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Reconstructing China–Thailand Relations in the Post-Pandemic Era from a Constructivist Perspective: The Role of the Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract

In the post-pandemic era, global governance has increasingly shifted toward regional cooperation. Drawing on China–Thailand cooperation between 2020 and 2025, this study focuses on three interrelated questions: the evolution of China–Thailand relations under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Thailand's role as a regional coordination hub, and the impact of bilateral cooperation on China's national image construction. Using a constructivist "interaction–meaning–institution" framework, the study finds that China–Thailand relations have evolved from crisis-driven cooperation to institutionalized and norm-oriented partnership.Thailand has gradually transformed from a passive participant into an active coordinating hub, facilitating agenda alignment, institutional linkage, and policy diffusion between bilateral and regional frameworks. Bilateral cooperation has expanded from pandemic-related emergency assistance to long-term collaboration in railway connectivity, the digital economy, green industries, and public health governance.The findings further demonstrate that sustained interaction and institutional embedding have reshaped Thailand's perception of China, contributing to a shift from instrumental cooperation toward value-based partnership, thereby strengthening China's national image and promoting regional integration.However, geopolitical competition, intra-ASEAN divergence, and Thailand's concerns over economic dependency and technological reliance continue to constrain deeper cooperation. The study proposes policy recommendations for consolidating Thailand's hub role, enhancing institutional coordination, and strengthening people-to-people connectivity. It also provides practical insights for advancing the "Thailand 4.0" strategy and building a China–Thailand community with a shared future.

Research Background

In the post-pandemic era, global governance has increasingly shifted toward regional frameworks as states seek to deal with governance deficits, trust crisis, and development uncertainties exacerbated by COVID-19 and intensifying geopolitical rivalry (Liu & Tang, 2023). As one of China's most important partners in Southeast Asian, Thailand with its advantageous geographic position plays a pivotal role in connecting bilateral cooperation with boarder regional framework.

After the Cold War, ASEAN has consolidated its institutional centrality through consensus-based mechanisms, enabling member states to instill regional norms into bilateral and multilateral cooperation. This flexible institutional design allows ASEAN countries to diversify external partnerships while preserving strategic autonomy and mitigating major-power competition (Yue, 2025).

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The pandemic further accelerated supply-chain regionalization and accelerated economic uncertainty. The entry into force of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in 2020 injected new impetus into China–Thailand cooperation by facilitating factor mobility, deepening industrial division of labor, and enhancing regional market integration (Du et al., 2022). Together with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), RCEP has strengthened regional connectivity and economic resilience.

Faced with the intensifying Sino–US strategic competition, Southeast Asian states have adopted various forms of "partnership diplomacy" to balance external pressures while safeguarding autonomy. While the United States seeks to constrain China's regional influence with series of policies as Indo-Pacific Stragety and IPEF (Indo-Pacific Economic Framework) (Du, 2021) , China aims to stabilize its neighborhood and promote a China–ASEAN community with a shared future. Southeast Asian countries navigate between competing powers while prioritizing economic development and regional influence (Yue, 2025), rather than choosing one of the country as eternal follower.

As the primary strategic partner examined in this study, Thailand occupies a uniquely significant position in China's neighborhood diplomacy. Situated at the geographic center of mainland Southeast Asia, Thailand occupies a strategic hub position, connecting Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam in the north; Cambodia and Malaysia, Singapore Philippines, Indonesia and Brunei in the south. Drawing on its institutional experience within ASEAN and its tradition of flexible diplomacy, Thailand has emerged as a key coordinating node in regional cooperation. The "Thailand 4.0" strategy emphasizes innovation-driven development and aligns closely with BRI priorities. By integrating BRI projects with the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC), Thailand has promoted industrial-chain cooperation and enhanced regional connectivity.

Against this background, this study aims to solve the following three questions:

(1) How have China–Thailand relations evolved under the BRI in the post-pandemic era?

(2) How does Thailand function as a coordination hub within China–Thailand cooperation?

(3) How does bilateral cooperation contribute to the construction of China's national image in Thailand and its spillover effects on regional integration?

While policy documents and empirical observations suggest Thailand's rising importance in China–Thailand cooperation, how this transformation has been interpreted in academic literature remains unclear. To identify unresolved questions, this study advances constructivist International Relations theory in three ways. First, contextualizing constructivism in China–Thailand relations. Second, proposing the concept of "pandemic-catalyzed ideational transformation". And third, by analyzing Thailand's intermediary position, the paper theorizes the mediating role of hub states.

Research Objectives

1. To examine how China–Thailand relations have evolved under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the post-pandemic era, and to explain how the "interaction– meaning –institution" mechanism has driven the transformation from temporary cooperation to institutionalized collaboration.

2. To analyze Thailand's emerging role as a regional hub within China–Thailand cooperation, clarifying how Thailand facilitates agenda coordination, institutional linkage, and policy diffusion among regional actors.

3. To investigate how China–Thailand cooperation in public health, industrial-chain integration, and people-to-people exchanges

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contributes to the construction of China's national image in Thailand, and to assess how this image further promotes China–ASEAN cooperation and broader regional integration.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case-study approach combined with literature analysis and process tracing to examine how ideational change transforms in China–Thailand relations in the post-pandemic era.

1. Research Design

China–Thailand relations are selected as a critical case for three reasons. First, Thailand occupies a strategic "hub" position within ASEAN, serving as a bridge between major powers and Southeast Asian states. Second, China and Thailand maintained high-intensity cooperation before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing rich empirical material to observe ideational transformation. Third, the integration of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) offers an institutionalized setting to trace interaction, meaning construction, and norm diffusion.

2. Data Sources

This study draws on two categories of data. The first is official documents such as China–Thailand joint statements, ASEAN summit declarations and Policy papers related to BRI and EEC. The second is secondary sources such as journal articles, policy reports and some authoritative media coverage.

The material covers the period from 2020 to 2024, including outbreak of the pandemic, recovery phase, and post-pandemic adjustment.

3. Analytical Strategy

This research employs process tracing to identify causal mechanisms linking interaction, discourse, and institutionalization. Specifically, it traces: 1) how the repeated interaction platforms generate shared expectations; 2) how the discursive practices reshape mutual perceptions; and 3) how norms become embedded in regional institutions.

In addition, critical discourse analysis (CDA) is used to examine narrative framing ("shared future", "joint responsibility"), identity positioning (partner, coordinator, mediator) and normative legitimization (ASEAN centrality, consultation norms).This multi-method approach ensures analytical rigor and enhances the explanatory power of constructivist theory.

Literature Review

Responding to the post-pandemic restructuring of regional governance and the growing strategic relevance of Southeast Asia highlighted above, academic interest in China–ASEAN relations has expanded rapidly. Scholars increasingly focus on how middle powers such as Thailand navigate geopolitical competition while deepening economic and institutional cooperation with China (Zhou, 2015). Existing studies can be broadly categorized into three strands: economic cooperation, public-health and soft-power diplomacy, and constructivist approaches to identity and norms.

1. Economic Cooperation Studies

A substantial school of literature examines the resilience and structural upgrading of China –Thailand economic relations because of employing B&R Initiative and mutual cooperation. Most scholars agree that bilateral trade and investment demonstrated strong resilience despite pandemic disruptions (Xu, 2020; Du, 2021; Fan, 2021; Li et al., 2022). Research highlights a gradual transformation from traditional commodity trade toward deeper integration into regional value chains (Zheng, 2018； Cui & Li, 2020). According to Thai-Asean Panorama in 2020, trade between China and Thailand reached USD 98.63 billion, a year-on-year increase of 7.5%. Of this, China's exports to Thailand reached USD

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50.53 billion and imports from Thailand USD 48.1 billion, up 10.8% and 4.2% respectively. In 2021, bilateral trade overcame the impact of the pandemic and surpassed USD 100 billion, reaching USD 131.2 billion.

Some scholars emphasize the enabling role of digital technologies in driving value-chain upgrading. Cui and Li (2020) propose a "regionalization – digitalization" framework, arguing that big data, artificial intelligence, and platform economies have become key engines of industrial upgrading. From this perspective, China-Thailand cooperation, situated within China–ASEAN framework, serves as a strategic response to global technological competition.

However, other studies adopt a more cautious view. Many scholars (Zheng, 2018; Luo, 2024; Xu & Liu, 2017; Lu & Wang, 2020) point out that structural overlap, product homogeneity, and regulatory fragmentation continue to constrain deeper integration. Divergent technical standards and governance rules increase transaction costs and weaken cooperation efficiency. These scholars argue that although trade volumes have expanded, institutional and structural barriers still limit qualitative upgrading.

Overall, existing research provides rich empirical evidence on trade performance and industrial cooperation but remains largely confined to material outcomes. The ideational foundations underlying economic cooperation are seldom explored.

2. Public Health Cooperation

Public-health cooperation, particularly vaccine diplomacy, constitutes another major research focus. Scholars widely acknowledge that the pandemic exposed deficiencies in global health governance, as some developed countries prioritized domestic control over international assistance (Xu, 2020; Su, 2021). Among ASEAN countries, the public health systems are at different levels of development, and there are differences in their social management capabilities, leading to limited mutual assistance among the countries during the peak outbreak period (Zhang, 2020).In contrast, China's large-scale provision of medical supplies and vaccines to ASEAN countries has been interpreted as an alternative governance model, strengthening the confidence against virus.

Interpretations of China's health diplomacy diverge. Some scholars view it primarily as a strategic instrument to expand regional influence (Xu, 2020; Pan, 2023), whereas others emphasize its normative dimension, arguing that such practices reflect China's responsibility as a major power (Liang, 2022; Du, 2021), putting live-saving as priority rather than so-called political intention.

Empirical studies focusing on Thailand suggest that vaccine cooperation not only strengthened national pandemic-response capacity but also reshaped public perceptions of China. Media discourse analyses reveal a gradual shift toward more positive and cooperative narratives (Liang, 2022). That means China's performance during the pandemic was acceptable and recognizable by Thailand. The success of dealing with the spread of pandemic proves the determination and competence of central government of China, which is beneficial to deepening the trust between two countries. As a whole, these studies implicitly touch upon China's national image construction in Thailand, yet few provide a systematic theoretical explanation of how such perceptions are socially produced.

3. Constructivist Approaches to China –Thailand Relations

Constructivist scholarship emphasizes the role of interaction, discourse, and identity in shaping international relations. Interaction can eliminate suspicion and is better than confrontation. Liu (2018) argues that the BRI functions as an ideational platform through which norms of connectivity and shared development are diffused.

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Identity is not a given but socially constructed through discursive interactions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, China actively articulated a discourse of "responsible major power" and "community of shared future", featuring as a provider of public goods and a reliable partner for developing countries. Song (2012) also demonstrates that China's identity construction within the China–ASEAN Free Trade Area is socially negotiated rather than externally imposed.

Recent studies further explore how repeated cooperation facilitates trust-building and norm internalization (Song, 2025; Yang, 2020). These works highlight the socialization effects of institutional interaction and people-to-people exchanges. Nevertheless, most constructivist studies remain at the macro-regional level and lack micro-level case analyses of specific bilateral relationships. Moreover, they rarely examine how ideational change unfolds dynamically across different stages of cooperation, particularly under crisis conditions such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Synthesis and Research Gaps

Despite their valuable contributions, existing studies reveal three major limitations. First, most research prioritizes material outcomes while overlooking ideational mechanisms. Although trade performance and cooperation projects are well documented, few studies examine how shared meanings, narratives, and identities are constructed through sustained interaction. Second, research on Thailand's role in China–ASEAN cooperation remains largely descriptive and static. Existing studies tend to portray Thailand as a passive participant or structural node, failing to capture its evolving agency as a regional coordinator. Third, current literature under-theorizes the interactive effects of geopolitical competition and intra-ASEAN differentiation. While structural constraints are frequently mentioned, few studies explain how these pressures shape Thailand's strategic choices and hedging behavior through social and ideational mechanisms.

By addressing these gaps, this study directly responds to the three questions raised in the introduction: how China–Thailand relations have evolved under the BRI in the post-pandemic era, how Thailand exercises agency as a regional coordination hub, and how bilateral cooperation reshapes China's national image in Thailand. Through a constructivist "interaction–meaning–institution" framework, this study offers a dynamic and micro-level explanation of relational reconstruction. It not only enriches constructivist scholarship on regional cooperation but also advances understanding of middle-power agency within asymmetric partnerships.

Theoretical Foundations and Analytical Framework

Constructivism, which emerged as a prominent school of International Relations (IR) theory in the 1990s, is represented by scholars such as Alexander Wendt. Centred on the logic of "interaction–meaning–institution", constructivism argues that participators generate shared ideas through sustained interaction; these shared ideas shape identities, identities determine actions, and actions are further internalized into cultural structures (ideas) (Song, 2025), thereby forming relatively stable institutions. In the context of China–Thailand cooperation, this logic manifests as a progressive process of "practice enabling–conceptual sedimentation–institutional solidification", which helps explain the mechanisms through which China–Thailand relations are reconstructed in the post-pandemic era.

The formation of shared ideas is a gradual process of socialization, involving interaction, meaning - assignment, and institutionalization among participators. Through sustained interactive

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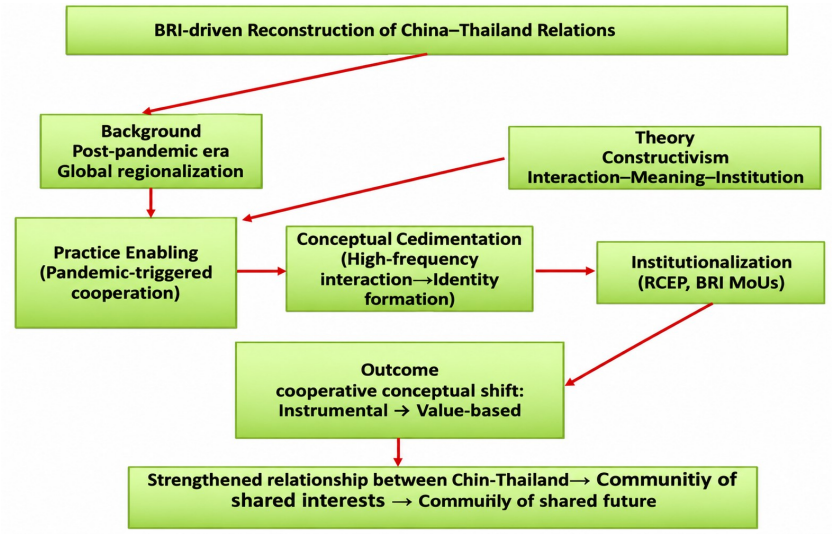
practices, participators gradually develop perceptions of each other's behaviour and identity (Qi & Zhang, 2025). The more frequent and deeper the interaction, the more trust can be built and the easier it is to form shared ideas. In the course of interaction, actors assign particular meanings to each other's behaviour, thereby forming shared values, expectations and beliefs. This meaning-assignment is central to the formation of shared ideas. Through institutionalization, shared ideas are consolidated, for example, in the form of international agreements, mechanisms and norms. Institutionalization not only reinforces shared ideas but also further shapes the identities and interests of actors (Yang, 2020).

Shared ideas have far-reaching impacts on international relations in at least two aspects. First, they shape identities. By redefining actors' identities, shared ideas influence behavioural choices. For instance, through the construction of the China–ASEAN Free Trade Area, China and ASEAN have created a cooperative and friendly collective identity, thereby reducing misperceptions of each other's behaviour (Song, 2012). Second, they reshape interests. Shared ideas can redefine actors' interests, enabling them to transcend short-term gains and focus on long-term cooperation. In international interactions, member states form consensus through interaction, jointly address conflicts that arise, enhance identity-based recognition, and forge common interests. Stable patterns of interaction help build chains of interest, deepening and broadening cooperation (Liu, 2018).

China and Thailand shares a long history of cultural connections that can be traced back to ancient Silk Road with repeated trade interactions. As a country long influenced by both the Indian and Chinese culture, and with a large ethnic Chinese population, Thailand has forged resilient bonds of friendship with China (Zhou, 2025). Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1975, the two sides have adhered to principles of "mutual respect, equality, sincere trust, and mutual assistance", fostering the deep friendship rooted in the notion that "China and Thailand are one family". Cooperative practices in the economic, security and cultural domains have laid a solid foundation for the formation of shared idea. Within these practices, both sides assign positive meanings to each other's actions, viewing the other as a partner rather than a threat. This meaning-assignment facilitates the formation of shared values and beliefs and helps diffuse shared ideas to other ASEAN members, thereby promoting mutual identity-building and reconstructing a community of shared interests.

Figure 1

The analytical framework can be summarized as follow



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Embedded Variables and an Analytical Model for the Post-Pandemic Era

In the post-pandemic era, the triple shocks in "health–economy–governance" have prompted Thailand to actively embed itself in the BRI framework, forming a causal chain of "crisis–demand–cooperation".

1. The catalytic role of the pandemic in China –Thailand cooperation

Following the outbreak of COVID-19, China and Thailand launched close cooperation in the field of public health to jointly respond to the crisis. Thailand's mainstream media, such as Thai Rath, extensively reported on China–Thailand anti-pandemic cooperation, highlighting mutual assistance and support. China provided substantial medical supplies and shared its anti-pandemic experience, while Thailand strengthened its own public-health system through cooperation with China. Collaboration in vaccine R&D and distribution further deepened bilateral public-health cooperation, and as an important ASEAN member, Thailand's cooperation with China in vaccine production and distribution not only enhanced its own capacity but also supported pandemic control in the broader ASEAN region (Liang, 2022). The action on the one hand proved that China is shouldering the responsibility in global health governance; and on the other hand it indicated that China-Thailand are closely connected in face of difficulty which further strengthen the mutual trust between two sides.

The pandemic also severely disrupted global supply chains but created new opportunities for China–Thailand cooperation. During the period, Thailand accelerated its digital transformation, and the digital economy became an important driver of economic recovery. Cooperation between China and Thailand in the digital economy—particularly the construction of "digital corridors"—has become a key direction of post-pandemic economic collaboration. Specifically, the two sides have deepened cooperation in digital infrastructure, e-commerce and logistics, telemedicine, and vocational education (Li, Zhao & Ma, 2022), laying a solid foundation for the development of a data-driven and green economy in the post-pandemic era.

The pandemic exposed deficits in global governance, especially in the provision of public-health goods and international cooperation mechanisms. China–Thailand cooperation during the pandemic provided a positive example for global governance. By strengthening policy coordination and resource-sharing, they demonstrated the importance of multilateral cooperation in addressing global crises (Su, 2021). Joint construction of the "Health Silk Road", including the establishment of fast-track channels for medical supplies, helped maintain the stability and smooth functioning of regional industrial and supply chains and advanced regional economic integration. As an important BRI partner, Thailand has cooperated extensively with China in digital-economy infrastructure and vocational education, providing key support for ASEAN's economic recovery and for the improvement of global governance (Yang, 2022).

In short, the pandemic has exerted a profound catalytic effect on China–Thailand cooperation, particularly in the areas of public-health crises, supply-chain restructuring and governance deficits. Strengthened cooperation has enhanced both sides' response capacities and generated valuable experience for regional and global pandemic governance. Looking ahead, China–Thailand cooperation will continue to play an important role in digital economy, public health and global governance, laying a solid foundation for sustainable development in the post-pandemic era.

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2. A constructivist analytical model adapted to Thailand

Table 1

Based on the logic of "interaction–ideas–institutions," this paper constructs a three-stage progressive model as follow

Phase	Core logic	Key practices (BRI carriers)	Effects on conceptual formation
Pandemic-induced cooperation (2020–2021)	External crisis creates demand gaps	(1) Vaccine assistance: China delivers 500,000 doses; (2) Supply-chain security: emergency supply of semiconductors and auto parts; (3) Logistical support: anti-pandemic special trains on the China–Laos Railway	Generates instrumental perception of "China as a crisis-response partner"
Interaction-driven conceptual upgrading (2021–2023)	High-frequency interaction upgrades ideas	(1) Hard connectivity: Phase-I construction of the China–Thailand Railway; establishment of EEC industrial cooperation zones; (2) Soft connectivity: trade-facilitation agreements; entry into force of RCEP; (3) Heart-to-heart connectivity: educational exchanges; Agreement on Mutual Exemption of Visas for Holders of Ordinary Passports between the PRC and the Kingdom of Thailand	Forms a functional perception of "China as a development-enabling partner"; reflected, for example, in the 2024 report on "Building a Thailand-China Community with a Shared Future"
Institutionalized consensus (2023–2025)	Ideas translated into institutional norms	(1) Bilateral: MoU on BRI cooperation; (2) Regional: incorporation of China–Thailand digital mutual-recognition practices into China–Laos Railway rules in the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025	Establishes a value-based perception of "China as a co-builder of rules"

This three-stage model grounded in the logic of "interaction–ideas–institutions" effectively analyses the social construction of China–Thailand relations, offering a theoretical framework for understanding BRI practices in Thailand, and providing reference for future research and practice. Its adaptability to Thailand highlights Thai agency in several ways: it stresses two-way interaction between Thailand's demand-driven engagement under pandemic pressures and the BRI's supply-side adaptation, rather than portraying a "China-led" process; it underscores Thai subjectivity—for instance, by showing how Thailand transforms vaccine-cooperation experience into ASEAN health rules, thus achieving "localized re-innovation"; and it aligns with domestic agendas by connecting to the "Thailand 4.0" strategy, explaining how the BRI becomes a carrier for restructuring China–Thailand relations through endogenous demand coupling.

Mechanisms of Ideational Formation in China–Thailand Cooperation: Constructivist Perspective

Drawing on the constructivist logic of "interaction–meaning–institution", this section conceptualizes ideational formation in China–Thailand cooperation through a three-dimensional framework: interaction platforms, discursive consensus, and normative systems. As an ASEAN hub state, Thailand functions not merely as a passive participant but as an intermediary actor that translates bilateral practices into regional norms. This mechanism marks a qualitative shift from material coordination to ideational identification.

1. Multi-platform interaction: institutional channels for ideational diffusion

Thailand plays a pivotal bridging role across multiple levels of interaction. At the official level, it actively participates in agenda-setting

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within China–ASEAN summits and ministerial meetings, promoting cooperation in political security, economic development, and cultural exchange. By hosting and steering high-level dialogues, Thailand helps embed bilateral agendas into regional frameworks and amplifies ASEAN's centrality (Lu & Wang, 2020).

At the institutional level, Thailand engages through mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS), advancing cooperation in disaster management, maritime security, and public health (Luo, 2025). These platforms not only facilitate practical cooperation but also enable the diffusion of ideas such as "cooperative security" and "inclusive development".

At the societal level, think tanks, universities, NGOs, and enterprises constitute informal yet crucial channels of ideational supplementation. By 2023, Fifteen China–ASEAN Think Tank Strategic Dialogue Forums and three China–Thailand Think Tank Forums had been held, focusing on connectivity, poverty reduction, and sustainable development (Tang, 2024). These exchanges strengthen mutual understanding and counter "China threat" narratives, reinforcing ideational trust by depoliticized interactions.

Through this multi-layered platform structure, repeated interaction generates shared expectations and social recognition, forming the structural foundation for ideational convergence.

2. Discursive consensus: value resonance and narrative construction

From a constructivist perspective, discourses do not merely reflect material interests but actively constitute social reality. During the COVID-19 pandemic, China and Thailand co-constructed narratives of "jointly overcoming difficulties" and "shared responsibility", which strengthened mutual trust and regional solidarity (Xu, 2020). On 22 April 2021, Mr. Don Pramudwinai, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand, had a telephone conversation with Mr. Wang Yi, State Councilor and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. Both sides discussed cooperation on the procurement of COVID-19 vaccines. Expressions such as "strengthened partnership, support, combat together, official visit, exchange views" were reported, which indicates the shared values between two countries in face of common problems.

The strategic docking of the BRI with Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) further deepened discursive convergence. Beyond policy coordination, this alignment fostered mutual recognition of development philosophies, integrating China's "community with a shared future" narrative with Thailand's "Sufficiency Economy Philosophy" (Zhang & Zeng, 2025).

In response to external misrepresentations—particularly regarding the South China Sea—China and Thailand issued joint statements and conducted cooperative exercises, emphasizing dialogue and peaceful dispute settlement (Tang, 2024). Such discursive practices consolidated a shared regional narrative centered on stability and development, which can be a good example for other ASEAN countries in dealing with South China Sea dispute.

3. Normative system: co-creation and institutional embedding

Norm institutionalization constitutes the most durable form of ideational consolidation. Under the RCEP framework, rule alignment in tariffs, rules of origin, and service trade has lowered transaction costs and fostered industrial-chain integration (Duan & Qiu, 2025), promoting the formation of the concept of China-Thailand cooperation and regional connectivity. These institutional arrangements translate shared ideas into governance structures.

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In emerging domains such as digital governance and green development, China and Thailand jointly explore standards and regulatory frameworks, further institutionalizing cooperation. This process reflects a transition from bilateral arrangements to regionally shared expectations. Such ideas can be seen in Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and the Kingdom of Thailand on Working towards a China-Thailand Community with a Shared Future for Enhanced Stability, Prosperity and Sustainability issued in Bangkok in November 19, 2022.

4. Consultation norms: practicing the "ASEAN Way"

Consultation and consensus-building—core norms of ASEAN—shape regional conflict management. The "ASEAN Way" emphasizes non-coercive dialogue and comfort-level decision-making, which fosters long-term trust (Cao, 2011). This consultation norm has featured relational and processing attributes, emphasizing continuous verbal interaction to build webs of relations, define interest boundaries and reshape social relations, thereby advancing regional cooperation. Although slow, this mechanism enables diverse political systems to coexist and cooperate (Chen, 2025).Thailand's consistent advocacy of consultation reinforces its identity as a mediator and stabilizer, contributing to the internalization of cooperative norms.

Challenges and Pathways for Deepening China–Thailand Relations

Building on the ideational mechanisms identified above, this section examines how external pressures and internal fragmentation constrain these mechanisms and proposes targeted pathways to reinforce them. While China–Thailand cooperation has advanced from material coordination to ideational identification, this process remains challenged and fragile.3

1. External challenges: geopolitical pressure and discursive erosion

Major-power rivalry increasingly penetrates multilateral platforms such as ARF (Asean Regional Forum) and EAS (East Asia Summit), reducing their neutral confidence-building functions. This trend directly weakens the multi-platform interaction mechanism, as agenda-setting space narrows and external powers shape discourse dynamics.

Although Thailand is not a claimant in the South China Sea, it seeks to maintain influence within ASEAN by using ASEAN frameworks and platforms to express its stance and promote "ASEAN-isation" of the South China Sea issue. At the same time, Thailand calls for a "sea of peace", underlining freedom of navigation and overflight, which has provided a pretext for US involvement and intensified regional tensions, leading to internationalization and complications (Zhu & Shi, 2021). These developments erode the discursive consensus constructed around cooperation and peaceful dialogue. In trade governance, divergent technical standards and regulatory systems constrain institutional convergence, undermining the normative system formation.

2. Internal challenges: ASEAN fragmentation and Thai developmental concerns

ASEAN member states exhibit deep structural heterogeneity in development levels and political systems (Ma, 2024), so national and territorial security and core interests remain central to Southeast Asian foreign policy considerations. This fragmentation limits the diffusion of shared norms generated under frameworks such as RCEP.

Thailand faces a dual dilemma: pursuing economic benefits from China while avoiding over-dependence. As was criticized by Hemmaphat (2021) that Thailand has been drawn into a highly dependent relationship with China

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and to the extent created an inflexible diplomacy and imbalance stance towards the major powers. At the same time, nationalist sentiments and security concerns generate internal resistance, weakening ideational trust. Insufficient policy coordination further reduces cooperation efficiency, constraining Thailand's hub function.

3. Pathways I: reinforcing pragmatic cooperation to consolidate discourse

To repair discursive erosion, China and Thailand should deepen cooperation in digital economy, green development, and vocational education under the BRI–EEC framework. Joint climate initiatives and clean-energy cooperation can enhance Thailand's benefits and narrative ownership. People-to-people exchanges in education, culture, and tourism should be expanded to rebuild societal trust and emotional connectivity, providing a social foundation for ideational integration. Once mutual trust is consolidated, concepts such as a "community of shared future for mankind" and the BRI can take root and flourish in Thailand, and diffuse to the broader ASEAN region.

4. Pathways II: supporting Thailand's coordinating role to strengthen platforms

To reinforce the multi-platform interaction mechanism, China should support Thailand's intermediary role by linking Lancang–Mekong Cooperation with ASEAN mechanisms and promoting cross - regional dialogue between ASEAN, BRICS, and SCO(Li, 2025). Supporting Thailand's mediating role in advancing the Code of Conduct (COC) negotiations can mitigate misperceptions and stabilize regional security (Lu, 2025). Strengthening strategic coordination with Thailand consolidates ASEAN centrality from within.

5. Pathways III: institutional safeguards to deepen normative embedding

To consolidate the normative system, China and Thailand should intensify cooperation in law enforcement, cybersecurity, and emergency governance. Joint training and exercises enhance trust and institutional compatibility. Deepening industrial-chain integration through third-market cooperation can alleviate competitive pressure and embed cooperation into regional governance structures (Luo, 2024). As institutional trust consolidates, norms such as consultation and community-building become internalized.

Discussion and Policy Recommendations

1. Discussion of Major Findings

This study demonstrates that China–Thailand relations exhibit a gradual transformation from pragmatic crisis management toward ideational identification and institutional consolidation. The findings highlight that bilateral cooperation is not merely driven by material interests but is socially constructed through sustained interaction and discursive alignment. Thailand's intermediary role enables bilateral practices to be embedded into regional frameworks, strengthening ASEAN-centered cooperation.

Compared with existing China–ASEAN macro-level studies, this research provides micro-level empirical evidence showing how middle powers exercise agency through institutional mediation and ideational translation.

2. Policy Recommendations

First, China and Thailand should prioritize high-quality BRI cooperation in digital economy, green infrastructure, and smart logistics to enhance sustainable development capacity; Second, strengthening Thailand's coordinating role within ASEAN mechanisms can improve policy communication efficiency and reduce misperceptions caused by major-power rivalry; Third, expanding people-to-people exchanges through education, tourism, and cultural programs will reinforce social trust and stabilize the public-opinion foundation of bilateral relations; Finally, institutional risk-management mechanisms

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should be improved to address concerns over debt sustainability, technological dependency, and regulatory compatibility.

Conclusion

In the post-pandemic era, global economic recovery has been uneven, while protectionism and unilateralism have continued to challenge existing governance structures. Against this context, China and Thailand have maintained cooperative momentum under the dual frameworks of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Rather than indicating linear progress, this study suggests that regional cooperation in this period can be understood through a constructivist logic of "crisis-induced interaction–practice-reinforced ideas–institutionalised consensus".

1. The logic of China–Thailand relational reconstruction

The reconstructing of China–Thailand relations in the post-pandemic era does not reflect a simple recovery of pre-pandemic patterns, but rather a process in which repeated interactions have gradually shaped shared meanings and institutional expectations. Within this process, Thailand appears to occupy a distinctive "hub role".

Analytically, Thailand's "hub role" refers to its function as an intermediary node that links China's bilateral cooperation with ASEAN-wide institutional frameworks. Through its geographic location, diplomatic positioning, and participation in regional mechanisms, Thailand serves as a bridge through which bilateral practices are translated into broader regional agendas (Song & Tian, 2022). In this sense, Thailand does not merely benefit from cooperation but also facilitates the diffusion of cooperative norms and practices at the regional level.

In the economic domain, infrastructure connectivity and industrial cooperation are not treated here as direct drivers of regional integration, but as practices that can be interpreted as reinforcing shared expectations about mutual benefit and interdependence. For example, China-Thailand Rong Yong Industrial Park in 2006, the construction of China-Thailand Railway in 2017, Chinese Yuan–Thai Baht Bilateral Currency Swap Arrangement（BSA）in 2025, ect.These practices have contributed to a shift from isolated project-based cooperation toward more networked forms of regional connectivity. From a constructivist perspective, such repeated interactions gradually consolidate the idea that connectivity constitutes a shared regional interest.

In public health, Thailand's participation in vaccine cooperation and regional emergency mechanisms is understood less as a unilateral outcome of assistance and more as a process of mutual socialization. Through institutional platforms such as the "10+3 Public Health Emergency Network," bilateral experiences have been embedded into regional cooperation frameworks. In official discourse, these practices are often framed as evidence of collective responsibility and solidarity, which contributes to the construction of a shared identity of "crisis community" within China–Thailand relations.

In people-to-people exchanges, cultural and tourism cooperation is interpreted as a social foundation for regional identification. Narratives such as "China and Thailand as one family" function discursively to enhance closeness and mutual trust. The establishment of Confucius Institute facilitate the exchange of cultures; Visa-free policy boost the mobility of people and ideas communication; Culture festivals shorten the physical distance between two countries. Rather than producing immediate political effects, such exchanges operate at the societal level, reinforcing perceptions of affinity and emotional connection that underpin longer-term cooperation.

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2. Ideational identification and institutional mechanisms under the BRI

From a discursive perspective, the BRI is framed in Chinese official narratives as a global public good and a platform for inclusive development. This study does not assess this claim normatively, but instead examines how such framing operates in shaping expectations and interpretations of cooperation. Through multi-level interaction platforms, bilateral agendas are incorporated into regional mechanisms, while institutionalised forums diffuse the notion that "cooperation equals benefit" across different actors.

In terms of ideational construction, narratives such as "joint pandemic response" and "joint development" have been employed to align China's concept of a "community with a shared future for mankind" with Thailand's "Sufficiency Economy Philosophy". These discursive strategies do not automatically generate consensus, but they provide interpretative frames through which cooperation is understood and legitimized. As a result, identification has gradually shifted from short-term instrumental cooperation toward more functional and value-oriented understandings of partnership.

Regarding norm formation, economic and trade rules, as well as emerging governance frameworks, illustrate a gradual transition from bilateral arrangements to regionally shared expectations. Consultation-based dispute settlement practices, in particular, are presented as models for differences management, reinforcing Thailand's role in region.

Overall, this study suggests that China–Thailand cooperation in the post-pandemic era can be interpreted as part of a broader process of relational restructuring within China–ASEAN relations. Through repeated interactions in economic, public health, and people-to-people domains, bilateral practices have contributed to the reinforcement of shared ideas and the gradual institutionalisation of cooperative norms. Rather than demonstrating direct causality, these processes reflect a dynamic of mutual socialisation consistent with constructivist theory.

3. Contribution and limitation

This paper contributes to the existing literature by applying a "crisis–ideas–institutions" analytical framework to explain how bilateral China–Thailand cooperation is translated into regional identification and institutional development within ASEAN. By foregrounding discursive practices and social interaction, it offers a relational perspective on post-pandemic regional governance.

One limitation of this study is its primary focus on the China–Thailand case, which may not fully cover the diversity of interaction patterns across different ASEAN countries. Future research could adopt a comparative approach to examine whether similar mechanisms operate in other bilateral relationships within the region.

AI Usage Declaration

The author used generative AI tool (e.g.ChatGPT) solely for partial language editing and stylistic refinement. The AI tools were not involved in the study design, data collection and analysis, or interpretation of results. All the viewpoints are summarized through true literature by author himself. The whole content has been reviewed and corrected by the author, who take full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the manuscript.

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