



From Suspicion to Hostility: Thai-Chinese Relations during the Cold War through the Lens of Structural Realism (1949-1969)

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Abstract

This article explores the evolution of Thai-Chinese relations during the Cold War (1949-1969) through the theoretical lens of structural realism by employing the analytical focus from internal variables to the external structure of the international system and proving a systemic explanation for the change of state behavior between Thailand and the People's Republic of China (PRC) from mutual suspicion to overt confrontation. The study examines and analyzes three shifting periods in the trajectory of Thai-Chinese relations. The first period of mutual suspicion and strategic rebalancing (1949-1954), characterized by Thailand's alignment with the United States and its concerns over the spread of communism through overseas Chinese communities to against China's ideological influence. The second period of diplomatic overtures and temporary détente (1955-1959), meeting between Thailand and China delegation plays an important role for backchannel diplomacy. The third period of overt hostility (1960-1969), regional conflicts such as Laos crisis amplified ideological divides to Thailand and China's diplomatic rapprochement struggle. These three periods between 1949 and 1969 reflect the adjustment of policies and strategies in both countries in response to the pressures from the structure of the constantly changing international system. While internal ideological and political factors influenced state behavior to some extent, the article argues that the major factor shaping the policies of both countries was the severely polarized and anarchic structure of the international order, defined by bipolarity and the asymmetrical distribution of power. In addition, this study identifies the underlying structural conditions that accelerated the downturn in Thai-Chinese relations and examines their broader implications for how small states position themselves within global power structures.

Keywords: Thai-Chinese relations, Cold War, Structural realism, Hostility, Small state

Introduction

The relationship between Thailand and China is historically extensive and intricate. Since the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya periods, Thailand has engaged in diplomatic, commercial, and cultural interactions with Chinese dynasties. Specifically, during the Ming and Qing dynasties, Thailand dispatched contributions, to which China reciprocated with amicable relations under the tributary system. Moreover, the role of overseas Chinese who settled in Thailand was significant in stimulating the private sector's economy and trade, as well as in their integration into Thai society throughout the early 20th century (Skinner, 1957). During the absolute monarchy period, Kings Rama V and VI adopted a lenient approach towards the



Chinese, since China lacked a definitive political influence in Southeast Asia. Consequently, the relationship persisted at an informal friendship level, mostly concentrating on economics, immigration, and culture. Nonetheless, the circumstances began to alter following the governmental transition in Thailand in 1932 and intensified when World War II ended and China officially commenced the Communist Party era in 1949.

Since World War II ended in 1945, the system of superpower relations and the world political structure entered a state of competition and power struggle, especially between superpowers such as the United States and the Soviet Union, which had different political, economic, and social ideologies. As a result, the international structure was divided into two power camps: the liberal camp led by the United States and the communist camp led by the Soviet Union. The changes in the world order during this period had a profound impact on the bilateral relations of various states, especially in the case of Thailand and the People's Republic of China (PRC), which was established in 1949 by the Communist Party of China (CPC) under the rule of Chairman Mao Zedong. The Cold War impact of such changes and the increasing conflict between the two superpowers caused the relationship between Thailand and China at that time to change from mutual suspicion to open confrontation. Although at times both countries attempted to ease the tension in the relationship through alternative diplomatic channels, it could not be improved (Chinvanno, 1991). However, although the relationship between Thailand and China during the Cold War has been studied in various aspects, both historically, diplomatically, and ideologically, there is still a need to explain theoretically why a small state like Thailand chose to pursue different policies at different times, even though domestic factors did not change much, and why Thailand changed its hostile stance towards China in the early stages of the Cold War.

This article aims to analyze the development of Thai-Chinese relations between 1949 and 1969 and examine the structural factors that influenced the adjustment of the two countries' policies and behaviors in order to show how a small state like Thailand and an emerging communist superpower like China pursued their foreign strategies against each other under the anarchic world system and the unbalanced distribution of power during the Cold War. To provide a clearer scenario of the changes in Thai-Chinese relations during the Cold War conflict, this article divides the study of the development of Thai-Chinese relations into three important periods: First period (1949–1954): Distrust and strategic rebalancing; second period (1955–1959): Diplomatic initiatives and temporary easing; third period (1960–1969): Open hostility. This study also employs Kenneth Waltz's (1979) analytical approach and conceptual framework of structural realism to elucidate the anarchic behavior of states in the international system. This anarchy stems from the lack of a global governing body, forcing states to rely on their own means of survival. Self-help states want to balance power so that no state dominates with the balance of power approach, including creating their own security that may create suspicion in others, as a security dilemma. This conceptual framework complements the hypothesis and make it clear that the behavior and policy implementation of Thailand and China do not only come from differences in ideology or leadership perceptions but are also mainly influenced by changes in the global structure throughout the Cold War era.



Research objective

1. to study the evolution of Thai-Chinese relations during the Cold War (1949-1969) through the theoretical lens of structural realism

Structural Realism: An Theoretical Framework for Analysis

Structural realism, or neorealism, explains international relations by arguing that states have different abilities and an anarchical state system. It also focuses on the relationships between the world's major powers, which determine the results of international politics. Since the 1970s, there has been a broad use of neorealism to investigate and interpret the connection between superpowers' struggles and nations' politics. Kenneth Waltz (1979);Mearsheimer (2001) indicate that the bipolar systems are inherently more stable and conducive to peace than multipolar arrangements.

In this theory, the international system's structure, not human nature, is a significant determinant of actor behaviors. States are self-interest-oriented and anarchic, and the competitive system pushes them to favor self-help a state's reliance on its abilities and resources, rather than external aid, to ensure security and survival over cooperation. States are rational actors, selecting strategies to maximize benefits and minimize losses. States see other actors as potential adversaries and threats to their security. This distrust and fear create a security dilemma, and this motivated the policies of most states. People use Kenneth Waltz's theory of international politics to explain how things work, what factors affect them, and how countries act. This theory modifies the power politics model by highlighting the structural limitations of the international system. Waltz developed his paradigm into 'three levels of analysis': the human individual, the state, and the international system. This limitation of classical realism stemmed from its inability to explain behavior beyond the state level. The "inside-out" perspective poses a problem for any endogenous variable. On the other hand, structural realism can explain state behavior by examining the structure of the international system from an external factor, or outside-in, perspective.

Additionally, Kenneth Waltz outlines the idea of the 'third image' and points out that states are unitary and logical actors. The environment and conditions of international anarchy influence all states to seek to survive and protect their interests by increasing and exercising their power and capabilities. Suspicion, fear, hostility, and insecurity underscore the relationship among states. Because of the disparity in power and capability, each state makes distinct foreign policy decisions to safeguard its interests amidst the uncertainty of other states' actions. However, the main argument is that neither classical realists nor neorealists consider the domestic factor significant enough to influence a state's behaviors. They do not consider a state's local political considerations, such as a state's political system and strong political characters' perspectives, to influence a foreign policy. Some neo-realists argue that while states may have different political systems, they will behave similarly as long as they find themselves in comparable conditions in the international system.

Through this perspective, structural realism serves as an essential framework for comprehending Thai-Chinese relations throughout the Cold War era. Consequently, the



emphasis of analysis transitions from the internal politics and ideologies of both nations to the wider international framework that influenced their strategic decisions, including alliance selections, threat evaluations, and regional perspectives. The early phase of Thai–Chinese relations from 1949 to 1969, characterized by significant mistrust and strategic realignment due to the complexities of a bifurcated international system, is particularly conducive to the analysis of this theoretical paradigm.

Mutual Suspicion and Strategic Realignment (1949-1954)

At the initial stage of the Cold War, Thai perceptions of the People's Republic of China (PRC) were characterized by heightened suspicion and strategic concern. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Thai government under Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram showed its suspicion of China, especially regarding the issue of Chinese interference through overseas Chinese in Thailand. The Thai government believed that China might use its networks to incite the Thai communist movement that had been established since 1942. Thailand's response proceeded in the form of cultural and social control measures, such as the closure of more than 300 Chinese schools, the control of the media, and the arrest of Chinese leaders in Thailand, claiming that they were involved in ideological incitement from abroad (Gurtov, 1975). Until 1952, the Prevention of Communist Act was promulgated, which imposed severe penalties on any person or group directly or indirectly involved in communist activities. Even at the beginning of the Cold War, Thailand did not play a prominent role in the international arena. However, due to its geographical location adjacent to Laos, Burma, and Vietnam, Thailand has high strategic significance in the eyes of the United States, which has led to Thailand receiving both military and economic support through various programs, such as the MSA (Mutual Security Act) and technical assistance programs (Buszynski, 1983). This assistance has enabled Thailand to enhance its ability to control internal affairs and effectively counter Chinese influence.

On the other hand, China itself has responded to Thailand's actions by condemning them through diplomatic channels and state media such as the People's Daily and Xinhua News Agency, accusing Thailand of violating the human rights of Chinese citizens and acting under the orders of the United States (Jain, 1984). Moreover, China sent an official protest message to the Thai government in 1950, demanding the release of imprisoned Chinese and calling for Thailand to respect the rights of overseas Chinese (Xinhua, 1950). China's accusations are aimed at Thailand and directly criticize the United States as an imperialist who attempts to turn Thailand into a base for attacking China (Zhai, 2000). This accusation not only emphasizes the idea that Asia resists Western imperialism but also reflects China's attempt to communicate its image as a state that protects the interests of Asians. China's policies during this period also included promoting the concept of peace and coexistence, which became China's main diplomatic strategy to identify allies in the Third World countries. However, these policies could not change Thailand's position in the short term, as Thailand viewed alliance with the United States as the best security guarantee under the world structure at that time.

The strategic rift deepened further in 1954 when Thailand formally joined the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), an anti-communist alliance led by the United



States. Thailand's decision to join SEATO was a clear indication of its choice in the global conflict. The move marked a clear alignment with the Western bloc and reinforced China's perception of Thailand as a hostile actor in the region (Buszynski, 1983). From China's perspective, the establishment of SEATO violated the Geneva Agreement and was a tool of imperialism that attempted to control the Southeast Asian region by using countries like Thailand and the Philippines as proxies. China responded by strengthening relations with neutral neighboring countries such as Burma, India, and Cambodia to create a new balance of power. In addition, joining SEATO affected Thailand's long-term security strategy, such as the establishment of a US military base there and its reliance on US military technology. Thailand reasoned that its strategy was to ensure survival from the communist threat, which was inevitably linked to China.

From a structuralist perspective, the behavior of both Thailand and China during 1949–1954 can be interpreted as strategic adaptation within a bipolar and anarchic international system. Thailand's actions were not solely driven by anti-communist ideology or domestic policy but were calculated responses to external structural pressures, especially the necessity of aligning with a superpower to ensure national survival (Waltz, 1979). Similarly, China's behavior was constrained by its limited influence in a world order dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union. In this context, both countries adopted pragmatic strategies that, while sometimes ideologically inconsistent, served as necessary tools for navigating the Cold War's zero-sum geopolitical environment. Their policy decisions reflect a deeper logic of survival and balance-seeking, rather than purely ideological confrontation.

Diplomatic Overtures and Temporary Détente (1955-1959)

Although the early part of the Cold War was dominated by polarization and suspicion between Thailand and China, in the mid-1950s, some changes occurred that led to the opening of new areas of diplomacy between the two countries. Although state-level relations still lacked official diplomatic recognition, shadow diplomacy and people's diplomacy began to play an increasingly important role in order to alleviate tensions in a system still under the pressure of bipolar structures.

In 1955, the Bandung Conference marked the opening of new diplomatic channels rooted in the spirit of peaceful coexistence between Thailand and China. China's foreign policy under the leadership of Premier and Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai aimed to promote the principle of peaceful coexistence as a means of reshaping China's image among Asian and African countries (Zhou, 1955). On the Thai side, the appointment of Foreign Minister Prince Wan Waithayakorn to be the head of the delegation of the government of Field Marshal P. Phibunsongkhram reflected Thailand's determination to maintain its anti-communist stance but indicated a willingness to participate in regional initiatives. At the conference, Zhou Enlai utilized the forum to build confidence that China did not intend to invade any country, especially Thailand and the Philippines, which were identified as countries that fear China (Gurtov, 1975). He proposed that the Thai side send a delegation to visit the Thai Autonomous Region in Yunnan Province to demonstrate China's peaceful intentions and convince them that China had no plans to undermine Thailand's security (Jain, 1984). China's behavior at the Bandung Forum reflected a strategy to reduce resistance from neighboring states and to seek



new allies in the Third World, a move that responded to the strategic constraints China faced in a bipolar system that was not conducive to direct negotiations with great powers (Waltz, 1979).

Following this, informal outcomes from Bandung led to secret Thai-Chinese missions that embodied early forms of shadow diplomacy. In September 1955, Thailand's prime minister sent Sang Phathanothai, a close advisor, with his two sons and daughters; he traveled to China as a political tribute to strengthen relations with the Beijing government and entrusted his children to Zhou Enlai as a gesture of diplomatic goodwill (Phathanothai, 2006). This unofficial visit by the Thai delegation resulted in meetings with senior Chinese leaders, including Chairman Mao Zedong and other Chinese Communist Party leaders, who expressed their friendliness and expressed their intention to enhance relations with Thailand under the framework of mutual interests, especially in economic matters such as rice and tobacco trade (Jain, 1984). Although the mission did not lead to the official restoration of diplomatic relations, it was the beginning of high-level, backchannel diplomacy in which both sides assessed their long-term strategic interests. The delegation did not overlook the limitations imposed by its ideological supporters.

In parallel, cultural and semi-secret trade exchanges functioned as important bridges in easing bilateral tensions. For instance, in 1957, the Chinese trade representative agreed to purchase Thai rice at a price higher than the market price as a gesture of friendship, while a Thai troupe performed in Beijing. Although these did not go through official diplomatic channels, they reflected China's strategic shift from confrontation to positive motivation. In Thailand's view, these policies temporarily eased tensions and allowed some elites, especially business groups and high-ranking officials, to see the benefits of maintaining semi-official relations with China while not abandoning their security ally, the United States (Buszynski, 1983).

Although the period 1955-1959 witnessed positive developments between Thailand and China, structural changes in the relationship were still limited, as Thailand could not completely escape from its strategic obligations to the United States. And China was also concerned about Thailand's support for SEATO and the South Vietnamese military (Whiting, 1968). From a structuralist perspective, Thailand's behavior during this period reflected a strategic adjustment that attempted to reduce the impact from China while maintaining security benefits from its former allies. Shadow diplomacy thus became a tool to maintain the balance of power for small states that had to survive in the midst of great power conflicts.

Thailand and China's Overt Hostility (1960-1969)

The 1960s were a period when Thai-Chinese relations changed from mutual suspicion to overt confrontation. The tensions during this period were not limited to the bilateral level between Thailand and China but were the result of the confrontation between the ideological camps of the Cold War that encroached on the Southeast Asian region, especially when the crises in Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia began to escalate. Such situations led Thailand to adjust its strategy to rely fully on the United States, while China itself increased its support for revolutionary movements in the region.



One of the most significant developments contributing to this rapid deterioration was the Lao crisis, which underscored the deepening American-Thai alliance. During 1959–1962, the Thai government, under Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, supported conservative groups in Laos that opposed the Pathet Lao Party, which was supported by China and North Vietnam (Zhai, 2000). Thailand became a base of operations for the US military. In transporting weapons and supplies to the right-wing in Laos, China accused Thailand of violating the Geneva Accords and being an agent of imperialism in Southeast Asia (Whiting, 1968).

From China's perspective, the Lao crisis was not just an internal conflict but also a front for an ideological invasion by the Free World Alliance aimed at encircling China. China viewed Thailand as a proxy actor employed by the United States to contain China's influence in Indochina, which led to China's increasingly aggressive stance towards Thailand (Zhou, 1965). As tensions escalated, China responded by intensifying its operational support for the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). At the operational level, China systematically increased its support for the Communist Party of Thailand, especially after 1964, when it supported the establishment of the Thai Patriotic Front and the Thai People's Liberation Army, which operated from bases in Yunnan Province (Peking Review, 1964). These groups published clear policy statements that aimed to overthrow the Thai government, which they accused of colluding with American imperialism, and to promote a socialist revolution in Thailand. China's approach during this period was consistent with Mao Zedong's rural revolution strategy, which aimed to spread political influence through the communist parties in neighboring countries, which was an extension of the people's war to Southeast Asia (Peking Review, 1967). In response, Thailand deepened its strategic ties with the United States and SEATO to counteract Chinese influence.

In return, Thailand countered by establishing intensive military cooperation with the United States, especially by signing the Thanat-Rusk Joint Communiqué in 1962, which confirmed that the United States would provide protection to Thailand under the framework of SEATO if Thailand was attacked by the communists (Buszynski, 1983). This agreement paved the way for the establishment of several US military bases in Thailand, such as Udonthani, Ubonratchathani, and Nakhonratchasima, which were later used as bases for dropping bombers during the Vietnam War. In addition, the Thai government pursued a strong anti-communist policy domestically through the suppression of leftist movements in the countryside, the establishment of special operations units, and anti-communist campaigns at the community and educational institution levels, with the idea that communism is a threat that must be contained and eliminated completely.

Under the structuralist framework, the Thai-Chinese conflict in the 1960s was a result of pressures in a clearly polarized international system. A small state like Thailand had no choice but to adhere to alliances with great powers to prevent aggression and maintain internal stability. Meanwhile, China, isolated on the world stage after the crisis with the Soviet Union, turned to a strategy of supporting revolution in small states to reduce the influence of the United States in the region. This structural confrontation did not create space for diplomatic negotiations or cooperation but instead promoted clashes and power competition at the regional level. Thai-Chinese relations were thus severely disrupted until strategic changes on



the world stage occurred in the early 1970s, such as the adjustment of the US policy towards China (Nixon's China policy) and the transition of leaders in Thailand.

Conclusion

The article aims to illustrate that dependence exclusively on ideological or bilateral viewpoints is inadequate for a comprehensive understanding of the development of Thai-Chinese relations during the initial phase of the Cold War (1949-1969). The implementation of structural realism, particularly as defined by Kenneth Waltz in his international politics theory, demonstrates that the foreign policies of Thailand and the People's Republic of China (PRC) were shaped by systemic factors inherent to a bipolar and anarchic international system. The study's tripartite division illustrates that Thailand, as a small state, modified its policies not because of internal ideological changes, but instead as a reaction to its structural position within the Cold War framework. This aspect of the study proved to be particularly fascinating. In the initial phase, spanning from 1949 to 1954, the context was significantly influenced by Thailand's resistance to communism and its strategic partnership with the United States. This response emerged due to the nation's apprehensions regarding the influence and dissemination of revolutionary concepts originating from China's expatriate population. During the second phase, which lasted from 1955 to 1959, a limited degree of détente was achieved through the use of shadow diplomacy and informal encounters, particularly in the aftermath of the Bandung Conference. In spite of this, the essential strategic partnerships did not undergo any adjustments as a consequence of these developments. The level of explicit animosity obviously escalated during the third phase, which occurred from 1960 to 1969. Due to regional battles in Laos and Vietnam getting worse, both countries strengthened their ties with groups that were at odds with each other, which led to this development. The bipolar system constrained the diplomatic alternatives for smaller countries while exacerbating regional conflicts simultaneously. To ensure its survival, Thailand adopted a pragmatic strategy and established alliances with the United States. Conversely, China sought to advance its revolutionary objective by endorsing communist factions. The situation of Thai-Chinese relations in the early Cold War illustrates how structural pressures can take precedence over ideological or cultural similarities. This brings to light the importance of strategic flexibility and pragmatic diplomacy for smaller states operating within an anarchic international system under the great power competition.

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