



Regime type and Thailand's foreign policy position, 1950–2020: Some statistical evidence

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Abstract

Despite applying various theoretical lenses, methodological diversity is less observed in the literature on Thai foreign policy. Quantitative analysis of Thailand's international relations is scarce, which leads to a methodological gap. This study aims to fill this gap by addressing the simple yet essential question: is regime type (i.e., dictatorship or democracy) related to Thailand's foreign policy position? Regime type is operationalized by the Bjørnskov–Rode regime data and Thailand's international position by the (foreign policy) similarity score of the Thailand–United States dyad using Cohen's kappa (κ) statistics. The κ score can serve as a measurement of Thailand's satisfaction level with the American world order, postulating its international alignment. Using correlation, cross-tabulation, and chi-square analyses, we identified a negative significant relationship between regime type and the κ score for the Thailand–United States dyad during the period 1950–2020. That is, democracy in Thailand is related to its low satisfaction level with the United States. This satisfaction level with the United States-led international order does not necessarily indicate that Bangkok would closely align with Beijing. Methodological limitations render the results tentative, and further quantitative research on Thai foreign policy is required.

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Introduction

Thailand holds a peculiar position in Asia due to its ability to avoid being controlled by European imperial

powers or any other regional power despite its longstanding history of political instability, coups, and turmoil. It is known for its adaptive and flexible foreign policy, which has been compared with the “bamboo-in-the-wind,” which is deeply rooted but flexible enough to bend in any direction the wind blows to survive (Kislenko, 2002). Different regimes at different times have varied concerns and undertake variegated policy tools to serve national security and interests.

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For example, during the height of the Cold War, when the Communist expansion threatened Thailand's territorial security (*khwa mankhong haeng dindaen*), policy elites in Bangkok preponderantly counted on military alliances to counter the Communist threat and safeguard the nation's integrity. Contrariwise, in the 1990s, economic wealth (*khwammangkhang thang setthakit*) became a major concern for policymakers in the Thai capital, and economic diplomacy began to become bold in Thailand's relations with other countries (Bunyavejchewin et al., 2022).

The dynamic nature of Thai policy formulation and state behavior has been investigated through various paradigms and parameters by different scholars over time. Various theoretical speculations and analytical devices have been used to comprehend Thailand's foreign relations (Charoenvattanankul, 2017), including some nonmainstream theories, such as critical theory, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism (Na Thalang et al., 2019).

These studies have identified many determinants responsible for formulating and shaping Thai policies. The determinants can be divided into internal and external ones. Internal determinants include inter alia, identity and nation-building history, elite perception, threat perception, leadership turnover, and domestic political system (Phuangkasem, 1980; Phuangkasem, 1984; Suthiwart-Narueput, 1980; Viraphol, 1985; Wattanayagorn, 1998; Yensabai, 2019), whereas external determinants include constantly changing regional balance of power, coupled with political-economic dynamics in Thailand's near abroad (Chambers & Bunyavejchewin, 2021; Dhiravegin, 1974; Sirichote, 1986; Viraphol, 1982).

As discussed above, Thai foreign policy has been widely studied, and a wide variety can be found in the scholarly literature available; however, it has revealed a finite circumference of research perspectives on the subject matter. First, a majority of studies did not rely on primary sources. It was not until the late 1990s, when the Official Information Act, B.E. 2540 (1997) was enacted, that first-hand materials regarding Thailand's foreign policy formulation became accessible to those outside policy circles. This has entailed a flawed picture of the kingdom's international politics.

Aside from the aforementioned shortcoming, considerable diversity in the existing literature has not been very imaginative in terms of the methods used. Methodologically, behavioralism—a methodological school of hard social sciences using statistics and other quantitative techniques, which has dominated American political science since the late 1960s—has had no

presence in the body of knowledge regarding Thai foreign policy (Prasirtsuk, 2008). A few exceptions include Phuangkasem (1980). To put it differently, there is a shortage of statistical and scientific research on Thailand's foreign relations.

This research article is an attempt to fill the foregoing methodological gap to extend the circumference of scholarly work on Thailand's foreign policy. To this end, we have reexamined the fundamental determinant of foreign policy analysis, namely, “regime type.”

Literature Review

Phuangkasem (1984) has observed that the type of political regime in Bangkok seems to exert a certain specific effect on Thailand's foreign policy position. It is important to note that after the dissolution of the absolute monarchy to form a constitutional monarchy in 1932, the military has held power for much of the time. The military has always been traditional and rigid in its approach, questioning the modern approach of western educated bureaucrats. Military governments tended to implement dogmatic and rigid policies, as those in the barracks were inclined to have a black-and-white worldview and firmly believed in “with us or against us” relationships. On the contrary, civilian governments have demonstrated a tendency toward more open and flexible stances (Phuangkasem, 1984).

Thailand's military coup in 2014 triggered a series of debates about whether the new military regime is in proximity to China and shifted Thai foreign policy toward a Pro-China stance. Some scholars firmly believe that the junta has propelled Thailand into China's political orbit (Pongsudhirak, 2017; Tungkeunkunt, 2016; Tungkeunkunt & Phuphakdi, 2018). Many scholars argue that Thailand's yielding to Chinese demands has jeopardized Thai security concerns. In this context, Cogan (2019) raises a vital argument that either the Thai military has willfully chosen to be on the Chinese side or it has accepted the inferior status under the Chinese. The abovementioned scholars seem to be in clear agreement with Phuangkasem (1984) ideas. However, several scholars seem to be in denial of the existing observations (Chambers & Bunyavejchewin, 2019, 2021; Raymond, 2019). For instance, Chambers (2020) claimed that “... regime type (democracy versus dictatorship) in Thailand does not correlate with close relations with Washington versus Beijing” (p. 54).

Considering varied narratives, this study attempts to reexamine the question of whether the Bangkok political

regime's nature and Thailand's foreign policy position are related. Compared to previous research relying predominantly on qualitative evidence, this reexamination is methodologically based on quantitative analysis in general and statistical methods in particular. We do not claim that our line of argument here is intellectually sophisticated, yet we attempt to approach the controversial debate on Thai foreign policy differently.

Methodology

This article relied almost exclusively on quantitative measures in judging the link between Thailand's regime type and its foreign policy position. The study design is delineated below.

Hypothesis

Although our hypothesis is straightforward, it is necessary to provide empirical evidence regarding the relationship between regime type and Thailand's foreign policy position.

H1: Regime type is related to Thailand's foreign policy position.

To test H1, we performed a correlation analysis to determine the extent of the relationship between Thailand's regime type and its foreign policy position. Correlation analysis will enable the acceptance or rejection of the hypothesis. Then, we used cross-tabulation and chi-square analyses to ensure the statistical soundness of the correlation analysis results.

Data Sources

This study used data from open-access databases. For regime type, we exclusively used the Bjørnskov–Rode regime dataset (Bjørnskov & Rode, 2020), an updated extension of Cheibub et al. (2010) democracy–dictatorship index. For the dyadic (foreign policy) similarity score, which is used to measure Thailand's foreign policy position, we extracted the time-series data (for the period 1950–2020) from large datasets reported by the Alliance Treaty Obligations and Provisions (ATOP) project (Leeds et al., 2002).

Specifically, this study computed foreign policy similarity data using the ATOP datasets and Cohen's (1960) kappa (κ) coefficient, as mentioned in Chiba et al. (2015). Häge (2011) originally proposed the application of Cohen's κ statistic for measuring foreign policy positions. In the ATOP data, the strength of alliance

obligations used for computation follows an ordered categorical form, namely: (1) defense and/or offense obligations; (2) neutrality and/or consultation obligations; (3) non-aggression but without defense, offense, neutrality, or consultation bindings; and (4) no alliance obligation (Chiba et al., 2020).

Variables

This study primarily evaluated whether a relationship exists between two variables, namely, regime type (operationalized by the Bjørnskov–Rode regime data) and Thailand's foreign policy position between 1950 and 2020 (operationalized by the ATOP data on the similarity score data for the Thailand–United States dyad calculated using Cohen's κ [hereafter, κ score]). Complementarily, we also tested the association between regime type and the ordinal ranking of the κ scores of the dyad within the same timeframe.

Regime type

For Thailand's regime type during 1950–2020, we employed the dataset from Bjørnskov and Rode (2020). Regime characteristics were simplified and coded in a binary form (0 = dictatorship; 1 = democracy). This dichotomous coding was based on a minimalist definition of democracy: “[a] country is defined as democratic, if elections were conducted, these were free and fair, and if there was a peaceful turnover of legislative and executive offices following those elections” (Bjørnskov & Rode, 2018).

Thailand's foreign policy position

As aforementioned, Thailand's foreign policy position was operationalized by the κ -score data for the Thailand–United States dyad between 1950 and 2020 (Chiba et al., 2015). κ score is a measure of shared interests between the two nations based on their matching alliance bonds. It performs the same function as the tau-b (Bueno de Mesquita, 1975) and S scores (Signorino & Ritter, 1999) used to evaluate a state's satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the existing order as well as its institutional working rules at the regional and international levels (Kim, 1992; Kim, 2002; Kim & Kang, 2010; Sobek & Wells, 2013). Specifically, the κ score for the Thailand–United States dyad could indicate Thailand's overall satisfaction level with the existing international order, where the United States is the dominant nation. Therefore, the score would aptly represent Thailand's foreign policy position based on its international alignment.

κ score pertains to the proportion of agreement between the dyad after accounting for chance. The scale ranges from -1.00 to $+1.00$, where a κ value of 1 indicates perfect agreement, while 0 indicates that the agreement is merely chance. Conversely, negative values indicate agreement that is less than chance (i.e., potential disagreement between a pair of states). Because the ATOP κ -score data are available only until 2018, our study assumed that no changes occurred in the κ values for 2019 and 2020. Notably, the constraint of normality on the κ -score data was contraindicated because the sampling was not randomized (Sweetland, 1972).

Ordinal rankings of Thailand's foreign policy position

Furthermore, to ensure statistical soundness, we tested the association between regime type and ordinal rankings of Thailand's foreign policy position. Consequently, we recoded the ATOP κ -score data into six ordinal rankings according to the strength of agreement using the benchmark proposed by Landis and Koch (1977), which will be described in detail in the subsequent section.

Data Analysis Methods

The methods used for analysis included: (1) descriptive statistics; (2) correlation; and (3) cross-tabulation and chi-square. Although the latter two statistics are similar, albeit not identical, in terms of purposive measurement, performing both analyses would be beneficial to cross-check the validity of the results. Statistical analyses were conducted using the Minitab 20.4 software (Minitab LLC, 2021). Point-biserial correlations (r_{pb}) were interpreted using Cohen's (1988) criteria (*small* = 0.10–0.29, *medium* = 0.30–0.49, *large* \geq 0.50). Additionally, Cohen's k coefficient was interpreted using Landis and Koch's (1977) criteria (*poor* < 0.00, *slight* = 0.00–0.20, *fair* = 0.21–0.40, *moderate* = 0.41–0.60, *substantial* = 0.61–0.80, and *almost perfect* = 0.81–1.00).

Descriptive statistics

We performed descriptive statistics analysis to summarize and describe the basic features of the selected data.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of the κ score

Variables	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SEM</i>	<i>SD</i>	Minimum	<i>Mdn</i>	Maximum
κ Score	71	0.0879	0.0105	0.0888	−0.0356	0.0433	0.2742

Note: *N* = Total number of cases (i.e., total years analyzed); *M* = Mean; *SEM* = Standard Error of the Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation; *Mdn* = Median.

Correlation analysis

A point-biserial correlation analysis was used to test the relationship between Thailand's regime type and its foreign policy position, as represented by the κ score for the Thailand–United States dyad. A point-biserial correlation denotes a specific case of Pearson's product-moment correlation used in the analysis with a binary variable. Thus, the value of r_{pb} was computed by running a standard correlation procedure in Minitab.

Cross-tabulation and Chi-square analysis

To ensure the statistical validity of the results from the point-biserial correlation analysis, we performed a cross-tabulation on regime type and the ordinal rankings of the κ score for the Thailand–United States dyad. Then, a chi-square test was conducted to evaluate the association between the two variables.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the κ score, and Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of regime type and ordinal κ -score categories.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics of regime type and ordinal κ -score categories

Variables	<i>n</i>	%
Regime type		
Dictatorship	36	50.70
Democracy	35	49.30
Total	71	100.00
Ordinal κ -score categories ^a		
Poor	6	8.45
Slight	52	73.24
Fair	13	18.31
Moderate	0	0
Substantial	0	0
Almost perfect	0	0
Total	71	100.00

Note: *n* = number of cases (i.e., total years analyzed); ^a = categories ordinally indicating interrater agreement for qualitative items (i.e., Thailand–United States dyad).

Point-Biserial Correlation

Furthermore, we evaluated the relationship between regime type and the κ score of the Thailand–United States dyad. A point-biserial correlation test demonstrated that the two variables were negatively and significantly related ($r_{pb} = -.61$, 95% CI $[-0.74, -0.44]$, $p < .001$, $N = 71$ [Table 3]).

Table 3 Point-biserial correlation with regime type

Regime type	Minitab method		κ Score -.613*
	Correlation type	Pearson's coefficient	
	Number of rows used	71	

Note: * $p < .001$.

Cross-Tabulation and Chi-Square

Table 4 is a contingency table that was constructed by cross-tabulating the regime type and ordinal rankings of the κ -score data followed by a chi-square test. Table 5 shows that a statistically significant association exists between the two variables ($\chi^2(2) = 17.425$, $p < .001$). This finding corresponds to the results of the correlation analysis—that is, regime type and the κ score for the Thailand–United States dyad are relatively related.

Discussion

Through the point-biserial correlation analysis, we find a negative significant relationship between regime type and the κ score. In other words, a negative r_{pb} indicates that high values on the binary data (i.e., democracy) are related to low values on the κ score (i.e., Thailand's foreign policy position with the United States or the country's overall satisfaction level with the existing international order, where the United States leads). Meanwhile, χ^2 appears to support the foregoing. Based on these findings, H1 is supported—that is, Thailand's regime type is related to its foreign policy position.

Table 4 Regime type and ordinal rankings of the κ -score

		Strength of agreement			All	
		Poor	Slight	Fair		
Regime type	0	Count	4	19	13	36
		% of Total	5.63	26.76	18.31	50.70
	1	Count	2	33	0	35
		% of Total	2.82	46.48	0.00	49.30
All	Count	6	52	13	71	
	% of Total	8.45	73.24	18.31	100.00	

Note: 0 = dictatorship; 1 = democracy.

Regime type is important for setting the course of Thailand's foreign policy. In other words, dictatorship (i.e., autocracy) and democracy tend to differently position Thailand's international alignment. However, our results are inversely counterintuitive. Throughout 71 years, Thai democracy has generally shared little common interests with the United States compared to dictatorial regimes. In other words, democratic leaders in Bangkok seem less satisfied with the United States-led international order. Arguably, this stance was evident during the tenure of Thaksin Shinawatra (2001–2006), where decision-makers in Bangkok considered China's role in Asia as preferable and indispensable to the national interests of Thailand (Bunyavejchewin, 2018).

In terms of measurement, the present statistics cannot identify the direction in which the dictatorial and democratic regimes may shift Thailand's foreign policy. Nevertheless, Thailand's relatively low satisfaction level with the American world order does not necessarily mean that it would closely align with Beijing. Instead, its foreign policy position may vary—from being omnidirectional to neutral to even directionless (Crispin, 2016). To elucidate the reasons behind Thailand's foreign policy determination, substantial quantitative research is further required.

This study has its limitations. The results of the correlation, cross-tabulation, and chi-square analyses are extremely rudimentary to yield a general conclusion about the causal effects of regime type on Thailand's foreign policy position. Furthermore, spuriousness is common in political studies (Kritzer, 1990). Thus, our study is aware of the potential problem of spurious correlation in the analysis; therefore, the results may not be generalizable. Consequently, the results presented should be regarded as tentative empirical evidence.

Table 5 Chi-square test of association between regime type and ordinal rankings of the κ -score

	Chi-square	df	p value
Pearson's coefficient	17.425	2	.000
Likelihood ratio	22.503	2	.000

Note: Two cells with expected counts less than 5.

Against this background and given the methodological gap in the literature on Thai foreign policy, the current study asserts that a simple, straightforward statistical analysis is necessary. Further scientific research with simple or sophisticated techniques is strongly encouraged to explore this issue.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This article started by pointing out the lack of quantitative research in the existing state of scholarly work on Thai foreign policy. To increase the number of studies on Thailand's international relations, we reexamined a basic question in foreign policy analysis—that is, whether Thailand's regime type and foreign policy position are relatively related. Using simple statistics (i.e., correlation, cross-tabulation, and chi-square analyses), the results demonstrate that the two variables are statistically related. Specifically, the results suggest that Thailand's democracy is related to its low satisfaction level with the American world order, as reflected through the country's shared interests with the United States, the hegemonic power of this existing order. Nonetheless, statistical evidence derived from our analysis could not explain the mechanism underlying the foregoing direction.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned limitation, the first, simple step is a prerequisite to the next steps of sophisticated research that explains the causal mechanisms between various internal determinants, such as regime type, and future directions in Thai foreign policy, especially Thailand's international alignment. These implications indicate the methodological need for more interaction between quantitative and qualitative considerations in making sense of the country's foreign relations. For example, future research might consider the implications of numeric variables, such as geographic distance, on Thai foreign policy behavior toward great powers.

Presently, the authors conclude this article by slightly deviating from our analysis to focus on recent heated debates on regime type and Thailand's international alignment, which was triggered by the 2014 coup in Bangkok. Despite prevalent observations that the military regime has driven Thailand into China's arms, we argue that such opinions are untrue. One costly lesson learned from the Thai experience during the Cold War was avoiding a close alignment with one major power. Paradoxically, the threat to Thailand's security tended to worsen after deepening its ties with the United States (Viraphol, 1982). This incident was followed by the United States abandoning the Bangkok regime in the mid-1970s. In other words, taking China's side is not an

option for Thai policymakers because it may put the country at risk of repeating the same mistake—that is, selecting the wrong horse. As such, doing so will provide Thailand with less leverage in negotiations.

As aforementioned, even if the Bangkok regime may be dissatisfied with American and western democracies, solely relying on China would severely damage the country's national interests and security. Even the military junta, who tends to hold a friend–foe perception, is aware of this fact. Although some top generals may initially believe that China is a true friend, China's shaming offensive has destroyed its image as a “good big brother.” In 2017, Beijing embarrassed Thai dictators by excluding General Prayut Chan-o-cha, the coup leader and Prime Minister, from the Belt and Road Initiative Summit (Busbarat, 2017). Policy elites in Bangkok suspiciously viewed China as a long-term threat at least since 1992 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1992), and this is a matter of fact and not an opinion.

In terms of national security and interests, especially territorial integrity, Thai leaders—including the junta—address these issues without compromise. This stance is evident by the unexpected decision of the Prayut regime to cease the Joint Committee on Coordination of Commercial Navigation (JCCCN) on the Lancang–Mekong River. JCCCN is a dialog mechanism through which Thailand and China have negotiated important issues related to the Mekong River, such as dredging riverbeds, over the past two decades (Ganjanakhundee, 2020). The actual reason behind Thailand's unanticipated action was that allowing China to dredge the contested stretch of the Mekong River would directly influence the unsettled demarcation line between Thailand and Laos see (Bunyavejchewin et al., 2022).

We conclude this article by recalling the words of the late Professor Likhit Dhiravegin: “[A]moral or not, Thailand's [foreign] policy is essentially based on a pragmatic principle, self-interest and the necessity to survive” (Dhiravegin, 1974, p. 61).

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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