

The Historical Manifestation of the ‘Global Britain’ narrative in Siam (1855-1925)

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Abstract

British foreign policy has consistently been characterized by a global approach, mainly due to its imperial legacy. Britain had sought to maintain its influence with a global approach since the nineteenth century. Siam (the former name of Thailand) was part of Britain’s informal empire after the signing of the Bowring Treaty in 1855. The impact of this relationship was that Britain had economic dominance in Siam and became closely associated with Siam’s ruling elites, establishing elite networks to influence Siam’s cultural and social development. The relationship between Britain and Siam could thus be viewed as ‘mutually advantageous’. It could be argued that Britain influenced policy in Siam was very much a part of the British Empire. Although Britain supported nominal independence in Siam, the government expected exploitation and dominance within economic dependency and elite networks. The article, which draws on the approach of Jim Glassman was published in 1999 which explains how particular factions of capitalist classes could end up sharing evident interests in specific state policies across national boundaries, using Siam as a case study. This concept

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contributes to the current prevalence of neoliberal perceptions among several Third World officials. The article argues that Britain employed a model of ‘informal empire’ in Siam within the ‘Global Britain’ narrative during the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. Under the framework of the internationalisation of the state grows from classes and other social forces as working through both foreign and domestic markets, politics and economics. It can be said that the relationship between Britain and local elites in Siam was a legacy of the empire.

Keywords: Global Britain, Siam, The British Empire, Informal Empire

Introduction

British imperialism influenced Siam as an ‘informal empire’ between 1855 and 1925, which was a nominally independent society and countries being dominated by external interests and states, Britain had dominated to ensure that Siam signed the Treaty of Friendship and Commerce between the two countries known as, the Bowring Treaty in 1855. Moreover, Britain had influenced social and economic development through the Siamese elites. This article explains the historical relationships between Britain and Siam during the imperial period, the notion of the internationalisation of the state, proposed by Glassman (1999) will be applied as an analytical framework. This process has created a set of elite-based transnational alliances which strengthen the possibilities for internationalised capital accumulation based less on national priorities, or rather than shared transnational class interests. It can be integrated into the notion of an ‘informal empire’ (Barton, 2014) within the parameters of elite formation to lead towards an imperial network. Barton (2014) pointed out that the model of ‘informal empire’ for world history is a key mechanism for exploring the transformation of political economy in the twenty-first century. These include 1) massive investment in a foreign economy; 2) large numbers of settlers or guest workers who run major sections of an economy;

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3) outside military, diplomatic, and economic interventions; 4) relations between elites that determine the economic, cultural and political direction of a country; and 5) new identities among elites group that link there to the imperial power. In this respect, these are the key approaches to investigating British foreign policy during the imperial period. It is useful to analyse British influences in Siam and gain an understanding of the ‘Global Britain’ narrative between the two states and also know about how the notion of an ‘informal empire’ had worked in Siam between 1855 and 1925. The year 1855, when King Rama IV (1851-1868) signed the Bowring Treaty, is chosen as the starting point of this article and the start of Britain's informal empire in Thailand. The year 1925 is selected as the endpoint of Britain's informal empire in Thailand because of the ending of the British Royal Forestry Department (RFD) in northern Thailand, which was the main mechanism of Britain's informal empire in Thailand.

The article is divided into three parts. The first part explores the establishment of Britain's informal empire in Siam in line with the principles of the Bowring Treaty, which shaped how Britain controlled Siam under the notion of an ‘informal empire’ and the process of internationalization of the state. The second part discusses how Britain influenced trade and financial services in Siam. The final section examines the transition of Thai elites to establish an imperial network of elites from Britain and Siam, particularly the network in terms of cultural dimension. Documentary analysis was used to conduct an inductive analysis. the findings of this study would be beneficial to British and Thai stakeholders interested in current Thai-UK collaboration in various areas, including commerce and investment, politics, culture, and social development.

Siam as part of Britain's informal empire

The literature on the British and Western industrial revolutions has provided the rationale for Britain's expansion of its influence in Siam. According to Tate (1970), Western countries demanded to build new markets in Southeast Asia to establish manufacturing centers and explore natural resources. Many historians have argued that Siam was a gateway to the South China Sea. Therefore, European traders were interested in installing the free trading system in Siam (Chochirdsin, 2015; Wannamethee, 2014; Pombejra, 2014; Farrington & Pombejra, 2014). Furthermore, Jamsai (1970) studied Asian economic growth during the imperial period; The Siamese state was a trading center. In comparison to other Asian countries such as Cambodia, Japan, India, and China, Siam had the highest level of economic success and foreign investment. Notably, the process of the internationalization of the Siamese state was a key principle to connect Siam with the global market (Glassman, 1999). The concept is a process in which the state apparatus becomes increasingly oriented towards facilitating capital accumulation for the most internationalized investors, regardless of their nationality. In this case, several studies argued that Siam became a strategic location for commerce in Asia to access natural resources, such as teak, tin, and copper (Chochirdsin, 2009; Farrington & Na Pombejra, 2006; Morson, 1999; Wannamethee, 1990). Likewise, Jamsai (1970) identified that Siam was a mainland in Asia and Southeast Asia and traders explored ports to establish commercial relations with other Asian countries, including Singapore, Malaysia, Japan, and China. Considering all this evidence, it is inevitable that many European traders visited Siam during the imperial period because of its geography and natural resources, which formed the basis of the Siamese state's commercial position in the center of Asia.

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Previous studies have explored the relationship between Britain and Siam in the imperial period. Since the seventeenth century, Britain established formal trade agreements through the British East India Company (Chochirdsin, 2009; Farrington & Pombejra, 2006). The significant analysis and argument for the justification for Britain's informal empire in Siam were presented by Webster (1988). Britain sought to maintain its influence through an informal empire because it would allow British commercial and financial interests to control their objectives in the Siamese state under the most favorable conditions. Therefore, the British government dominated by advancing national economic prosperity and strengthening the economies of other British colonial possessions by providing cheap food and raw materials such as rice and teak from Siam. By drawing on the concept of imperialism, Robinson & Gallagher (1953) note that due to the costs of direct colonialism increasing, Britain changed its policy to be more informal through the nineteenth century. The costs of this strategy were reduced because the British government did not actively influence politics. The government forced ruling elites to open their economies to free trade or so-called free trade imperialism. This view is supported by Barton (2010); he argued that Britain allowed Thailand to remain nominally independent because Britain could maintain an informal empire without the burdens and costs of directly running Siam or waging war with France, which is why Britain established a buffer state in Thailand to protect France's expansion in Southeast Asia. Notably, Thai and British trading relations were overwhelmed by the French expansion in Southeast Asia.

Thus, in the nineteenth century, the British government shifted its strategy to threaten Thailand for dominance of the teak trade and keep France away from Asian borders, particularly in Burma and India (Pluvier, 1974). In the same vein, Barton (2020) and Webster (1988) highlighted that British Foreign Office officials were trying to create a 'buffer state' in Siam to keep the French in Indochina from

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bordering directly in India. Arguably, Britain sustained continuous diplomatic, security and defense, and economic influences in Siam, which would provide cheap security for British Burma and the eastern frontier of India. Also, to ensure that British interests in the Malay Peninsula would remain free of Siamese resistance or interference. Britain rapidly expanded its influence to explore new trading markets and resources in Siam. As a result, it became part of Britain's informal empire after signing the Bowring Treaty in 1855 (Webster, 1988; Jackson, 2004; Barton & Bennett, 2010; Barton, 2014; Sasiwuttunat, 2011; Lertsatit, 2014).

Despite the Siamese state being never directly or officially colonised by the British Empire, Siam was controlled by British imperialism within the Bowring Treaty, which provide political and economic benefits for the British government (Sasiwuttiwat, 2011). It argued that Siam was threatened by British imperialism in 1855 and then forced to sign an unequal agreement regarded as the Bowring Treaty. Its conditions include the right of extraterritorial privileges, the establishment of consul courts in parts of northern Siam, and the right to internal trade by using British commercial and capital systems (Lertsatit, 2016; Barton, 2014; Sasiwuttinatt, 2011; Dixon, 1999; Webster, 1998. Gildea (2019) supports this argument which defines the 'Empire of Trade'. He argues that trade was typically imposed on reluctant non-European empires or their vessels by force in the informal empire, using gunboats when required and forcing unequal treaties that cemented European privileges. In this context, British imperialism had controlled Siam to establish a free-trading system. Specifically, Britain employed the process of internationalisation of the state, which refers to the model of development in terms of capitalism and modernisation process, to drive the British economy in Siam during the imperial period. The Siamese economy has been dominated by capitalist elites, allowing Britain to expand its economic dominance (Cain & Hopkins, 1988). In this respect, this article analyses the characteristics of British expansion in

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Siam within the concept of an informal empire. It would evaluate growth in broader British or international settings and acknowledge the independent ability of peripheral transformation to shape dependency relations.

The emergence of the capitalist state in Siam

Britain modernised the taxation system through a free trading system with Western countries (Lertsatit, 2016), establishing a network of financial advisers to accommodate the demands of Britain's informal empire in Siam (Webster, 1998). Britain also established the city's international currency management and credit system, subordinating Siamese economic policy to the centre of London through the gentlemanly capitalist dynamics of British imperialism (Cain & Hopkins, 1980; Webster, 1998). The emergence of capitalist elites had become a substantial portion of their Siam incomes. Therefore, the Siamese economy rapidly adjusted to its incorporation into international commerce. The opening market in Thailand brought significant changes between Britain and Siam's relationship in terms of economy and social culture. The Siamese economic system was changed from subsistence agriculture by the peasantry to international production for export and supported Britain with commercial and financial interests (Webster, 1998). For example, Siam became a significant rice supplier for British colonised countries in Asia, such as British India, Burma, and the Malay states (Webster, 1998; Barton, 2016; Jamsai, 1978). Moreover, Siam was a valuable market for British exports, notably cotton textiles, tin, and teak (Lertsatit, 2016; Sasiwuttunat, 2011; Webster, 1998). Notably, Britain established the Royal Forestry Department (RFD) in northern Thailand to dominate British-based trading teak companies: The Borneo Company Limited (BCL) and The Bombay Burma Trading Corporation (BBTC) (Barton, 2010; Webster, 1998). Specifically, Siam exported 81800 tons of teak by 1895, and virtually all of it felled and transported by British companies (Webster, 1988; Barton,

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2014). The dominance of British trading firms in Siam installed the British monopoly over the teak industry. Thus, the teak trade system in northern Siam was controlled by British companies between the 1890s and early 1900s.

The formation of imperial networks of British and Thai elites

The transformation of Siam was determined by a traditional society into a peripheral capitalist in terms of political, economic, and social structures in the late nineteenth century. To achieve the demands of Britain's informal empire, the Siamese government rapidly adjusted the expansion of export-oriented primary production demanded by British imperialism. As a result, the Siamese government modernised economic and administrative systems through the British imperial ideas (Webster; 1998). However, some academics argued that the monarchs or local elites in Siam worked with British imperialism to restructure the state to maintain their authority (Webster, 1998; Jackson, 2004; Sturm, 2006; Barton, 2014). This argument is a key feature of the investigation into the formation of elite networks between Britain and Thailand since colonial expansion.

The existing literature on British imperialism in Siam is focused particularly on elite networks. In a comprehensive study of the British informal empire's alliances through subordinate elite networks, Webster (1998) found a special relationship between Britain and the Bangkok elites, maintaining their interests as a collaboration network founded on the monarchy, royal family, oligarchy, and local aristocrats. Pasuk and Baker's (1995) explanation of King Rama IV's rationale for signing the Bowring Treaty in 1855 highlights the importance of Britain's relations with the Siamese elites. Before King Rama IV acceded to the throne, the Siamese commercial system with China constituted the basis of its international commerce. However, due to the instability of the Opium Wars and the Taiping Rebellion, Chinese trade was disrupted in Siam. Instead of China, Britain targeted Siam as a

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market for its Indian-grown opium. Thus, in 1851, King Rama IV ascended to the throne with the support of the leading trader of the Bunnags family. The Bunnags were closely allied with the British East India Company and the opium trade. King Rama IV then moved rapidly to legalise opium and the British trade directions under the Bunnags opium tax. Furthermore, the monarchy and the associated royal families represented continuity between the two states, related to Britain's cultural and political dimensions and Thai relations. For example, Britain's domination of concessions in northern Thailand by establishing the Royal Forest Department (RFD). It helped the Bangkok elites gain more control over the north, much akin to a form of internal colonisation (Barton, 2014). The feudal elites had become political and social elites equipped to manage Siam in its peripheral capitalist relationship with the world economy (Webster, 1998). In addition, Barton (2014) notes the British special relationship with the Bangkok elites in the early twentieth century. This principle was a strategy for creating network collaboration to gain both countries' interests. Britain could extend its control over the vast territories of northern Thailand, while King Rama V established the principles of Siamese modernisation by using British models. The literature on Siamese modernization has revealed the emergence of Siamese development and its modernization, enabling Siam to survive as an independent state in the colonial expansion period (Tate, 1970). He also asserted that Siam was the best organised state in the Southeast Asian region under the Ayutthaya monarchy. In addition, recent studies (Lersatit, 2014; Sasiwuttiwat, 2011) stated that the Siam state received significant socio-economic benefits from Britain during modernisation, and the two countries maintained a friendly relationship. However, some authors challenged the widely held view that King Rama V modernized the Siamese administration system by using the British model to assert his power rather than the Thai people or the whole country (Webster, 1998; Jackson, 2004; Sturm, 2006; Barton, 2014). It was because Siam had

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a decentralized administrative system during the imperial period. There was an intra-elite struggle between the nobility and the monarchy. Therefore, King Rama V modernized the state subordinated to Western standards and achieved its power as the great monarch protecting the country during the colonial period.

Many historians pointed out that the modernization of the state administrative model by King Rama V capable of satisfying the demands of the British's informal empire. He gained financial or network benefits from Britain (Wyatt, 1975; Kasian, 2001; Jackson, 2004; Sturm, 2006). As Tarling (1997) notes, British imperialism significantly impacted the Siamese central government and areas where powerful elites resided because the local elites preferred the British as an alliance. Furthermore, the British controlled most Western businesses (Suheiro, 1996). In this context, Sasiwuttiwat (2011), who investigated the effects of British imperialism on the Siamese state, supported this argument. He asserted that the local elites would respond to the threat by maintaining their power within the context of systemic vulnerability. In the context of an informal empire, the forces of dominating powers can collaborate with some local elite groups. As a result, these elites may modernize a state even if they have indirect rule because they may gain some benefits from dominance. Thus, Sasiwuttiwat (2011) suggested that the forces of dominating nations represent both a threat and an ally to the local elite. Notably, King Rama V visited Western Asian colonies, including Singapore, Malaya, Burma, and India. After visiting these formal colonies, He intended to modernize Siam by transforming the Siamese administration into an authoritarian and centralized modernization auto-colonial state (Wyatt, 1975; Kasian, 2001). Moreover, Sturm (2006) affirmed that Thai nationalism as an ideology originated in the mid-nineteenth century. The kings actively embrace Thai nationalism to strengthen their power and bind the people's loyalty to their institution (Sturm, 2006). Thus, Thai nationalism was originally monarchical and elitist, with the monarch himself

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embedded in the nation and lacking a popular component. However, after the 1932 Thai revolution, Thai nationalism was characterized by various conceptions of the national by different ruling elite groups. In addition, Britain's informal empire in Thailand for the Bangkok elites, particularly the monarchy, could be helped the Bangkok monarchy by increasing its power to replace the resistance of local elites. This argument was supported by Webster (1998); during the British colonial expansion, King Rama V used British pressures in northern Siam to increase Bangkok's control. The teak forests in north Thailand helped Bangkok elites to gain more control over the north through internal colonization (Webster, 1998). In the same vein, Jackson (2004) argued that the Bangkok monarchy's reforms extended and cemented its dominance over the parts of the old Siamese empire that remained under its control. Because it gained financially from treaties with Western countries, the absolute monarchy had the resources to exert far more substantial control over the local populace than in the pre-colonial period. This strategy might have helped the Bangkok monarchy strengthen its influence through the concept of an informal empire. It became a vital component of a local bio-power system that subjected the public to a more intense state control while presenting this as Western liberty rather than subjection to a new form of local tyranny. Moreover, others (Watananguhn, 1998; Na Pombejra, 2001; Lertsatit, 2015; Ruth, 2019) argued that King Rama V aimed to reform the Siamese educational system. The sending of Royal family members to study in Britain was the main strategy to gain new knowledge and bring it back to Siam. For example, Prince Abhakara and Prince Vajiravudh were educated to acquire a Western military education (Ruth, 2019). Prince Raphi Phatthanasak was educated in the Inner Temple and trained in English law in London (Kaneko, 2019). Prince Purachatra Jayakara studied engineering in Cambridge to develop the railway systems in the country (Ngambutsabongsophon,

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2020). It is clear that elite networks are linked to the cultural and social dimensions between Britain and Thailand.

A recent study by Barton & Bennett (2021) argues that Britain's informal empire in Siam declined in the 1920s due to the gradual nationalization of teak leases. However, British firms and foreign offices remained dominant in the export industry. This argument can be investigated in terms of the continuation of Britain's gentlemanly capitalism in Siam during the imperial period, specifically the account of dominant elites. Nevertheless, the 1932 revolution in Siam changed its political system from Royal absolutism to a constitutional monarchy (Klinfoong, 2016; Paribatra, 2003). Siamese state authority changed from a monarchy to democratic procedures and new state enterprises as new Thai elites emerged, including monarchy, military, bureaucratic, business, and political party elites (Glassman, 2000; Anderson, 2002). Therefore, Britain's informal empire maintained its domination in the teak industry and elite networks until the 1920s.

To sum up, it is apparent that historical manifestations within the 'Global Britain' narrative between Britain and Thailand were a dependent relationship within Britain's informal empire. Britain used hard and soft power to force Siam for signing the Bowring Treaty in 1855. At the same time, Britain had influenced social development and soft diplomacy through subordinate elites in Siam. Thus, the internationalization of the state could be a critical approach to analysing Britain and Thailand's relationship between 1855 and 1925. These elements are integrated into the concept of an informal empire within the dominant power's preferences and the roles of local elites. The framework is constructed by the key aspects of Britain's informal empire in Thailand. They consist of five elements in Thailand, including 1) extraterritoriality and concessions; 2) a free trading system; 3) interventionist tools such as military force and the informal power exerted by diplomats; 4) imperial financial presence; 6) network collaboration with Thai elites.

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Arguably, Britain's informal empire is a future pattern of British and Thai relations as the British imperial legacy in Siam.

It is evident that, up until now, the two states have developed elite networks to connect their relations and interests since the nineteenth century (Jamsai, 1970). Notably, the British and Thai royal families have been central to the development of the wider partnership between the two countries (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2000). Thailand's 1932 revolution had changed the Thai political system from Royal absolutism to constitutional monarchy. Thus, the state power had been changed from monarchy to democratic procedures and new state enterprises as group of Thai elites including; military, bureaucratic, business, and political party elites (Glassman, 2000; Anderson, 2002).

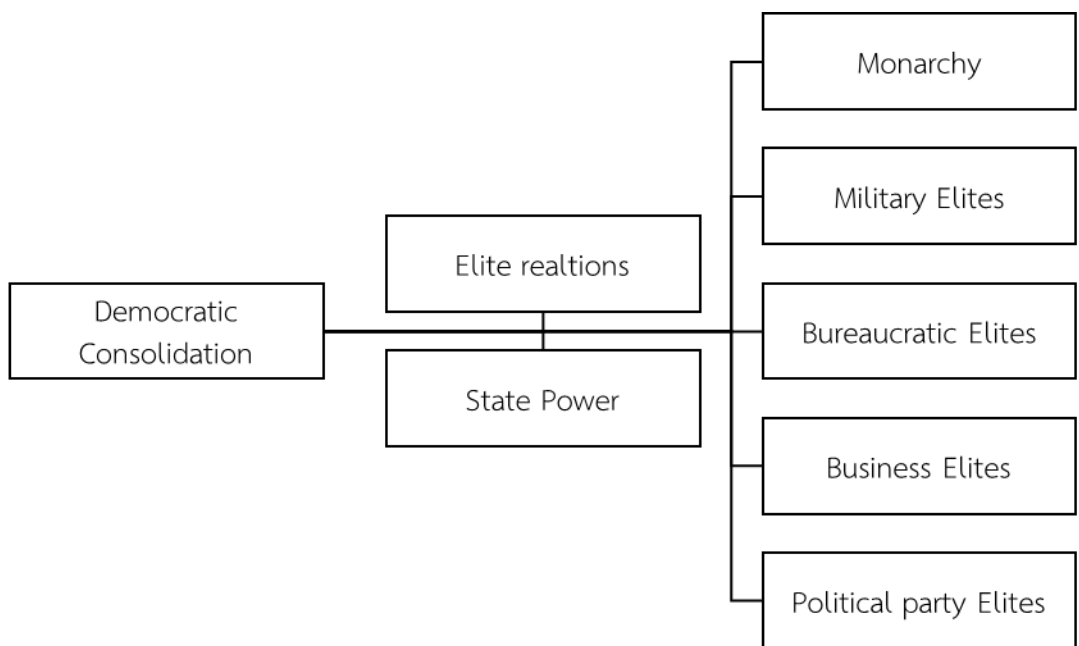


Figure 1 : The longstanding disunity between elites in Thailand (Glassman, 2016)

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However, Thailand has struggled in an unconsolidated democracy in terms of disunity of Thai elites (Burton & Higley, 2000). In particular, during the late 1980s, Thai and British elites had promoted the interests of British investors and Thai elites rather than the interests of the majority of Thai citizens. These problems created significant conflicts between military and royalist elites and the emerging middle-class forces favoring democratization on Thailand (Glassman, 2016). Thus, elite disunity and political instability have impacted Thai development in rolling back authoritarianism, in particular the military dictatorship from 2014 to the present.

Conclusion

This article explores the foreign policy relations between Britain and Siam through the model of ‘informal empire’, in supporting the context of the ‘Global Britain’ narrative. The concept of the internationalization of the state is a process to investigate the development of Thai and British relationships, particularly in terms of trade, social, and cultural development. It can be concluded that the model of Britain’s informal empire was a key mechanism of the ‘Global Britain’ narrative in Siam, particularly the cementing of British and local elites in Siam. It could be argued that the model of ‘informal empire’ is the pattern for Anglo-Thai relations. As Barton (2014) argues that an ‘Informal empire’ is a key mechanism of control that explains much of the configuration of the modern world as it is today; including globalism. It also points out that the study of ‘informal empire’ could enable the reader to better understand the configuration of the modern world by understanding ‘how elites in certain locations have influenced the formation of elites and the structures that they have built in a globalized world.

The Global Britain narrative in Siam was the model of an ‘informal empire’, which was worked in Siam during the imperial period. This argument agrees with Barton (2014)’s concept that an ‘Informal empire, is neither East nor West, but

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global, which built on exchange, people, capital, and material and cultural goods, it sometimes involved force and sometimes voluntary collaboration. In this case, I argue that Britain's informal empire in Siam through elite formation was a 'voluntary collaboration'. This finding is consistent with Sasiwuttiwat (2011) that the Siamese state development was driven by two factors, which are 1) British imperialism; 2) the resistance of the local elites. Thus, one of the historical consequences of the formation was an absolute monarchy state whose main characteristics persisted and influenced the economic development until 1997. Furthermore, The Thai-British relationship can be criticized in terms of elite interests to study how elites operate within the global capital economy. Also, to maintain their power relations and interests through 'mutually beneficial relationships' in the model 'core-periphery' of Prebisch (1950) and Wallerstein (1974) within the 'Global Britain' narrative in Thailand up until now.

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