each state pursues its interests, however defined, in ways it judges best. Force is a means of achieving the external ends of states because there exists no consistent, reliable process of reconciling the conflicts of interest that inevitably arise among similar units in a condition of anarchy.” Note that he doesn’t prescribe specific or universal interests to all states, but rather leaves some room for differing conceptions of national interest. This is a key difference from classical realism and is key to understanding why both states with differing relative power positions and states with similar relative power but differing internal conditions may arrive at different policy positions. As a result,

understanding how individual states conceptualize these goals is important to understanding why states pursue certain policies under a neo-realist approach to international relations (Trifunovic & Curcic, 2021).

To build on the concept of differing interests, it is instructive for this work to consider the differences in how great powers like the United States and China define and pursue their national interests in comparison to how a middle power like Thailand might. Some states, like the United States, explicitly define their national interests in publicly available documents, while others like the PRC don't release a single comprehensive document, leaving researchers to parse often opaque White Letters and policy pronouncements. European scholars Darko Trifunovic and Milica Curcic write that

All states, regardless of the power they possess, seek to pursue their national interests. Great powers can define their national interests ambitiously, i.e. their interests can be projected miles from their state borders and without the consent of other states. On the other hand, for small states, the essence of politics is based on achieving and preserving internal stability. The policymaking of a small state is conditioned by the established balance of interests of great powers as well as political articulation and protection of national interests.

Importantly here, a middle power like those in Southeast Asia likely has little ability to restrain or prevent the pursuit of national interests by the United States and China, but still must pursue their own. Chief among those interests is state survival, only after which can other goals like economic prosperity be pursued (Burchill, 2005).

It is possible to determine how countries determine their national interests in many ways. Trifunovic and Curcic find that national security strategies represent a "concretization of... prudent state policy of promoting national interests based on the preservation of state policy." When access to national security documents is limited due to state secrecy or other barriers, interviews and policy analysis can be substituted. This study proposes to synthesize all three in order to determine how Thailand's pursuit of national interests since 2001 has been affected by the competitive pursuit of national interests by the Great Powers and how that competition may shape future policy efforts by Thailand over the next 20 years.

The role of domestic influences: present and relevant, but not a dominant factor

A defining feature of neo-realism that separates it from classical realism is the respect for the impact of domestic forces on external state actions. Waltz highlights this through the use of the individual and state images from "Man, the State, and War" as discussed above. To this point, Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro (2009) find that while neo-realists "maintain that the state conducts foreign policy primarily with regard to the international arena, a matter which puts them squarely

within the realist camp, they recognize that leaders also must be attuned to threats to their power position from within the state.” The argument then follows that while not the primary influence, “in rare times of extreme domestic instability, national leaders might actually conduct foreign policy with greater attention to the domestic audience than to international exigencies.”

As such this work will not turn a blind eye to domestic factors that may offer alternative explanations for Thai policy choices in the Greater Mekong Subregion. For example, the Thai government under military leaders has been loathe to criticize Myanmar during substantial portions of the study period when the country was led by military governments. This is very likely shaped by the necessity to avoid criticizing another military government who subverted democratic norms, despite external pressure from the United States and some ASEAN partners (Zawacki, 2021). Additionally, domestic economic factors may impact external ambitions, such as decreasing revenue following economic downturns or domestic political strife.

Strategic hedging as a neo-realist explanation for state behavior

Neo-realist theory accounts for the differing relative power levels of states acting in the international system. Unlike classical realism, however, it does not assume that minor and middle powers will be forced to bandwagon with a great power or inevitably be defeated or destroyed. Instead, it provides a pathway for hedging against the rise of an alternate power while protecting against the threat of abandonment (Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019). In a bi or multi-polar environment, or an environment that is moving from unipolarity to another state like the U.S. is arguably doing now, strategic hedging theory allows smaller states to hedge against uncertain outcomes (Geeraerts & Salman, 2016). This can be done by building up economic reserves and capacity sufficient to survive short term shocks caused by tensions with one or more great powers, improving military capabilities in a manner sufficient to defend oneself without provoking an attack, and ensuring coordinated and consistent national policy to avoid high stakes policy mistakes (Tessman & Wolfe, 2011).

Cheng-Chwee Kuik (2021) of the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies addressed strategic hedging in Southeast Asia extensively in his 2021 article. In it, he finds that:

The United States (USA) and China, who view themselves as the primary targets of hedging, have frequently expressed distaste for this behavior. They dismiss hedging as opportunistic and urge states who practice hedging to stop doing so. Weaker states—especially those in Southeast Asia, which is presently the main theater of US–China rivalry—are pressured by both Washington and Beijing to send clear and consistent signals. Small states are urged—either directly or indirectly—to fall in line and make the “correct” choice. The United States and its allies attempt to

persuade smaller states to share the responsibility for “preserving the rules based order.” China, on the other hand, lobbies the same countries to collaborate and “build a community of common destiny,” while positioning itself as the “wave of the future.”

Despite these pressures, Kuik argues, small and medium states may pursue hedging behavior as a natural reaction to high levels of uncertainty rather than out of a deliberate or concerted policy choice. This may be characterized by “insurance-seeking behavior with three attributes: (a) an insistence on not taking sides or being locked into a rigid alignment; (b) attempts to pursue opposite or contradicting measures to offset multiple risks across domains (security, political, and economic); and (c) an inclination to diversify and cultivate a fallback position.” In the context of this study, hedging activity by Thailand could include maintaining defense alliances with the United States, while maintaining close military ties to China through joint exercises, weapons, sales, or other security cooperation. Similarly, it could be reflected in pursuing stronger economic ties with both great powers as well as third-party and non-aligned countries. The overall impact, if identified, would be to maintain freedom of decision-making across a broad swath of future events from U.S.-China rapprochement to open high-intensity conflict.

6. Literature Review

Great Power Competition

Jonathan Stromseth’s February 2021 book titled “Rivalry and Response: Assessing Great Power Dynamics in Southeast Asia” is highly representative of the bulk of current literature. He frames many of the ongoing policy issues in the region, including debates over development around and construction on the Mekong, illicit trafficking, and predatory economic practices by the PRC in terms of competition between the United States and the PRC. While at first approach this appears to diminish the agency of countries in the region to determine and pursue their own interests, Stromseth presents a compelling argument for the impact of the great powers on local foreign policy issues (Stromseth, 2021).

PRC expansionism in the South China Sea, including the military occupation of islands belonging to Vietnam is described as a key driver of increased tension in the region, and PRC assertiveness is framed as an assault on the U.S. led liberal international order more broadly. In depth focus is given to the strategic frameworks driving the actions of both great powers, including the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” strategy of the United States and the PRC’s integrated economic and diplomatic focus on the region. Stromseth, alongside the co-authors of chapters within the work argue that increased wariness of conditions tied to PRC development funds and concerns about debt-trap diplomacy, have created openings for greater engagement by the United States. Multilateral institutions and ASEAN in particular are portrayed as key to regional efforts to engage with both great

powers while maintaining careful independence from both. Mekong issues are woven throughout the analysis and complement discussions germane to the broader region.

Stromseth's work and others consistently identify similar policy problems that are important to both Thailand and the broader region. They are, therefore, useful for focusing research on the most important issues. They fail to address in depth how internal factors shape and influence the responses to these problems however. This leaves space for additional research to link external policy priorities with internal structures and influences (Stromseth, 2021).

Thai policy towards the United States and China

The literature on Thailand's foreign policy system is remarkably sparse. Whether due to the relative fluidity of Thailand's governmental structure over the course of more than a dozen constitutions or due to a lack of scholarly attention, there are few to no comprehensive descriptions or assessments of how foreign policy is made in the Kingdom. This presents a large opportunity for a contribution to the understanding of Thai foreign policy creation from idea to execution and how the dominant geopolitical trend of the current era, great power competition, impacts that process.

For example, Supalak Ganajanakhundae's 2021 article in the journal *Southeast Asian Affairs* is emblematic of many articles on the Thai government that recount the history or sequence of events in the government, including which key players held particular offices and which parties gained or lost seats in parliament without a serious attempt at analysis of how those events will impact policy making procedures or outcomes. Additionally, COVID-19 understandably dominates discussion of the second government led by Prime Minister Prayut Chan Ocha in line with most works published since the 2019 elections.

Pongphisoot Busbarat's 2012 paper for the Australian National University is an outlier to this trend. Busbarat takes a critical look at Thailand's post-cold war efforts at regional leadership and analyzes both the policy choices and the intent behind them. He argues that, greater than any other factor including economic rationale, Thailand's actions are driven by self-perception and identity. The work argues that historical perceptions of neighboring states dating back to the pre-colonial era continue to affect Thai policy towards its neighbors. This includes viewing Myanmar as aggressive, Laos as weak, and the Khmer of Cambodia as untrustworthy. Further, strong nationalism rooted in the dominance of the former Siamese state and pride in never having been colonized, Busbarat argues, continues to motivate the current Thai state to take a leading role in mediating regional issues. These narratives, it is noted, frequently complicate Thai actions in the region as neighboring countries view historical Siamese aggression in a negative light.

While Busbarat recognizes the economic rationale for many post-Cold War integration initiatives, he argues that non-economic motivations are just as

significant. Efforts like the “Quadrangle Economic Co-operation (QEC) initiative, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Co-operation (BIMSTEC), ACMECS, the Emerald Triangle and the Asia Co-operation Dialogue (ACD),” among others all have the unifying force of placing Bangkok in a central leadership role. The work spends significant time identifying the development of Thailand’s self-perception and drive to be a regional leader through assessment of regional initiative both during and following the Cold War era.

This historical narrative provides valuable insight into the ideological and motivational inputs to the Thai foreign policy process that will inform this research, including the historical case study. Busbarat’s work does not substantively address the impact of the United States of China on Thailand’s development of or pursuit of its national interests, likely due to the decreased focus on the issue globally at the time of publishing.

7. Findings on Thai Foreign Policy 2001-2024

Thai Foreign Policy over the study period does not follow a straight line, but it does head in a consistent direction. The strongest external policy stances took place under the Thaksin regime and were fortified by the centralization of power under his leadership. Notably, this also marks the clearest period where Thailand moved toward China and away from the United States. Consecutive political crises in the seven years following the 2006 coup that deposed Thaksin saw movement back towards a more balanced relationship between the great powers, but few large-scale diplomatic efforts were offered due to domestic instability. Even fewer regional efforts in the GMS took root. The 2014 coup d’états that brought General Prayut Chan-ocha to power put a further freeze on many of Thailand’s diplomatic relationships, most notably with the United States, and bids for regional leadership withered. The Srettha Thavisin administration is still young, but it appears to be reengaging in a more proactive foreign policy, attempting to reassert Thai leadership regionally, and negotiating a balance between the United States and China.

This section will look at each major period during the study period sequentially, and it opens with a brief discussion of historical trends in Thai foreign policy from before the study period. The administrations under consideration are addressed in the following manner: Thaksin Shinawatra (2001-2006); Surayud Chulanont (2006-2007), Samak Sundaravej (2008), Somchai Wongsawat (2008), Abhisit Vejjajiva (2008-2011), and Yingluck Shinawatra (2011-2014); Prayut Chan-ocha (2014-2023), and; Srettha Thavisin (2023-present). Each period is evaluated to identify major policy positions; diplomatic initiatives in the GMS, Southeast Asia, or globally; and relative orientations towards the United States and China. The primary source documents used include Thai National Security Strategies and policy statements, and they are buttressed by a deep reading of works

by the relatively small community of academics working on Thai foreign policy and security issues.

The most common phrase used to describe Thailand's approach to foreign policy is "Bamboo Diplomacy," a phrase meant to reflect a method that allows the country to bend with the prevailing geo-political winds, while remaining rooted in core Thai values, and without breaking decisively in one particular direction. Pavin Chachavalpongpun, a scholar of Thai foreign policy who will be cited heavily here, describes a long history of pragmatic diplomacy, led by a Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) that was traditionally dominated by a relatively closed group of aristocracy and social elites. While access to the institution has broadened substantially, the Thai MFA and its diplomatic corps have a strong tradition of professionalism and independence that continues through the present day (Chachavalpongpun, 2010). Since the formation of the constitutional monarchy in 1933, "Thai foreign policy aims, as part of the state apparatus, to achieve a condition that stabilizes its core pillars – nation, religion (Buddhism) and king – by 'defend[ing] the nation's independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and status in the international arena (Busbarat, 2016)."

Protecting sovereignty and national security was placed above all else as a priority through the 1970's, which was reflected by a strong role for the military and the security organs of the state (Chachavalpongpun, 2010). A shift to business promotion and a focus on trade slowly took root beginning in the 1970's and expanded with economic liberalization through the 1980's (Chachavalpongpun, 2010). Backed by the U.S., Thailand led the economic opening up of the GMS under the Chatichai administration's "Turning battlefields into marketplaces" policy, and its prolonged rapid growth placed it not far behind the Asian Tigers of South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore (Busbarat, 2012). This economic growth combined with strong nationalist narratives of cultural superiority tied to avoiding colonial conquest, and resulted in a self-perception as the natural leader within the GMS and Southeast Asia more broadly (Busbarat, 2012). Despite setbacks from the Asian Financial Crisis, known in Thailand as the Tom Yum Gung crisis, Thailand continued to press its leadership in the region through the end of the 1990's, and its core foreign policy goals were to promote Thai and regional economic growth, to promote and maintain the GMS as Thailand's sphere of influence, and to counter limited structural power through the use of multilateralism (Busbarat, 2012).

Concerns about the dominance of great powers can also be traced back to well before the study period. Indeed, Thai concerns with China's intent to extend their sphere of influence into the GMS date back to policy documents from as early as 1992 (Busbarat, 2016), and former foreign minister Thanat Khoman noted in 1999 that "When we know that great powers always compete for power, we must fall into nobody's arms, but maintain the policy of equidistance — not leaning too much towards anyone who will tie us so tightly that we cannot breathe comfortably.

This is the principle that always guided me when I was responsible for Thai foreign affairs (Khoman, 1999).” This is the situation as Thaksin Shinawatra encountered it when he took office in February 2001.

Thaksin Shinawatra (2001-2006)

The Thaksin government’s foreign policy is characterized by a heavy emphasis on business promotion, by the strong and historically atypical centralization of policy-making power in the hands of the Prime Minister, and by a distinct move toward China. To that end, Phongpisoot Busbarat finds that Thai diplomacy during the period “was bold, assertive, unconventional and controversial, and departed from business-as-usual (Busbarat, 2016).” This approach, and Thaksin’s coziness with China, addressed more fully below, was not directly at the expense of the United States, but it did lead to lasting complications in the relationship. Additionally, Thaksin’s personalization of foreign policy and diplomacy upended the meticulous process in place for generations and made Thai foreign policy more rapid, capricious, ad hoc, and very likely ultimately lead to less measured responses to actions by the U.S. and China. This personalization also meant that when he was removed from power, many of his initiatives died on the vine, such as the Asian Cooperation Dialogue and the Asian Bond Market.

Thaksin represented a major turning point for Thai diplomacy and foreign policy, reorienting it towards business and economics and away from national security and the military. Moreover, he implemented dramatic changes in the way Thai diplomacy operated by centralizing control within the Government House (and away from the historically autonomous Ministry of Foreign Affairs), promoting a CEO-diplomat style of leadership, and promoting a much more nationalist, assertive, and ambitious stance for Thailand regionally and globally (Chachavalpongpun, 2010).

Among Thaksin’s most notable policy positions was the effort to promote pan-Asian sentiment and to implement policy that supported the idea of Asia for Asians (Chachavalpongpun, 2010). Integral to this, he sought to shift Thai diplomacy from a traditionally reactive stance to a proactive and assertive one, particularly within the GMS. This included the sponsorship and leadership of subregional integration efforts and organizations, many of which are detailed in previous sections (Energy Policy and Planning Office, Ministry of Energy, 2001). Most notable among them, however, were the Asian Cooperation Dialogue (Thepchatree, 2019) and the Asian Bond Market (Chachavalpongpun, 2010). Each sought to promote pan-Asian sentiment and work around traditionally Western-led frameworks. His administration also strongly promoted the candidacy of the then foreign minister to be Secretary General of the United Nations (Chachavalpongpun, 2010).

In the GMS, ACMECS was an effort to reassert Thai hegemony over mainland Southeast Asia, and the Bangkok Process sought to guarantee Thai

involvement and leadership in global efforts to resolve the long-standing conflicts in Myanmar (Chachavalpongpun, 2010). Notably, these efforts saw some participation from China and the United States, but were neither led by or centered around either's participation.

Additionally, Thaksin brought his longstanding business practices to not just the MFA, but to the policies its diplomats pursued abroad. His administration sought numerous free trade agreements (FTAs), including with China and ASEAN. In the words of Prapat Thepchatree author of the 2019 book *Thai Foreign Policy* (translated from Thai), Thaksin made business the business of the state (Thepchatree, 2019).

Shortly after his swearing in as Prime Minister, Thaksin made his first international trip abroad to China (China Daily, 2001). While there, and during numerous subsequent trips, he hailed the deep cultural ties and long history of trade between the two countries (Chachavalpongpun, 2010). This visit was an early signal of what would become a deliberate policy of moving closer to China and “standing up to the United States (Chachavalpongpun, 2010).” It also coincided with China's emergence as a rising power and aspiring regional hegemon as discussed in depth above.

Importantly for Thaksin, China provided a value-neutral partner that stayed out of internal Thai issues, including Thaksin's consolidation of power, aggressive and violent war on drugs, and his fights with insurgents in Southern Thailand that resulted in dozens to hundreds of deaths. This is in notable contrast to the United States who criticized but did so relatively mildly (Chachavalpongpun, 2010). Thailand quickly signed a free trade agreement with China that came into effect in October 2003, and resulted in substantial increases in trade between the two countries in the following years. The public took notice of the government's increasing ties to China as well, and 70% of Thais saw China as their most important external influence in 2003 (Kurlantzick, 2006). Moreover, Thaksin strongly promoted Chinese culture, signing a memorandum of understanding for the training of 1000 Thai Mandarin teachers, reintroducing Chinese language and culture to Thai classrooms, being a vocal supporter of the One-China policy and backing Chinese aggression towards Taiwan, the latter of which earned Chinese support for the ACD and disinterest in the controversial response to the Southern Thai insurgency in turn (Chachavalpongpun, 2010).

Engagement with China was not unequivocal, however. Rather, Thaksin's government pursued increased direct bilateral development support, foreign direct investment, and trust-building through institutional engagement with its neighbors in the GMS, particularly Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia in order to prevent their move away from Thailand's orbit and into China's (Chachavalpongpun, 2010). China's major push into development in the region under the Belt and Road Initiative would not come until after Thaksin was out of power, and there is little published work assessing Thai-China relations in the broader GMS context from

this period beyond the multi-lateral institution building efforts discussed in previous sections.

Thaksin's relationship with the United States was more transactional and significantly less warm in comparison to that with China. Multiple experts offer a compelling rationale for his chilliness toward the United States. Likely influenced by his own business background, it is argued that Thaksin harbored deep resentment towards the United States over its perceived failure to come to Thailand's aid following the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997. Phongphisoot Busbarat writes that, in particular, a U.S. failure to support Thailand in a manner equivalent to the way it helped South Korea led to resentment. He wrote in 2016 that:

As Kishore Mahbubani opined, "all the Western institutions that had made loans to South Korea received phone calls from the US Treasury 'advising' them not to pull out. These phone calls saved South Korea." However, this did not happen with Thailand. At this juncture, public resentment against the West was provoked by nationalist public intellectuals who saw the conditions imposed by international financial institutions as a neo-imperialist tool supported by America. As US companies bought Thai assets at low prices, the perception emerged that America had taken advantage of Thailand's economic problems. Considering the fact that Thailand is America's oldest ally in Asia, its lack of enthusiasm and support during the crisis not only upset Thais but also raised doubts concerning Washington's real intentions towards the Kingdom. Anti-American sentiment contributed to Thaksin's popularity."

Pavin Chachavalpongpun expresses the same sentiment in his 2010 book *Reinventing Thailand: Thaksin and His Foreign Policy* and draws a direct line from the financial crisis to Thaksin's pan-Asia policy and Asia-for-Asians pushes. The consensus continues in 2019, with Prapat Thepchatree making a virtually identical argument.

Less than a year into Thaksin's tenure, the United States suffered its largest terrorist attack in its history when terrorists flew three hijacked commercial aircraft into buildings in New York and Washington, DC and crashed a fourth aircraft in Pennsylvania. Unusually for a military ally of a stricken country, Thaksin initially declared strict neutrality following the attacks (Chambers, 2004). The government quickly back tracked after strong domestic criticism, but the initial hesitation was noteworthy. Over the ensuing years, however, Thailand would go on to send non-combatant military support to U.S. operations in Iraq and Afghanistan during the Global War on Terror (GWOT). In return, Thailand was elevated to Major non-NATO ally status, U.S. criticism of heavy handed tactics in Southern Thailand was relatively muted, and the Bush administration promised to pursue a free trade agreement with the Kingdom (Chachavalpongpun, 2010). Busbarat argues that part of the hesitation was based in fear that China would think

Thailand was supporting a U.S. containment or encirclement strategy aimed at China. He further argues that, while rhetorically ambiguous early on, this was primarily designed to buy decision space, while actual support remained unchanged, and higher support for the U.S. in the security space was ultimately balanced with greater economic ties with China.

2006-2014: Domestic turmoil, foreign policy stagnation

The period between Thaksin's ouster in the fall of 2006 and the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) coup led by General Prayut were marked by domestic turmoil, reduced foreign ambitions, and the withering of key Thaksin-era initiatives in the GMS and Asia more broadly. The first of four leaders during the period, Surayud Chulanont, attempted to signal a clean break from the Thaksin era with his "ethical diplomacy" initiative. This was an explicit rebuke of perceived corruption tied to the business promotion efforts of the Thaksin regime, but it also sought to reassert an emphasis on democracy promotion, to address international concerns about the anti-insurgency campaign in Southern Thailand, and to further elevate the role of Thailand in ASEAN and the United Nations (Chachavalpongpun, 2010). Surayud's military administration tied foreign policy to national security and deemphasized the role of the state in business promotion abroad (Chachavalpongpun, 2009). In keeping with China's value-free foreign policy, little changed in the relationship after the 2006 coup, and while the U.S. was statutorily obligated to withhold some foreign assistance after the coup, the defense relationship remained intact and the Cobra Gold exercises continued unhindered (Chachavalpongpun, 2009). U.S.-China competition through institution building continued, but Thai efforts to assert hegemony via these institutions faded (Chachavalpongpun, 2010).

The year 2008 saw two different Thaksin-aligned Prime Ministers, Samak Sundravej (January-July) and Somchai Wongsawat (September-December). Each faced substantial and prolonged domestic protests that limited their ability to focus outward, and the global financial crisis further limited ambitions abroad. International institutions remained central to diplomatic efforts in a mark of continuity with the post-coup Surayud administration (Chachavalpongpun, 2010). However, Samak and Somchai governments also made an attempt to resurrect Thaksin-style business promotion in a nod to their political patron (and brother-in-law in Somchai's case (Chachavalpongpun, 2009). It remains unclear how much either government's actions were influenced by either the United States or China during their short tenures, though decision making was almost certainly dominated by domestic factors. Writing in 2009, Pavin Chachavalpongpun argued that "Since elected Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was removed from power in a military coup in September 2006, the country has arguably been without a foreign policy," adding that during this time, the MFA was effectively in damage

control abroad, focusing on restoring the good name and image of Thailand abroad more than creating or implementing coherent foreign policy priorities.

Abhisit Vejjajiva took office as the Prime Minister of Thailand in the closing days of December, 2008. While domestic unrest continued throughout his tenure, his conservative anti-Thaksin government proved more durable than those of both Samak and Somchai (Thepchatree, 2019). Early on, Abhisit declared ASEAN the cornerstone of Thai diplomacy (Chachavalpongpun, 2010). This coincided with Thailand's 2009 ASEAN Chairmanship, which presented significant opportunity but yielded no clear successes (Thepchatree, 2019). Similarly, Abhisit led participation in the G20 meetings in London and Pittsburgh and the World Economic Forum, but policy accomplishments remained sparse. Within the GMS, the new government sought to address anti-democratic actions by the Myanmar junta in a reassertion of regional leadership. This won plaudits from the United States, including from then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, but ultimately complicated relations with their neighbor (Chachavalpongpun, 2010). Looking to their eastern neighbors, the Abhisit government faced significant headwinds due to flaring tensions with Cambodia over a longstanding border dispute about the historic Preah Vihear temple. Once again, domestic Thai politics was a key driver of the action, as Thaksin was intimately involved in raising public ire surrounding the issue through provocative statements and actions on the border (Chachavalpongpun, 2010).

By this time, the United States was well into the "Pivot to the Pacific" policy described above, and rising tensions between it and China were clear throughout the region. The U.S. offered to mediate between the Abhisit government and the anti-government Red Shirt protestors out of an announced concern for a treaty ally, but many Thai elites "viewed it as a move to manipulate the political situation in Thailand," and "Immediately, Thai Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya rejected [the State Department official's] offer." This is in contrast to what the Thai's saw as the "strict non-interference" policy from China who was more interested in "making money rather than enemies (Chachavalpongpun, 2011)."

Rather than take a decisive side in the great powers' competition, an Abhisit government spokesman at the time stated that "Our interests and international relations are becoming more complex. We see advantages in the competition between superpowers (Chachavalpongpun, 2010)." In particular, China's more pragmatic and hands off approach toward domestic issues often appealed. Chinese moral ambivalence notwithstanding, the Abhisit government still celebrated U.S. actions when they were perceived to support that government or to blunt Chinese hegemonic expansion in the GMS. Specifically, Thailand attempted to balance overwhelming Chinese economic power with expanded contract farming in Laos, and saw the U.S. presence in the region as beneficial to

balancing Chinese economic dominance and slowing its growing power (Chachavalpongpun, 2010).

Ultimately, while Abhisit's government brought stability to Thai foreign policy in comparison to his immediate predecessors, it too suffered from significant domestic headwinds that ultimately limited accomplishments. Throughout the period from 2006-2011, there was no clear grand strategy, nor was there a consistent response to growing U.S.-China competition in the region (Thepchatree, 2019). Abhisit's government provided the clearest articulation to that date of a desire to maintain a balanced relationship between the two great powers while using multilateral organizations to enhance Thai diplomatic presence at all levels.

Yingluck's government, though longer lived than some of her immediate predecessors, was equally turbulent. She faced intense protests by conservative groups throughout her time in office and was dogged by claims of corruption tied to her brother's time in office. It is difficult, therefore, to draw out a coherent foreign policy vision.

Pongphisoot Busbarat's 2016 article titled "Bamboo Swirling in the Wind" describes two case studies that highlight the impact such pressures had on Yingluck's relations with the great powers. First in 2012, the United States' National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) proposed using Thailand's Utapao Air Force Base to launch and recover flights that would conduct air testing over the GMS and would be in keeping with longstanding use agreements between the United States and Thailand. Domestic critics of Yingluck immediately claimed the U.S. science mission was meant as a front for bringing in military forces aimed at China and/or a cover for espionage activities. Multiple high level meetings, including with the United States Secretary of Defense, with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (the highest ranking military officer in the U.S.), and with the Assistant Secretary of State for Political Military Affairs took place, but it was ultimately scrapped despite support from the Thai military and the routine nature of US military access to the airport before and after the incident. Domestic politics prevailed when the issue was punted to parliament, forcing delays that led NASA to withdraw the request. Meanwhile, China's opposition to the program was never clear (Busbarat, 2016). It was evident, however, that domestic opponents of Yingluck's government would seize on foreign policy issues to weaken her position, even if they were based on tenuous concerns.

The second case study similarly occurs in 2012, which saw Thailand participate in the then still U.S.-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement. Notably, this agreement explicitly excluded China. The Yingluck government, when faced with the prospect of being drawn into the U.S.-led TPP and potentially alienating China, opted to reassure its northern neighbor that it would aggressively pursue membership in the Regional Comprehensive

Economic Partnership (RCEP), which included the great power. Pongphisoot frames the choice as an explicit choice to balance American and Chinese interests, but one made out of perceived necessity rather than deliberate choice.

2014-2023: General Prayut Chan-ocha

2014 marked a turning point for Thailand in several ways. The country moved away once again from democratic processes and transitions of power in favor of a military led coup, but it also marked the end of prolonged period of domestic instability that saw five prime ministers in eight years (not counting caretakers). In terms of diplomacy, it also marked a return to a more stable, deliberate, and process-based approach.

Perhaps unsurprisingly for a military administration, planning and strategy documents became important pieces of Thai foreign policy under Prayut. After the initial turmoil of the immediate post-coup period settled, the government began issuing new guidance. Throughout 2016 and 2017, the Thai MFA and junta led NCPO issued a new 20 year strategy, a new foreign policy strategy, a new national development strategy, and more (Thepchatree, 2019). ASEAN once again held a prominent spot in these documents, and Prayut once again sought to make Thailand the “hub” of the organization and region.

Resentment from perceived US interference in domestic affairs following the overthrow of Thaksin in 2006 was reinforced following the 2014 coup when Washington downgraded bilateral ties “including the suspension of military assistance and arms sales, and scaling down the annual Cobra Gold military exercise.” As a result, the junta reinforced relationships with Asian neighbors, including China (Busbarat, 2016).

China was not, however, an unequivocal supporter, and the Prayut administration did not move as strongly toward them as the Thaksin one had. The government sought support from China for the hub strategy and major economic and infrastructure projects, but pulled back after China overstepped during Belt and Road railway negotiations, squeezing Thailand hard like it had small countries. Thailand wasn’t invited to the Beijing led One Belt, One Road (OBOR) conference in 2017 as a result (Thepchatree, 2019). Following this, Thailand tried to reduce its reliance on China as it grew stronger and more assertive, and increasingly tried to balance the superpowers in the 2017-2018 period (Thepchatree, 2019).

Prayut was returned to power in 2019 following elections held under a new constitution. Though the elections were flawed, and the post-election period saw the third-place party disbanded by court order under dubious circumstances, the government now had the legitimacy to ramp up policy making and diplomacy. The 2019 to 2022 National Security Policy and Plan explicitly address rising great power competition between the United States and China, and argues that “such development forces Thailand to adopt more flexible international policies

to maintain its international relations balance with the superpowers [emphasis added].”

The plan lays out a structured assessment of the situation, defines Thai national interests (including independence and peaceful coexistence with ASEAN and global communities), sets objectives, and operationalizes these with explicit policies and plans to achieve and “strengthen international relations equilibrium.” National Level Policy 16 is titled “strengthening international relations equilibrium, and it is implemented by National Level Security Plan 3.7.16, titled “Maintaining balanced international relations. The plan’s strategic goal is to be implemented by, among other processes, strategies (2) “utilizing existing cooperation mechanisms...” and (6) “promoting balanced relations between Thailand and the superpowers, especially in terms of military and security relations.” The ministry of Foreign Affairs is tasked as the lead ministry for development and execution of the plan.

These policies were renewed and re-enforced in very similar language in policy documents and plans issued in 2023, just prior to the elections that brought Prayut’s term to an end. These documents include the 2023 Five Year Threat Outlook, the Immediate Policy of the Minister of Defence for Fiscal Year 2023, and the National Intelligence Agency 20 Year Assessment. For example, the last of these documents argues that “It is important to maintain a proactive balance and not choose the side of a great power, but rather to use pragmatism....” Moreover, multi-lateral institutions are assessed to “help increase negotiating power for Thailand, while distributing risks.”

Veteran Thai journalist Kavi Chongkittavorn wrote in a 2023 retrospective on Prayut’s diplomatic accomplishments that his government’s “foreign policy played an indispensable role in pivoting Thailand on geopolitical landscape.” Kavi argues that, Thailand rebuilt its relations in the GMS under Prayut, including through chairmanship of organizations like ACMECS, ASEAN, and APEC. Prayut’s government is also said to have addressed longstanding cross-border issues with its neighbors, including human trafficking, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, and aviation safety, while also maintaining a peaceful frontier that led to increased trade and people-to-people exchanges (Chongkittavorn, 2023).

2023-Present: Srettha Thavisin

At the time of writing less than a year in, little academic work has been published on the Srettha Thavisin government’s foreign policy or its explicit positions towards either the United States or China. The 2023 policy documents issued in the closing days of the Prayut government remain in effect and have not yet been superseded. Srettha has, however, announced several initiatives in the press that very likely signal an intent to continue historical themes of Thai diplomacy. The new government appears eager to maintain or grow Thailand’s

position as the de facto leader of mainland Southeast Asia, and they have made several ambitious policy proposals such as a Schengen Zone style visa-free travel regime for the GMS and Malaysia (Sangwongwanich, 2024).

Srettha, having inherited the mantle of Thaksin's Pheu Thai party, is similarly friendly with China. His administration quickly waived visas for Chinese tourists as part of a broader tourism push, and has been eager to bind the two countries more closely in other areas (Sangwongwanich, 2024). To wit, Srettha's push to join the western-aligned Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) was swiftly followed by an announced intent to also pursue membership in the decidedly anti-Western BRICS bloc, shocking many including the United States and perhaps his own MFA who advocated for a focus on the OECD first (Chongkittavorn, 2024).

8. Analysis

Documentary Research

What becomes clear across the entire study period, is that while individual governments leaned more towards the United States or China, none sought to break entirely with either. Each administration strove to hedge their position by balancing one great power against the other, and such a strategy has become increasingly explicit in planning and strategy documents as tensions increase between the two remaining super powers.

Thailand faces an increasingly complicated regional picture, and the increasing tension between the great powers will only serve to amplify diplomatic pressure on the country. While Thailand is not directly implicated by South China Seas tensions, it is certain to be affected by hostilities that erupt there. Economic pressures continue to bind Thailand to both the United States and China, with China increasingly dominant economically. Fear of Chinese expansionism and hegemony will very likely continue to bind Thailand to the United States. As such, great power competition will almost certainly continue to be a significant driver of Thai foreign policy. Failure to recognize this imperative would put at risk trade flows with its first and second largest trading partners (China and the U.S. respectively) valued at more than 1.6 trillion baht and 1.05 trillion baht through the first 5 months of 2024 alone (Trade Statistics Report System, Ministry of Commerce, 2024).

Multilateralism remains an important value for Thailand, and participation in ASEAN and other multi and mini-lateral organizations in the region will almost certainly continue to be a priority for Thailand. They represent a path by which Thailand can exercise influence greater than its relative size, military strength, or individual economic strength would normally allow if operating independently, particularly if it is in a leadership position. ASEAN takes a preeminent role for governments across the Thai political spectrum, but mini-lateral groupings are

a prominent part of its subregional strategies in the GMS. Great power efforts to create and shape these institutions, therefore, likely pose both benefits, such as increased leadership opportunities, and risks, like overextension and overlapping mandates that cause confusion and drain resources.

Across the entire study period, the behavior of Thai governments is clearly consistent with the strategic hedging theory as discussed in the opening sections of this work, and there are few signs throughout the study period of a desire by any Thai government to make a clean break from either China or the United States. Thaksin expressed the clearest willingness to favor one side, but even the most anti-American policies he pursued were carefully calibrated. For example, Thaksin pushed back on the U.S., but only within careful limits, and he never threatened the broader U.S.-Thai defense relationship or downgraded existing cooperation or ties. Indeed, increased security cooperation and participation in the U.S.-led GWOT was paired almost simultaneously with an extensive free trade agreement with China. Warmer ties with China represented a hedge and balancing effort against the historic U.S. influence, influence that he argued often included domestic meddling. To wit, longstanding and deep multi-sectoral relationships between the two countries, including the “Thai-U.S. Strategic Dialogue,” continued, and new advances in the Thai-China relationship largely served to bring China closer to the type of relationship already in place between Thailand and the United States (Chachavalpongpun, 2010). Unlike his political benefactor Thaksin, the current Prime minister, Srettha Thavisin, does not appear to hold personal animus toward the United States and has expressed an eagerness to maintain balanced relations with both great powers such as by taking a dual track approach to OECD and BRICS membership.

Broader elements of neo realist theory proved relevant to the study as well. Domestic factors consistently constrained multiple Thai governments’ foreign policy efforts. Thaksin’s CEO ambassadors marked an ambitious new phase for Thai diplomacy, but the often controversial projects and investments that came with it ultimately led to his undemocratic ouster by domestic opponents. Noted scholar of Thai security and foreign policy, Benjamin Zawacki, positively described Thaksin’s era as both outgoing and proactive. What followed was a period of retrenchment during the turmoil of the successive regimes that rose and fell between 2006 and 2014, and Zawacki finds that Prayut’s post-coup foreign policy was more restrained, internally focused, driven by economic growth, and marked by explicit balancing of major powers. Phongpisoot Busbarat wrote in 2016, that “Although Thailand generally manages to maintain close ties with both Washington and Beijing, its balancing act is more ad hoc than a well-crafted strategy.” Thaksin’s personalist methods, the quick parade of leaders that came after him, and the need for the coup government of Prayut to initially steady the ship lend credence to this assessment. Writing another eight years down the road in 2024, however, it is increasingly clear that strategic balancing by Thailand is

no longer ad hoc, but rather the overriding principle that drives the countries interactions with the United States and China.

Prapat Thepchatree wrote in 2019 that “the superpower problem is Thailand’s biggest foreign policy problem,” and the strategy documents and intelligence assessments discussed above reflect that this assessment was shared by the government as recently as 2023. There is little reason to believe that the government’s outlook will change any time soon.

The competition between the United States and China, while challenging, also presents opportunities for Thailand. Thailand is in a unique position within the Greater Mekong Subregion in particular. It boasts a robust economy, a capable military, and a well-respected diplomatic corps, while not having the complicated histories with the great powers that its closest competitor, Vietnam, has. This potentially gives it leverage to drive and shape PRC and American policy in the GMS. Belt and Road infrastructure projects hold great potential for economic benefits, while U.S. Indo-Pacific policy efforts promise robust security cooperation and an alliance with renewed importance in Washington. Each win extracted from the great powers helps cement Thailand as the sub-regional hegemon and proverbial big-brother to its immediate neighbors, while helping increase its influence in ASEAN and global institutions more broadly.

Forecasting with Multiple Scenarios Generation

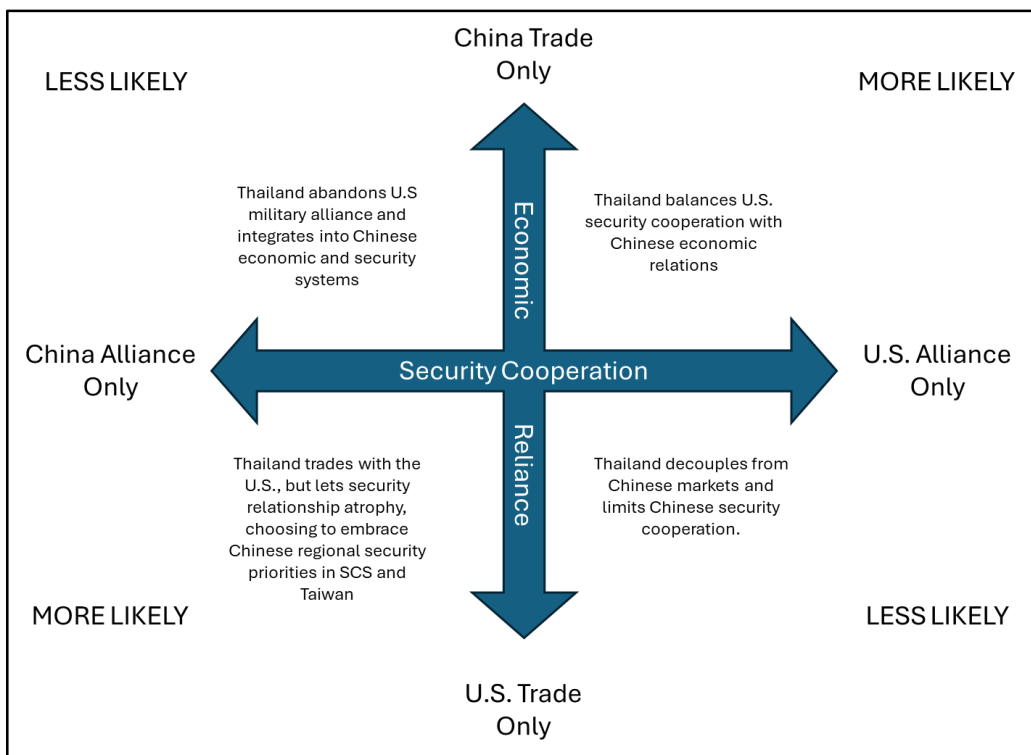
This work will now turn away from looking at the past to look at possible future trajectories for Thai foreign policy. The structural factors propelling U.S.-China competition show no signs of abating, and Thailand’s historic relations, geographic position, and economic needs will necessitate a continued focus on the issue. Structured analytic techniques bring academic rigor to attempts to predict the future, also known as forecasting. In particular, this work will use the “multiple scenarios generation” approach. Multiple scenarios generation analyses use a forecasting technique that helps “manage complexity and uncertainty by adding rigor to the foresight process. They are based on the premise that generating numerous stories about how the future will evolve will increase the practitioner’s sensitivity to outlier scenarios, reveal new opportunities, and reduce the chance of surprise (Pherson & Heuer, 2020).” Multiple scenarios generation is particularly useful “when dealing with little concrete information and/or a highly ambiguous or uncertain threat (Pherson & Heuer, 2020).” Given the highly dynamic nature of the ongoing conflict between the United States and China, this method provides the needed flexibility, while allowing for a robust assessment of a wide variety of complicating factors.

The first step in the process is to identify a short list, typically between 3-5, of key drivers that can help determine future plausible scenarios. They must be comprehensive, covering all aspects of an issue, and mutually exclusive. They are generated using a focusing question (Pherson & Heuer, 2020). For this

analysis, the author queried a group familiar with Thai political, social, economic, and security history, and used the focusing question, “What are all the forces or factors that would help explain how Thailand will approach U.S.-China competition in the next twenty years?” The responses were collated and refined down to the following four key drivers: Security cooperation and military alliances, economic reliance, the Thai history of independence from great power control, and domestic politics and instability.

The key drivers are combined across a number of two-by-two matrices in order to assess every possible combination of them. Each matrix produces four outcomes based on a spectrum of impacts from each key driver. This exercise produces a wide variety of future scenarios, some more plausible than others (see Figure 1 for one matrix that was produced during this phase. The scenarios produced are necessarily vague and often subjective given the huge number of variables involved, but they remain useful for framing discussions of future paths. Using the information gathered from the research above, as well as input from outside experts, three of the most plausible future scenarios were chosen for presentation in this work.

Figure 1: Example matrix produced during multiple futures generation



Source: author

Scenario 1: Thailand moves decisively toward China

In this scenario, geographic proximity, physical infrastructure improvements, and economic necessity drive Thailand closer to China. Continued domestic political instability, including the frequent banning of popularly backed political movements, makes the value-neutral PRC approach attractive to governments struggling to maintain democratic legitimacy at home and abroad. This drift is aided by continued U.S. distractions in other parts of the world and the prioritization of other parts of Asia, including Taiwan and the Korean Peninsula, which weaken the value of the U.S. security guarantee.

Possible indicators of such a shift could include Thailand's pursuit of deeper integration into regionally exclusive international organizations like the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation grouping at the expense of U.S. and western aligned inclusive organizations like the MUSP or abandoning the dual pursuit of OECD and BRICS membership in favor of exclusive membership in the latter. Notably risks under this strategy include damage to historical independence and possible loss of legitimacy amongst GMS partners, such as Vietnam, who remain wary of an ascendant China. Thailand would also likely lose access to significant long-standing security cooperation with the United States, affecting internal and external security and potentially limiting access to materiel support.

Scenario 2: Thailand moves decisively toward the United States

Scenario 2 sees China's increasingly assertive policies towards ASEAN members and heavy-handed responses to perceived slights drive Thailand decisively toward western backed institutions, trade networks, and subregional organizations like ASEAN that give it greater leverage than it would have on its own. The longstanding military alliance with the United States is reinvigorated and Thailand plays a central role in U.S. efforts to contain Chinese expansionism. This path amplifies historical security ties with the United States with a full buy-in to western efforts to decouple from China, possibly bringing economic benefits as western businesses off-shore from China to other locations in the region.

Similar to a China-centric scenario, indications of a decisive shift towards the United States would likely include significant efforts to upgrade regional and sub-regional multi-lateral organizations with a distinct preference for inclusive groupings that include western and western aligned countries like Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the European Union in addition to the United States. Doing so could help mitigate potential economic fallout from a break with the PRC and reinforce the longstanding security guarantees on which Thai security policy relies. The biggest risks include alienating Thailand's largest trading partner and a loss of support for infrastructure projects that are driving subregional integration that could reinforce Thai sub-regional leadership in the GMS. Additionally, should Laos and Cambodia move decisively toward China, the risk of conflict along Thailand's immediate borders may increase.

Scenario 3: Thailand uses strategic hedging to balance ties to the United States and China

This scenario was unanimously considered the most likely to occur. In it, the weight of Thai historical policies that date back to relations with the United Kingdom and France during the colonial era support the more recent pattern of balanced economic and security cooperation with the current great powers. Strategic hedging under this scenario, while potentially more turbulent than if Thailand chooses the “winning” side in another scenario, provides for less downside risk in the event of a protracted conflict between the U.S. and China. Economic ties with China are balanced with institutional engagement in sub-regional, regional, and global groupings that provide additional markets for Thai consumers and goods. Participating in Chinese-led efforts like the Belt and Road Initiative and Lancang-Mekong Cooperation scheme are pursued in parallel with both U.S. aligned organizations (such as MUSP) and reinvigorated indigenous initiatives like ACMECS and the Asia Cooperation Dialogue.

Through this approach, domestic instability can be managed by bending towards one or the other power as politics dictates, without committing fully. Moreover, the government retains the ability to seek benefits from both powers as they try to prevent defection to the other power’s camp. Immediate risks include overstretching diplomatic efforts across numerous frameworks, initiatives, and organizations, exacerbating both resource constraints and policy paralysis due to overlapping mandates and limited funds. A strategic balancing approach also risks potentially miscalculating how one or both great powers will react to policy actions pertaining to their competitor. This could create a breakdown in relationships with one side without the benefit of having a commensurate support structure in place that could be developed under a deliberate policy of bandwagoning with one power over the other.

Thai Foreign Policy in a Neorealist context

Unlike the brutish world of classical realism, in which the strong do what they wish and the weak do what they must, the neorealist perspective explains how and why states like Thailand might take specific foreign policy actions in the international system. As discussed above, great powers like the United States and China are free to pursue relatively ambitious aims and broadly define their national interests. Each sees economic opportunity in Southeast Asia and each also sees security threats (encroachment by the U.S. for China and degraded alliance networks for the U.S. among them). Thailand, however, faces several constraints. Deep economic ties bind the country to both great powers, and often turbulent domestic politics can limit freedom of maneuver abroad.

Thailand is not powerless, however. As the documentary research shows, Thailand has long embraced a pattern of strategic hedging. Rather than be forced to bandwagon with either great power for fear of being left behind, it has carefully

built economic, cultural, diplomatic, and security bridges to both powers. Kenneth Waltz wrote in “Theory of International Politics” that international institutions can be used to shape and constrain actors in the international system. As seen above, Thailand has done just that, skillfully using mini and multilateral institutions to engage with both great powers while enhancing its own bargaining power and regional influence. The GMS construct, ACMECS, CICPEC, ASEAN, Thaksin’s ACD, and others allowed Thailand to leverage greater diplomatic strength while nominally binding the great powers to codified rules of engagement and formal pathways for interaction.

Indeed, each of the core areas of neorealism addressed in the theory section proved useful during the study. Specifically, a neorealist perspective allows for a future where Thailand plausibly finds band wagoning to be a more beneficial approach, but does not make it inevitable. Rather, strategic hedging allows Thailand to bend with the winds of an anarchic international system while remaining fully rooted in its own position. Domestic politics has historically exerted significant pressure on Thai foreign policy, but it does not supplant broader historical patterns and goals. Finally, the great powers remain just that, greatly powerful, but the documentary research above shows that it is still possible for Thailand to chart a successful and independent path between them so long as it sets realistic national interests and policy goals relative to its size, strength, and influence in the international system.

9. Conclusion

Access to explicit information tying specific policy choices, particularly within the GMS, to concerns about one or the other great power remain extremely limited in the public record, whether in English or Thai, and the documents that do exist likely remain classified. Additionally, the community of academics following Thai foreign policy is small. Though intellectually gifted and academically rigorous, their work is necessarily limited in scope and depth by time, resources, and the competing demands of academia. The materials available to this author are further limited by his status as a foreigner living in Thailand for a limited period of time and his professional affiliation with one of the countries under consideration. Though writing in his personal capacity only, interviewing government officials for this work proved to be a delicate enterprise that was ultimately impossible to negotiate within the scope of the independent study and the time available for its completion.

With those caveats in place, it is clear that great power competition between the United States and China is a core driver of Thai foreign policy. Though heavily impacted by domestic considerations, Thai decisionmakers in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Prime Minister’s office are forced to craft policy that pursue the country’s national interests while attempting to maintain

an equilibrium between the competing powers. Even those leaders who are pre-disposed to one power over the other carefully balance their actions so as not to degrade existing ties.

Looking forward, historical precedent and key drivers of future actions signal that a dramatic change in Thai foreign policy posture is unlikely. Security ties, economic relations, cultural value placed on independence, and domestic politics will all likely drive future Thai governments toward a middle ground approach that emphasizes stability and continuity and allows future leaders to engage in opportunistic deal making with both sides as each tries to earn Thai favor.

The Greater Mekong Subregion will remain an important venue for Thailand to develop its own position, and international institutions are very likely to be a primary means to doing so. Moreover, Thailand stands to benefit from great power competition by extracting favorable deals across multiple sectors from the competing powers. The hedging strategy is not without risk, as close ties to both raise the possibility of miscalculation while also exposing Thailand to the risks of a potential economic or security shock should the U.S. and China tensions escalate dramatically (even if this shock is generated by tensions outside the GMS).

The intent of this work is to provide value by offering a holistic view of a timely issue. Great power competition is rapidly becoming the defining foreign policy issue of the 2000's, and understanding how Thailand has been impacted as the competition grew is important. That said, Thai foreign policy is ripe for additional research. Little published work exists in English or Thai on the foreign policy decision making process from an institutional perspective. Whereas there are library shelves full of books on the U.S. National Security Council, how the U.S. bureaucracy generates and coordinates policies across Departments, and the impact of congressional review and funding, often little to no equivalent exists for the Thai system. Histories of the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs detail the noteworthy work of the country's diplomats at home and abroad, but these often lack insight into how the policies they are tasked with promoting are developed. Generating a better understanding of how the policy process works structurally could benefit the Thai people by improving their knowledge of how insert their voice into the process, could help elected officials by improving their ability to oversee the process, and would help foreign partners by reducing uncertainty about policy processes and outcomes.

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