

## BAMBOO DIPLOMACY: CRUMBLING STRATEGY AMID THE SINO-US COMPETITION

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### Abstract

The diplomatic tradition of Thailand is known as bamboo diplomacy. This doctrine has been employed in the making of Thai foreign policy because it is a mechanism that helps protect the country's sovereignty. The rise of China and the US foreign policy, aiming to counter it, have challenged the discipline. However, the study argues that Thailand's bamboo diplomacy is not challenged by the hegemonic competition. Thailand was able to create equilibrium of relations with Washington and Beijing to maximize leverage gained from bilateral cooperation with both powers. However, the doctrine is not sustainable. The intensified major power competition could break the bamboo.

**Keywords:** Bamboo Diplomacy; Sino-US Competition; National Insecurity.

### Introduction

Thai foreign policy has been described as bamboo diplomacy. The diplomatic doctrine is comprised of three unique characteristics. The first one being hegemonic dependency. As Thailand is considered by political elites as small power, Thai foreign policy is hemmed by self-identification of weak state, and therefore is confined to Lilliputians' Dilemmas. This trait influences the second feature of bamboo diplomacy which is responsive flexibility. Inadequacy of power forces Thailand to sensitive to global politics as the time and leeway to make right decision for survival are limited. Thailand thus sways to any stronger nation of the moment for dependence. Lastly, it is opportunistic détente (Jittipat, 2022). As international politics is uncertain, Thailand always looks for an opportunity

to prevent strained relations with major power by playing a role of neutral state and maintaining good relations with all powers.

The rise of China has triggered a new era of great power competition. The Pivot to Asia was announced by Washington under Obama administration with an ambition to contain the rise of China and reclaim profound hegemonic presence in the Asia-Pacific. The collision has put the bamboo in a difficult circumstance. It is increasingly propelled to choose side. However, this paper argues that the great power competition between the United States and China does not challenge the traditional approach of Thai foreign policy. Although Thailand's increased engagements with China after 2014 coup d'état was significant, it just was to cope with the US response.

### **The setting of sino-us competition and thailand's strategy**

The US-Thai relations deepened during the Cold War due to shared common interest of anti-communism. However, the bilateral relations between the United States and Thailand were gradually decline. The United States reduced its presence in Asia as the Vietnam War almost came to an end. Deficiency of common national interests disrupted substantial alliance. This was at the same time when China moved from being isolationist to be more active in international affairs (Glaser, S., B.,2012). The US absence in Southeast Asia triggered hegemonic anxiety for Thailand. It drove Bangkok to reconstruct its bamboo diplomacy. Thai bamboo diplomacy consequently was built to engage more with the major power of Asia.

China became a stable and thriving market for Thailand's agricultural products.(Anuson Chinvanno, 2015) However, the bamboo encountered to windstorm of Washington's Pivot to Asia. The objective was to limit China's sphere of influence where Southeast Asia was a cornerstone. The United States therefore ramparted the region with foreign policy to counter the rise of China. The strategic implementation was to institutionalize regional order with the US leadership and hinder China from cooperative framework. The United States tangled practically half portion of Southeast Asian countries with mutual interests under the Lower Mekong Initiative. This was an effort of the United States to enrich relations between itself and the countries of the Mekong region ( Kurlantzick, J. ,2015).

China, on the other hand, has secured sphere of influence by bidding Southeast Asian states through the Lanchang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC). The institution comprised of development programs. China's provision of financial supports to the program has enhanced China's sphere of influence in the Mekong sub-region. The stakes of Thailand's bamboo

diplomacy have become high in the confrontational setting between the two major powers. The former Prime Minister of Thailand, Abhisit Vejjajiva, stated in the interview in 2015 that the United States excluding China from regional economic framework put Thailand in a difficult situation to make decisions (Zawacki, B.,2017).

China's foreign policy has threatened the security of the United States. It has strategically molded a linkage of mechanisms to diminish the traditional world order and the US dominance. The first effort of global reconstruction deals with international economic order. The One Belt One Road initiative was the land and sea infrastructure ambitions. In order to draw states to participant in the framework, China offers a Silk Road Fund derived from the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). It has challenged the Bretton Wood System.

The existing process of getting financial assistance from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) has been dissatisfied by various states. China therefore introduced an attractive proposal of non-conditionality and non-interference.(Bader, J.,2021) The principles are probable to decouple states from US dominant structure and hence weaken the norm of global currency. The bank is to hallow out dollarization and to be replaced with Chinese currency of renminbi (RMB) (Bader, J.,2021).

The second norm countering aspiration centers around the South China Sea maritime dispute. The national interest of China to reestablish it as the center global trade through One Belt One Road Initiative has made South China Sea crucial to the ambition. One of the traditional value in the US-led global order is freedom of navigation in respect to the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). However, China has rejected free access to sea. It has built artificial islands and facilities such as airstrips and ports despite it being lawful(Kuik, C.,2016). It is to justify China's rightful claim of sovereignty in the South China Sea over the nine-dash line.

While the two powers are walking towards the Thucydides Trap, Thailand has sought for an opportunity to détente in a role of mediator in the South China Sea dispute as a strategy to impede security risk for national survival and search for space of neutrality in order to maneuver if the relation between it and major power happens to strain. It has done this by two procedures. First, Thailand has offered to play a role of mediator to settle the conflict. Both Yingluck and Prayut administrations hosted the High Level forum on China-ASEAN Strategic Partnership.

## Thailand's foreign policy towards the united states and china after obama's pivot to asia

It can be argued that Thai foreign policy of Yingluck polity was best to be described as balancing. It consented on security and economic cooperation to both the United States and China. By having multiple providers of military and economic assistance, it could maximize national capabilities and decrease the country's vulnerability as a small power. Although Thailand was not directly affected by the South China Sea dispute, China's maritime claims and denial of freedom of navigation were a threat the Thailand's security. In the post-cold war environment, the military elites have contended the offshore competition to be a struggle for Thailand's security regarding national economy. Thai economy has depended on international trade where 95 percent is ocean trade (Panitan Wattanayagorn. , 1998).

To escape the dilemma, Thailand provoked counterbalance measures. The support of the US hegemonic order balanced China's determination to dominate the sea expanse. Therefore, the two countries signed the 2012 Joint Vision Statement for the Thai-US Defense Alliance. Moreover, Thailand did not hesitate to lengthen its position as a host of Cobra Gold and had continued playing the role throughout the administration.

Obama's Pivot to Asia did not pressure Thailand to not strengthen relations with China. China's aggregate and proximate powers were too severe for Thailand to ignore developing closer ties. Only a few months after the 2012 Cobra Gold, Yingluck paid a visit to Beijing, in which Bangkok and Beijing agreed to sign the Comprehensive Partnership. In the same year, Thai and Chinese marine corps held a military exercise codenamed Blue Strike. It can be argued that the naval training was to balance the Thai-US Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training, also known as CARAT.

Economic relations were key node in the Sino-Thai relations. Between 2010 and 2014, trade between Thailand and China surged 42%, whereas Thai-US trade grew 27%. Just a year after the 2011 currency swap agreement was signed, Chinese investment to Thailand increased in a total of 462.37 million baht (The Board of Investment of Thailand, 2013). At the same time, Thailand developed relations with the United States on the subject of economic cooperation when Yingluck was in power. During the 2012 Obama's visit to Bangkok, Yingluck announced that Thailand aspired to participate in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

This paper argues that the success of being a balancer occurred because of mutual interests. Diplomatic relations with Thailand served the national interests of the United States and China. President Obama advocated in the promotion of democracy. Thailand under Yingluck administration ticked all the boxes of the US criteria in the matter of democratic government and being the first Asian ally to the United States. Likewise, it was unavoidable for China to tighten relations with Thailand. The country's geography was therefore critical to China's grand strategy of One Belt One Road Initiative. Locating at the central heart of Southeast Asia, Thailand became the country that China prioritized in its economic expansion (Zhao, H., 2018).

The domestic political factor challenged diplomatic success between Thailand and the United States. The corrosion largely dealt with the political upheaval concerning the clash between Shinawatra supporters and anti-Thaksin and Yingluck movement. The passport controversy led Thaksin oppositions to be anxious about every move made by Yingluck government in foreign affairs. Few months after the passport contention, the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) proposed Southeast Asia Composition, Cloud Coupling Regional Study. However, the proposal raised two concerns. The US intelligence operations were suspected to be direct to China's national security and was hide behind NASA's climate study (Kitti Prasirtsuk & Tow, T., W. 2015).

Additionally, allowing the United States to use U-Tapao facility in Rayong was speculated to be an exchange for the Thaksin's US visa (Bangkok Post, 2012). Because of the political tension, Bangkok was unable to meet the deadline for the US space agency to approve NASA access to U-Tapao for the study to be carried. The sustainability of the US-Thai relations muddled with Thailand's political instability.

Furthermore, the US-Thai security partnership mingled with dissatisfaction on arms procurement from the Thai side. As a result of unreliability of security guarantee, the aspect of bamboo diplomacy, responsive flexibility, was employed to cope with the problem. Thailand sought for an alternative to the United States regarding arms provision and China was an attractive choice. The Thai Military General once said China sold arms to Thailand below half of their actual price. Therefore, it had become an alternative provider of military equipment. (Chulacheeb Chinwanno, 2009)

### **Bangwagon?: the drastic shift of thailand's foreign policy under prayut chan-ocha administration**

Under Prayut Chan-o-cha administration, Thailand still maintained bamboo diplomacy. The characteristic of hegemonic dependency was altered concerning aligned major power. Additionally, the elements of bamboo diplomacy on the subject of responsive flexibility and opportunistic détente can be observed.

The US response to the coup deteriorated the US-Thai alliance. The United States strongly articulated disapproval gestures against the coup. The US Secretary of State John Kerry strongly voiced “there is no justification for this military coup” and urged that the civilian government should be restored as soon as possible (Brunnstrom, D. & Mohammed, A. 2014). On top of that, Washington frankly declared it would employ every mean to force the junta out from the governmental system (Jory, P. (2014). It imposed several punitive measures to pressure the return of the civilian government through democratic election. Thailand was barred from participating in the world's largest international military maritime maneuver, the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) (Pavin Chachavalpongpun, 2016). The United States stated its consideration to relocate Cobra Gold 2015 out of Thailand to pressure the restoration of democratic regime (AFP. 2015).

The US cold shoulder response affected Thailand's decision of shifting China's embrace as major power whom Thailand shall be depended on. At the same time, China filled in the void. Thai military was forbidden to receive education from the US military institution due to the termination of annual funding of the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program (Storey, I. 2019). Thai military officers were allowed to attend the Chinese defense academic institutions. Moreover, as stated by the Defense Minister Prawit Wongsuwan, “China has agreed to help increase protection of its own country and advise on technology to increase Thailand's national security” (Wassana Nanuam & Patsara Jikkham , 2015).

The Annual Reports throughout the Prayut administration emphasized that the Sino-Thai friendship was based on trusts and that the relations were solid and “at all levels on the basis of equality and mutual interests”. Several Memorandums of Understanding was signed covering various areas such as rail system technical cooperation and trade. The military regime deemed China as a potential source to achieve the outcomes that the military state desired. Consequently, the regime adaptably realigned. It can be argued that the first outcome that was expected was for governmental justification from both

international and state levels. Despite the coup depicted itself to be ‘guardian coup’ who aimed to uphold peace and safeguard democracy (Ikome, N., F. 2007), it was still unacceptable to the Western society and sanctions were imposed. On that note, the military regime did not have any international recognition.

In the domestic level, the military government encountered to intrinsic resistance from pro-democratic opposition. The regime hence aimed to secure its power and status through economic success in order to gain legitimacy from the civil society. The regime viewed China’s infrastructure investment as a source to obtain acceptability (The Editors, 2017). China became a choice in the making of foreign policy as it gave the regime recognition in the international level and economic cooperation could lead to governmental acceptance in the domestic level.

Soon after the coup, government officials under Prayut administration were welcomed by Beijing. China gave the regime legitimacy through instant diplomatic recognition (Fels, E. (2016). According to the 20-Year National Strategy, Thailand aspired to be regional hub of logistics and transportation. Chinese investment and e-commerce experience became a resource for the regime in the national projects of Thailand 4.0 and Eastern Economic Corridor to foster Thai economy (Li, M. & Gong, X. 2020). PM Prayut was invited to the White House. For Washington, reengagement with Thailand was unavoidable. The United States took a u turn because firstly, Thailand’s strategic location was crucial to the US security interest as it was situated at the epicenter of Southeast Asian region. Additionally, the US-Thai reengagement could add regional pressure on North Korea to denuclearize which has been an attempt of the Trump administration during this time (Kavi Chongkittavorn, 2019). This affair represents an illustration of bamboo diplomacy. Thailand immediately jumped in when there was a chance for the country to détente and ease detrimental relations in the aftermath of 2014 military coup. This indicates that Thailand did not pursue an extreme diplomacy of abandoning the United States and realigned and Bangkok finally gained international recognition from the West.

The visit nevertheless demonstrates Thailand’s desperation to sustain the US-Thai relations. Pongphisoot (2017) dubs Thai foreign policy to Washington in this time as ‘shopping diplomacy’. The imposed measures were advantageous to Trump’s domestic policy of American First. Thailand lifted ban on US export products, purchased arms and invested \$6 billion to the United States which would reduce employment rate. Pongphisoot argues that the employed diplomatic tool was not sustainable due to limited financial budget. It was

impossible for Thailand to continue making a significant purchase to obtain the US satisfaction (Pongphisoot Busbarat, 2017).

The vaccine provision amid the COVID-19 pandemic is another case study that bamboo diplomacy was employed. It can be argued that Bangkok bended to Beijing because of the Trump factor yet swayed back to the United States in time of presidential transition. Trump's criticism toward the World Health Organization and decision of withdrawal were influential factor of Thailand's security anxiety to depend on the US assistance.

On the other hand, China's global vaccine distribution was a strategy in political game competing for hegemonic status and could be regarded as public diplomacy, which aims to harvest soft power which influences the behavior of countries that receive goods or service given by the provider (Jakusne, H., E. & Muranyi, E. (2022). China's public diplomacy had made it easier for Thailand to get access to Chinese produced vaccines due to less complicated procedure to import the goods, whereas Western made ones were highly demanded so it was more difficult to obtain (Kavi Chongkittavorn, 2021).

However, Thailand took an opportunity at the time of presidential crossroad and turned to the US embrace to get assistance when there was a rise of new clusters and a number of infected patients. The US vaccine commitment under Biden Administration echoed a sentiment of security guarantee from small powers regarding the public health crisis. Bangkok thus flexibly bended to Washington to receive assistance.

### **Problems and prospects of bamboo diplomacy**

Bamboo diplomacy can be a dangerous diplomacy to pursue and potentially put Thailand in a risky position. Firstly, it is a dilemma of security anxiety. The hedging mechanism prevents major power's sphere of influence to be entirely impacted within the sovereign sphere. As that power cannot be achieved, states will seek for other ways to increase capabilities to secure their safety. The growth of power will ultimately cause security anxiety to hedgers. Ambiguous stance also opens wider possibilities for hedgers to side with the threat, making them a threat to major power themselves. The second one is low-profit tragedy. Committed engagement with states that their allegiance is not guaranteed charges major power high political cost since the return is not assured.

The second trap is the trap of small power perception. Thailand has constantly viewed itself as a small power. However, according to the Lowy Institute Asia Power Index, Thailand is considered to be a middle power. It is ranked number 10 out of 26 nation states



in 2023. This can have a negative impact in the formation of foreign policy. The perception restricts Thailand to play a leading role and only be a follower.

The last trap is Thailand's geography. Thailand is an epicenter of the cold peace. The northern part borders Myanmar whom China is an important arms supplier for the military government. The northeastern part neighbors Laos and Cambodia where China's investment has been flaunted. The south is next door to the Indo-Pacific where the United States is dominant. Thailand is surrounded by geopolitical influences of both sides. When the wind truly blows, the bamboo is likely to break.

Therefore, there is a need for new diplomatic approach. Jittipat (2023) has proposed 'leading from the middle strategy'. He suggested that small to middle powers should hedge but hedging should not be done alone. They should bind major powers under a rule based order (Jittipat Poonkham} 2023). Jittipat's proposal echoes existing mechanism of ASEAN centrality. Thailand can increase political and economic leverage through ASEAN by initiating security initiatives to manage mutual threats of ASEAN member states such as drug trafficking, transnational crime and climate change, and include powers outside Southeast Asia in the platforms through the architecture of ASEAN Centrality. This will allow major powers to have a discussion while strengthening Thailand's dynamism in foreign policy and the regional institution of ASEAN as a catalyst for peace.

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