Additional Strategy for Thailand's Foreign Policy to Counterbalance Influences of The U.S. and China

บทความวิชาการ

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Abstract

In this new era of U.S.-China competition, Thailand needs to establish a more nuanced or nimble foreign policy for an effective hedging strategy that can protect and advance its interests as well as avoid being dictated to by the U.S. and China. Through documentary research, this article investigates how the existing engagement with other major powers helps Thailand to counterbalance the influence of China and the U.S., and also explores if there would be future potential for developing more effective policy through greater engagement with other major powers, middle powers, and multilateral mechanisms. This study finds that the future regional competitions among the major powers will likely intensify and Thailand will retain its geopolitical importance so that Thailand needs to diversify its foreign relations by strengthening relations with other major and middle powers, while also deepening its engagement with multilateral institutions, with first priority placed on greater economic engagement and second priority on greater security cooperation.

Keywords: Counterbalance, Foreign Policy, Major Powers Competition, Thailand

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บทคัดย่อ

ภายใต้สภาวะการแข่งขันการขยายอำนาจระหว่างสหรัฐอเมริกาและจีนในปัจจุบัน ประเทศไทยจำเป็นต้องมีการกำหนดนโยบายการต่างประเทศที่สามารถตอบสนองต่อสถานการณ์ได้ดีเพื่อนำไปสู่การใช้ยุทธศาสตร์การแข่งขันเชิงอำนาจได้อย่างมีประสิทธิผล ซึ่งจะทำให้ประเทศไทยสามารถปกป้องและพัฒนาผลประโยชน์ของชาติได้เช่นเดียวกับการหลีกเลี่ยงการถูกครอบงำโดยอิทธิพลของสหรัฐอเมริกาและจีน บทความนี้ได้นำเสนอผลการศึกษาที่ดำเนินการโดยการวิจัยเอกสารเพื่อสืบค้นว่าการมีความสัมพันธ์กับประเทศมหาอำนาจต่าง ๆ ได้ช่วยให้ประเทศไทยสามารถถ่วงดุลอำนาจและอิทธิพลของสหรัฐอเมริกาและจีนได้อย่างไร รวมทั้งเสาะหาว่ามีโอกาสที่จะพัฒนานโยบายที่ทำให้ดำเนินความสัมพันธ์ดังกล่าวได้ดีมากขึ้นกว่าเดิมทั้งกับประเทศมหาอำนาจอื่น ๆ ประเทศอำนาจระดับกลางและความร่วมมือผ่านกลไกความร่วมมือพหุภาคีต่าง ๆ การศึกษานี้พบว่า การแข่งขันการขยายอำนาจระหว่างประเทศมหาอำนาจในอนาคตนั้น จะทวีความรุนแรงยิ่งขึ้นและประเทศไทยจะยังคงมีความสำคัญในด้านภูมิรัฐศาสตร์ ซึ่งส่งผลให้ประเทศไทยต้องดำเนินความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างประเทศอย่างหลากหลาย ทั้งโดยการเสริมสร้างความสัมพันธ์กับประเทศมหาอำนาจอื่น ๆ ประเทศอำนาจระดับกลาง รวมทั้งการดำเนินความร่วมมือกับองค์กรความร่วมมือพหุภาคีอย่างแน่นแฟ้นมากขึ้น โดยเน้นให้ความสำคัญสูงสุดในการขยายความร่วมมือด้านเศรษฐกิจ และให้ความสำคัญในลำดับรองลงมาในการขยายความร่วมมือด้านความมั่นคง

คำสำคัญ: การถ่วงดุลอำนาจ, นโยบายการต่างประเทศ, การแข่งขันของประเทศมหาอำนาจ, ประเทศไทย

Introduction

With its strategic location in the heart of mainland Southeast Asia, Thailand is geopolitically and economically significant for not only the regional but also the global community, particularly in the Asia-Pacific. The U.S.-China rivalry in the past decade has heightened tension in the South China Sea and countries in the region have faced the undesirable power competition between these two major powers. China's emerging economic and military power has caused great concerns to the U.S. regarding regional security and balance of power (Cordesman, 2019). In this new era of U.S. China competition, Thailand's traditional approach to counterbalance the influence of one major power by shifting cooperation to another major power may not help the country to sustain its ability to counterbalance the pressures from both major powers in the longer term. Hence, Thailand needs to establish a more nuanced or nimble foreign policy for a more effective hedging strategy that can protect and advance its interests as well as avoid being dictated to by the U.S. and China. Thailand's additional approaches to effectively embrace or oppose future influence from these two countries could include the opportunity to increase engagement with other major powers, middle powers and multilateral mechanisms. This article investigates how the existing and future greater engagement with multilateralism and other major powers including Japan, India, and Russia help Thailand to counterbalance the influence of the U.S. and China.

Research Questions and Research Methodology

As there are currently inadequate studies of the impact and influence of middle powers and multilateral mechanisms on Thailand's foreign policy to specifically counterbalance the influences of the U.S. and China, this research will consider the following research questions:

(1) How is Thailand's current approach to national strategy informed by respective relationships with major powers, middle powers and engagement with multilateralism?

(2) Would greater engagement with other major powers, middle powers and multilateralism lead to better outcomes for Thailand's strategic position?

The analysis of this study is based largely on data from both primary sources such as policy papers, government reports and press releases, and secondary resources such as books, media stories, research reports, journal and on-line articles. The analytical framework includes key factors that influence and shape Thailand's foreign policy. This framework for assessment will identify whether the proposed additional approaches can be an effective source of national power for Thailand's foreign policy decision making and how the identified factors could enable Thailand to cultivate external sources of power to counterbalance the great powers in a changing and complex security environment. The desirable outcome of the additional approaches would be to give Thailand more flexibility in its foreign policy decision making, preserve the country's political autonomy, and, to some extent, insulate the Kingdom from great power competition. Figure presents an analytical framework showing the relationship between the factors and variables used for assessment in this study.

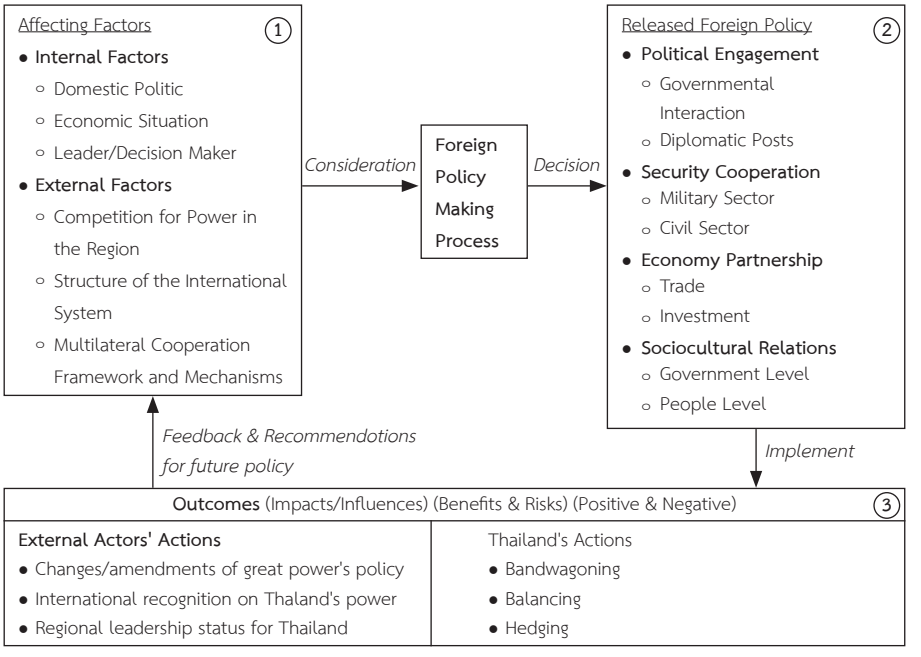


Figure Analytical Framework.

Source: Author

To answer the first research question, this study examines the outcomes of Thailand's past and current foreign policies by considering the factors and variables that have influenced existing Foreign Policy, as identified in Box 2 of Figure 1. To answer the second research question, this study examines the actions of Thailand and external actors, as presented in Box 3 of Figure 1. These are outcomes of Thailand's policies and have impact and influence over the internal and external factors considered in making foreign policies, as shown in Box 1 of Figure 1. These data sets were examined using the documentary analysis technique. Recommendations for future foreign policy strategies will accordingly be made with reference to the research findings.

Thailand's Relations with the U.S. and China

The U.S. and China are significantly important to Thailand's economy and security and they consistently compete to influence Thailand's policy and behavior, particularly during Thailand's periodic internal crises. During the Cold War, Thailand allied with the U.S. in order to protect the country from the spread of communism (Prasirtsuk, 2017). Through the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1955, Thailand received significant military and economic support from the U.S. and Thai leaders then viewed the U.S. military presence as an important deterrence against the expansion of Chinese communism in the region.

However, following the U.S. policy of disengagement from the Vietnam War and rapprochement with China in the mid-1970s, the Thai government quickly responded to such geopolitical changes by starting political communication and reopening its relations with China. The Cambodia Crisis, in which Vietnam invaded and occupied Cambodia during 1978-1989, was a turning point and a major factor that strengthened the Thai-Chinese relations because both countries had converging security interests. Throughout this period, Thailand's top priority was to improve and maintain its relations with China in order to get China's support against potential threat from Vietnam's aggression and China considered that friendly relations with Thailand would help to normalize China's relations with all members of ASEAN in order to against Soviet expansion (Chinwanno, 2009).

In 1990s, Thailand-China economic interactions were greatly enhanced through continuous bilateral economic and trade agreements while the Thai-U.S. relations began to drift. Having recognized China's economic importance, Thailand proposed the cooperation framework with China and, in 1999, both countries agreed to sign the Joint Statement on the Plan of Action in the 21st Century to enhance the Thai-Chinese relations. After the coup in 2006, the Thai-U.S. relations became more strained because the U.S. suspended military aid to Thailand. On the contrary, because China declared that the coup

was Thailand's internal affairs and firmly held to its non-interference policy and, moreover, China offered Thailand US$ 49 million in military credits (Storey, 2015).

Despite the weakened Thai-U.S. relations, the Thai military has sought for reengagement with the U.S. military because it has wanted to find a way to ease pressure from China's requests to further increase military engagement (Zawacki, 2017). The exchange of high-level visits of military chiefs in 2009 and 2010 paved the way for the Thai military to procure weapons and military equipment from the U.S. through the Foreign Military Sales (FMS). The current Thai-U.S. relations have slightly improved after the Trump administration relaxed its arms sale policy to Thailand, as the U.S. intends to compete with China to regain influence in Thailand (Parameswaran, 2017).

Thailand's relations with other major powers, middle powers, and multilateralism

Besides the superpowers of the U.S. and China, under the current geopolitical context, Thailand also has strong relations with other major powers including Japan, India and Russia as well as middle powers including Australia, Malaysia and Indonesia. Thailand tends to seek additional cooperation with external powers to enhance its capability to reduce, or hedge against, the economic and security pressures occasionally imposed by the U.S. and China. Busbarat (2016) and Zawacki (2017) explain that seeking alternative sources of power has always been Thailand's favorite policy to maintain its power-balancing strategy.

Established relationships between Thailand and Japan, India and Russia are diverse. Economically, Japan has been Thailand's most significant investor and top trade partner. Japan has consistently engaged with Thailand and Japan's involvement in the high-speed railway project helps Thailand reduce its dependence on Chinese investment in its large-scale infrastructure development scheme. Furthermore, the government of Japan has been trying to enhance relationships with Thailand's defence sector by establishing a mechanism for Annual Military Talks (Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). This suggests that Thailand remains a geopolitically important partner of Japan in order to maintain Japanese influence in Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, India has engaged with Thailand mainly in the areas of trade and investment. India has initiated the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and exerted great effort to promote this project to improve connectivity to Thailand, which will link Northeast India to Southeast Asia. In contrast, Russia is neither a significant investor nor trade partner with Thailand. Instead, the relationship between Thailand and Russia in the past decades has been more in security cooperation. Thailand has imported arms and military equipment from Russia since 2003. Recently, Thailand-Russia security cooperation between was further strengthened following

the signing of an inter-governmental treaty on Thai-Russian Military and Technical Cooperation (MTC) in September 2017 (Bokarev, 2017).

Likewise, Thailand has engaged with a wide range of middle-power countries including its ASEAN neighbors such as Malaysia and Indonesia, and the longstanding ally of Australia. These middle powers are emerging as key drivers of regional strategic change and they have both capacity and influence that can establish foreign policy behavior to stabilize and legitimize the global order through multilateral cooperation initiatives (Tow and Stuart, 2015). It can be seen that creating or strengthening relationships with the middle powers could help Thailand to have a more significant role and increased potential to hedge against the U.S. and China.

Result and Analysis: Thailand's Foreign Policy Strategies in an Era of the US-China Competition

To date, Thailand has opted to engage with other major powers, middle powers and multilateral institutions in order to optimize its potential of balancing the influences of the U.S. and China. Currently, Thailand's foreign policy and strategy include promoting relations with neighboring countries, countries in Southeast Asia, and strategic partners; promoting Thailand's constructive role in the ASEAN Community and the international community; and enhancing Thailand's economic competitiveness and cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015). Thailand has called on the Asia-Pacific countries to avoid the trap of choosing sides and to promote cooperation among major powers in the region (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2016). Recently, the Thai government announced Thailand's 20-Year (2017-2036) National Strategy and the Thailand 4.0 Policy and the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) scheme. Such primary strategies and policies address the issues of security and competitiveness enhancement, which largely involve strengthening the country's economy, infrastructure development, and international cooperation.

Achievement through Engagement with Other Major Powers

Thailand has maintained stable relations with Japan, India and Russia. Japan has its own interests in maintaining relations with Thailand to politically and economically compete with China in Southeast Asia. This reflects that Thailand has managed to exploit its geopolitical importance to partner with Japan to protect Thailand's interests and potential to alleviate the influence of China. Meanwhile, India's 'Act East' strategy matches well with Thailand's 'Look West' strategy, which will support each other in linking Northeast India to Southeast Asia. In the context of security cooperation, greater engagement with Japan and Russia could help Thailand's military capability development because Russian military equipment is affordable for Thailand, purchasing Russian

military equipment can address shortcomings of Thailand's modern military capabilities and Japan's current shift its security policy could allows defence industry cooperation with Thailand (Pejsova and Stanley-Lockman, 2016).

Achievement through Engagement with Middle Powers

Thailand's engagement with the middle powers including Australia, Malaysia and Indonesia, has been significant, particularly in terms of economic cooperation. The Thailand-Australia Free Trade Agreement [TAFTA] has more than doubled trade between the two countries, from US$8.1 billion in 2004-05 to US$18 billion in 2016-17 (Australian Embassy, 2018). Among ASEAN countries, Malaysia is Thailand's largest trade partner and second largest investor with a combined total trade of almost US$ 22 billion in 2017 and Indonesia is also among the top four of Thailand's largest trade partners in ASEAN the Bank of Thailand (2018). Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand have successfully promoted the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT), which will accelerate economic and social transformation in its southern provinces.

Achievement through Engagement with ASEAN

Multilateral cooperation forums such as ASEAN can bring Thailand great benefits, in terms of both economy and security. In 2017, exports to ASEAN accounted for 25% of Thailand's total trade as the trade volume grew 8.9% from 2016 to 2017 (Bank of Thailand, 2008). Thailand trades significantly with ASEAN countries while having security engagement with the ASEAN-led forums. ASEAN-led multilateral cooperation mechanism such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) has included ASEAN's eight dialogue partners —the U.S., China, Japan, India, Russia, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand— to broadly maintain the region's peace and harmony. These multilateral cooperation mechanisms have paved the way for Thailand to establish and maintain strategic cooperation with other major powers and middle powers. The ARF has the potential to serve as a diplomatic venue for multilateral discussions on regional problems, in order to share information, promote confidence-building measures, and enhance the practice of transparency. However, although ARF has managed to keep China and the U.S. engaged in the region's security dialogue, it is often criticized for its inability to respond effectively to security developments in the Asia-Pacific (Emmers, 2007). In this regard, ARF needs a new diplomatic momentum and Thailand could engage more actively in ARF activities to help attain implementation of preventive diplomacy in regional security issues.

Discussion

For decades, engagement with the other great powers has provided Thailand with broader options to promote its national interests. Mean while, Thailand's engagement with the middle powers has also been important. Engagements

with several middle-power countries has further provided Thailand with considerable potential for protecting and advancing its national interests, particularly in terms of trade and investment. In addition, the ASEAN and ASEAN-led forums are the main venues for Thailand to particularly engage with multilateral cooperation mechanisms. These forums have extensively brought significant benefits to Thailand in political, security, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions. As the country's plitical and diplomatic relations could have a significant effect on Thailand's economic development and security enhancement, this article has explored potential for greater engagement with other major powers, middle powers and multilateralism institutions in order to protect and advance Thailand's national interests, described as follows.

Potential for greater engagement with other major powers

Engagement with other great powers provides Thailand with broader options to promote its national interests. Thailand has previously engaged with Japan, India and Russia based on either economic or security reasons, or both. The main factors that drove such engagements to succeed were mutual understanding and shared interests. In the future, the ongoing interests of these major powers to be part of strategic competition in Southeast Asia will increasingly provide Thailand with opportunity for greater engagement with them.

Potential for greater engagement with middle powers

Engagements with several middle-power countries provide Thailand with considerable potential for protecting and advancing its national interests, particularly in terms of trade and investment. In the security dimension, Thailand's bilateral engagement with neighbors have brought significant benefits to the bordering areas. Furthermore, engagement with the longstanding middle power ally of Australia has provided Thailand with a broader scope and network of security cooperation. Nonetheless, the middle powers currently prefer the form of collective security within a multilateral framework.

Potential for greater engagement with multilateralism

The ASEAN Community integration initiative significantly paves the way for a further stabilized and prosperous region. Thailand has already perceived the high potential to advance its economic interests with the ASEAN Economic Community, as well as through the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (FTA) agreements with other countries outside the region. The security forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) have also provided a significant platform for the promotion of regional security.

Recommendations

Based on the above discussions, it is recommended that Thailand should focus on relationships that could best optimize Thailand's objectives in economic development and security assurance. Findings in this study suggest that bilateral cooperation is a favored option for engagement between the other major powers and Thailand. Also, to achieve its economic and security objectives, Thailand could develop its foreign policy for greater engagement with the middle powers based on shared interests and mutually agreed mechanisms. In addition to engaging with other major powers and middle powers, Thailand should have greater engagement with multilateral forums will continue to play a significant role for the improvement of Thailand's economy and security.

Conclusion

Thailand is clearly not a very large or powerful country that could effectively resist major powers' influence independently. The key finding in this article is that Thailand's future economy and security should not overly rely on relationships with the U.S. and China. Thailand's productive and cordial relations with many countries can prevent Thailand from becoming too dependent on either of these two great powers. To avoid being drawn into the growing China-U.S. competition, Thailand needs to diversify its foreign relations by strengthening relations with other major powers and middle powers, while also deepening its engagement with multilateral institutions, including ASEAN.

In the new era, Thailand should have a diverse foreign policy that constructively engages with a range of nations and multilateral institutions, including ASEAN and ASEAN-led forums. This study finds that Japan, India, and Russia are likely to increase engagement with Thailand in both economic and security dimensions. Thailand should seek greater engagement with these major powers as well as middle powers including Australia, Malaysia, and Indonesia because they could make significant contributions to influence the regional policies and behaviors of both the U.S. and China.

As ASEAN will continue to be valued and pivotal for Thailand's prosperity and security, stronger engagement with multilateral cooperation is also important for Thailand to regain its inter national recognition and increase its significant role in the multilateral institutions. The ASEAN Economic Community will continue to bring Thailand significant potential for economic development, while the ARF will increasingly become a key platform for the promotion of regional security cooperation. Thailand should actively seek greater engagement through these mechanisms to preserve and enhance its economic and security interests.

As Thailand has a priority on economic development, and in the absence of immediate

military threat, it is recommended that Thailand should focus more on promoting greater economic engagement with other major powers, middle powers and multilateral institution, particularly via the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) projects and the established Free Trade Area (FTA) agreements. Meanwhile, Thailand should maintain its security practice of balancing power in the region through its "Strategic New Equilibrium of the Asia-Pacific" policy by seeking for new strategic partners with other major powers and middle powers, bilaterally and multilaterally to reduce the impact of tensions from competing with great powers such as the U.S. and China.

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