
Research Articles

Thailand's Hedging Strategy towards the United States and China in the South China Sea Context: 2020-2025

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Abstract

This article examines Thailand's hedging strategy between the United States and the People's Republic of China during 2020–2025, with particular attention to the implications of intensifying U.S.-China strategic competition and tensions in the South China Sea. The study aims to examine Thailand's hedging strategy, analyze how U.S.-China competition influences Thailand's economic, security, and diplomatic policies, and assess the role of ASEAN Centrality in supporting Thailand's strategic autonomy. The study employs a qualitative research methodology based on documentary analysis, historical interpretation, and policy analysis. The study population consists of relevant government policies, official statements, diplomatic documents, regional agreements, and secondary literature concerning Thailand, the United States, China, and ASEAN during the study period. Purposively selected documents and policy materials constitute the analytical sample. Data were collected through documentary research and analyzed thematically to identify patterns in Thailand's economic, security, diplomatic, and regional strategies. The findings indicate that U.S.-China competition has become multidimensional, encompassing military security, trade, technology, infrastructure, supply chains, soft power, and regional institutional influence. Thailand has responded by pursuing a flexible hedging strategy rather than aligning exclusively with either power. This strategy

combines pragmatic economic cooperation with China, continued security cooperation with the United States and other partners, and engagement with ASEAN-led mechanisms as a strategic buffer. The study concludes that hedging and ASEAN Centrality enable Thailand to preserve strategic autonomy, maintain economic opportunities, and enhance its bargaining power. However, this strategy remains vulnerable to intensified great-power rivalry, economic and technological decoupling, and weakened ASEAN unity.

Keywords: Hedging strategy, Thailand, United States, China, South China Sea, ASEAN

Introduction

Strategic competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China has increasingly shaped Southeast Asia's regional security environment. The South China Sea is particularly important because it involves maritime security, freedom of navigation, supply chains, energy routes, and regional stability. Although Thailand is not a claimant state, its economic and strategic interests depend on open sea lanes, stable regional relations, and uninterrupted trade (Council on Foreign Relations [CFR], 2024; Vo et al., 2023).

Between 2020 and 2025, U.S.-China rivalry intensified through the COVID-19 pandemic, supply-chain disruptions, technological competition, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, China's expanding maritime role, and U.S. freedom-of-navigation operations. These developments created strategic challenges for Thailand as a middle power. Thailand maintained security cooperation with the United States while simultaneously deepening economic and infrastructural relations with China through trade, investment, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Such behavior cannot be fully explained by simple balancing or bandwagoning and is better understood through the concept of hedging (He & Feng, 2023; Kuik, 2024; Bunyavejchewin & Buddharaksa, 2024).

Although existing research has examined U.S.-China competition and hedging in Southeast Asia, less attention has been given to how a non-claimant middle power such as Thailand uses hedging in the South China Sea strategic environment. In particular, the 2020-2025 period requires greater attention because competition expanded beyond traditional security issues into technology, supply chains, clean energy, digital infrastructure, and maritime governance (MFA, 2025a; Poonkham, 2024; Zhao, 2025).

This study therefore examines how Thailand employed hedging between the United States and China during 2020-2025 and how this strategy contributed to protecting Thailand's national interests. The Thai case demonstrates how a non-claimant middle power can maintain strategic flexibility, benefit from relations with competing great powers, and reduce the risks associated with choosing one side.

Objective

1. To examine Thailand's hedging strategy between the United States and China during 2020–2025.
2. To analyze how U.S.-China competition affects Thailand's economic, security, and diplomatic policies.
3. To assess the role of ASEAN Centrality in supporting Thailand's strategic autonomy.

Literature Review

This study examines Thailand's hedging strategy between the United States and China during 2020–2025 through the perspectives of neorealism, balance-of-power theory, and hedging theory. Neorealism views the international system as anarchic and argues that states must manage relations with major powers to protect their security and autonomy (Waltz, 1979). Balance-of-power theory further explains how states respond to changes in the distribution of power and perceived threats (Walt, 1987; Mearsheimer, 2001). However, these theories alone may not fully explain the behavior of middle and smaller states that simultaneously cooperate with competing great powers.

The concept of hedging provides a more suitable explanation for Thailand's foreign-policy behavior. Hedging refers to a strategy in which states maintain relationships with competing major powers while avoiding excessive dependence on either side. (Kuik, 2021) conceptualizes hedging as insurance-seeking behavior under conditions of uncertainty and high stakes. He and Feng (2023) similarly argue that Indo-Pacific states may combine economic cooperation with one great power and security cooperation with another in order to preserve strategic flexibility.

Thus, hedging differs from balancing or bandwagoning because it allows states to obtain benefits from multiple powers while maintaining fallback options.

In Thailand's case, hedging can be examined through three dimensions. First, economic pragmatism refers to maintaining economic relations with China, the United States, and other partners to maximize economic opportunities and reduce dependence on a single power. Relevant indicators include trade, foreign direct investment, infrastructure, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). Second, soft or indirect balancing refers to maintaining security cooperation with the United States and other partners without directly confronting China. Military exercises, defense cooperation, maritime security, information exchange, and capacity-building are relevant indicators. Third, strategic buffering refers to using multilateral institutions and international rules to reduce pressure from great-power rivalry (Kuik, 2022; Nedic, 2022; Pujol, 2024).

ASEAN Centrality is particularly important to this framework because it provides Thailand with institutional mechanisms for managing relations with competing powers. ASEAN-led platforms, including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), East Asia Summit (EAS), and ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), allow Thailand to engage both the United States and China through multilateral diplomacy. These institutions can therefore function as strategic buffers that support Thailand's autonomy and reduce pressure to choose sides.

Existing literature provides important insights into Southeast Asian hedging, but there is a need for greater attention to Thailand during 2020–2025, particularly regarding how economic, security, and diplomatic policies interact. The period is significant because of intensified U.S.-China competition, post-pandemic economic changes, supply-chain concerns, and evolving Indo-Pacific security dynamics. This study addresses this gap by examining Thailand's hedging strategy across these three policy dimensions and assessing how ASEAN Centrality contributes to its strategic autonomy.

The theoretical framework therefore proposes that U.S.-China competition creates strategic uncertainty and pressure for Thailand, encouraging a hedging strategy based on economic pragmatism, indirect security balancing, and ASEAN-based strategic buffering. These

strategies enable Thailand to maintain constructive relations with both major powers while preserving flexibility and strategic autonomy.

Table 1 Analytical framework for Thailand's hedging strategy

Analytical dimension	Core meaning	Illustrative indicators
Economic pragmatism	Uses economic cooperation to create opportunities and reduce the costs of great-power rivalry.	Trade, investment, BRI, RCEP, IPEF, FDI, and partner diversification.
Soft/indirect balancing	Preserves security cooperation with the United States and other partners without direct confrontation with China.	Exercises, information exchange, maritime security, disaster relief, and capacity-building.
Strategic buffering	Uses ASEAN-led mechanisms and international law as buffers against great-power pressure.	ASEAN Centrality, AOIP, ARF, ADMM-Plus, EAS, and freedom of navigation.

Source: Developed by the author based on (Kuik, 2016), He and Feng (2023), and Pujol (2024).

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, using documentary research, historical analysis, and policy analysis to examine Thailand's hedging strategy amid U.S.-China competition in the South China Sea during 2020–2025. The study does not regard 2020 as the beginning of the South China Sea dispute. Instead, it is selected as an analytical starting point because the post-COVID-19 period intensified great-power competition beyond traditional security and trade to include technology, supply chains, public health, and competing international norms (Bowen, 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Zhao, 2025).

The study population and sample consist of publicly available documents and scholarly materials concerning Thailand, the United States, China, ASEAN, and the South China Sea. A purposive selection technique is used to identify sources that are directly relevant to Thailand's foreign policy, strategic behavior, economic relations, security cooperation, and multilateral diplomacy during the 2020–2025 period. The sample includes government policy documents, official statements, security and policy reports, academic journal articles, think-tank publications, and other credible analytical materials.

The primary research tool is a structured documentary data-recording form. Information is classified according to the time period, event, source, and three analytical dimensions: economic cooperation, security cooperation, and the use of multilateral mechanisms. This framework provides a consistent basis for comparing Thailand's interactions with both the United States and China.

The research procedure involves collecting relevant documents, screening them according to their relevance and credibility, organizing the evidence according to the analytical framework, and systematically comparing policy statements with observable policy behavior. Data are collected entirely through documentary and secondary sources, with no primary interviews or surveys conducted.

For data analysis, the study applies thematic synthesis to identify recurring patterns in Thailand's hedging behavior, the conditions influencing its policy choices, and the national interests affected by its strategy. The findings are organized around four key themes: U.S.-China competition, Thailand's hedging pattern, factors shaping its strategic choices, and the effectiveness and limitations of hedging (Bowen, 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Analytical reliability is strengthened through source triangulation and comparison of official positions with actual patterns of cooperation. This approach recognizes that hedging may be demonstrated through repeated policy behavior across economic, security, and diplomatic domains rather than through explicit declarations of alignment (Kuik, 2024; Pujol, 2024).

Results

The nature of U.S.-China strategic competition

The first finding is that U.S.-China competition in Southeast Asia during 2020-2025 has become multidimensional. It is no longer confined to military rivalry but includes trade, infrastructure, technology, energy, public health, soft power, and influence over regional institutions. The South China Sea most clearly reflects this competition because it connects sea lines of communication, energy routes, military power, and the principles of international law (CFR, 2024; Vo et al., 2023; Zha, 2023).

In the security dimension, the United States emphasizes freedom of navigation, defense cooperation with allies and partners, and support for a rules-based international order. China, by contrast, has expanded maritime power, strengthened military capabilities, and increased influence in contested areas to protect its perceived interests. This rivalry turns the South China Sea into a testing ground for regional leadership and increases pressure on ASEAN states to manage their policy positions carefully (Hassan & Ali, 2025; Nguyen & Le, 2026; Sasaki, 2025).

In the economic dimension, China uses trade, investment, the BRI, RCEP, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and infrastructure cooperation to expand long-term influence. The United States relies on export markets, high-quality investment, advanced technology, and Indo-Pacific economic cooperation to sustain its role. ASEAN countries therefore face a situation in which economic interests and security interests do not always align with the same great power (MFA, 2025b; Rajesh & Deshpande, 2025; Swaspitchayaskun & Surakitbovorn, 2023).

In the diplomatic and institutional dimension, both great powers seek to shape the legitimacy and rules of the regional order. The United States promotes the Indo-Pacific framework, alliance networks, and rules-based principles, whereas China uses bilateral relations and economic frameworks to increase its weight within ASEAN. This competition challenges ASEAN Centrality, particularly when internal divisions expose member states to stronger bilateral pressure from external powers (Sanglee, 2025; Venkatachalam, 2022; Zha, 2023).

Thailand's hedging pattern

The second finding is that Thailand's strategy toward the South China Sea reflects hedging. Thailand does not openly align with either the United States or China; instead, it preserves relations with both sides in order to protect national interests. This non-alignment should not be interpreted as passive neutrality. It is better understood as strategic neutrality aimed at preserving Thailand's room for policy maneuver (Feng & Netkhunakorn, 2024; Kuik, 2024; Siriarkkalarp & Poonkham, 2020).

First, Thailand avoids rigid alignment with either side. It avoids positions that would make it appear to be part of a containment strategy against China, while also refraining from unconditionally accepting Chinese regional predominance. This posture allows Thailand to continue security cooperation with the United States while preserving economic benefits and diplomatic relations with China (He & Feng, 2023; Kuik, 2021, 2024; Murphy, 2010).

Second, Thailand maintains economic cooperation with China. China remains important to Thailand in terms of trade, investment, infrastructure, supply chains, clean energy, and technology. Severing ties with China or adopting an overtly confrontational posture toward it would undermine Thailand's economic interests. However, such cooperation must be accompanied by diversification toward the United States, Japan, Australia, India, the European Union, South Korea, and other partners in order to prevent excessive dependence on China (Bunyavejchewin & Buddharaksa, 2024; MFA, 2025a, 2025b; Swaspitchayaskun & Surakitbovorn, 2023).

Third, Thailand preserves security cooperation with the United States and other partners. Security ties with the United States help Thailand enhance capabilities, increase strategic options, and remain connected to regional security arrangements. At the same time, such cooperation should emphasize non-provocative areas such as search and rescue, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, maritime safety, information exchange, and professional training (Everhart, 2024; Poonkham, 2024; Taim, 2025).

Fourth, Thailand uses ASEAN as a strategic buffer. ASEAN Centrality, AOIP, ARF, ADMM-Plus, EAS, and RCEP provide platforms that reduce pressure from great-power rivalry. Operating through ASEAN helps Thailand avoid direct bilateral pressure and support principles consistent

with its national interests, including freedom of navigation, non-use of force, and peaceful settlement of disputes (MFA, 2025a; Sanglee, 2025; Venkatachalam, 2022).

The resulting strategy is best described as compartmentalized hedging. Rather than placing all issues under one grand alignment choice, Thailand separates economic, security, technological, and institutional relationships into different baskets. This compartmentalization enables Thailand to receive benefits from different partners while reducing the likelihood that cooperation in one field will automatically dictate its position in another. However, this approach becomes more difficult when great-power competition links previously separate issues, such as technology standards, maritime security, and supply-chain restructuring (Kuik, 2024; Lim & Roberts, 2026; Zhao, 2025).

This pattern shows that Thailand's hedging is not evenly distributed across all policy areas. In economic policy, Thailand tends to emphasize opportunity maximization and practical cooperation, particularly where infrastructure, investment, tourism, and industrial upgrading are concerned. In security policy, Thailand tends to proceed more cautiously by maintaining long-standing defense cooperation while avoiding language that would directly frame China as a threat. In regional diplomacy, Thailand relies on ASEAN language, including neutrality, inclusiveness, and peaceful dispute settlement, to create a multilateral cover for its national position (Feng & Netkhunakorn, 2024; Poonkham, 2024; Swaspitchayaskun & Surakitbovorn, 2023).

Table 2 Summary of Thailand's hedging strategy in the South China Sea context

Component	Objective	Instrument	Effect on national interests
Non-alignment	Preserve policy space.	Balanced posture and strategic neutrality.	Reduces the risk of being drawn into conflict.
Economic ties with China	Sustain trade and investment opportunities.	BRI, RCEP, infrastructure, clean energy.	Maintains growth and regional connectivity.

Component	Objective	Instrument	Effect on national interests
Security ties with the United States and partners	Increase strategic options and capabilities.	Exercises, maritime security, disaster relief.	Strengthens security without direct confrontation.
ASEAN mechanisms	Reduce bilateral pressure.	ASEAN Centrality, AOIP, ARF, ADMM-Plus, EAS.	Creates institutional buffers and regional stability.

Source: Developed by the author based on Kuik (2024), Feng and Netkhunakorn (2024), Poonkham (2024), and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand (2025a, 2025b).

Strategic factors shaping Thailand's foreign policy

The third finding is that Thailand's foreign policy is shaped by several interrelated strategic factors. The first factor is economic interest and trade dependence. China and the United States matter to Thailand in different ways: China is crucial for trade, investment, infrastructure, and supply chains, while the United States is important as an export market, source of high-quality investment, technological partner, and economic-standard setter. Choosing one side could therefore undermine important interests linked to the other (MFA, 2025a; Swaspitchayaskun & Surakitbovorn, 2023).

The second factor is maritime security and sea lines of communication. Although Thailand is not a claimant state in the South China Sea, the area is closely connected to international trade, energy transportation, supply chains, and regional stability. Any military clash or disruption of maritime routes would inevitably affect the Thai economy. Thailand therefore has a national interest in supporting freedom of navigation and peaceful dispute settlement (CFR, 2024; Mia et al., 2024; Sasaki, 2025).

The third factor is ASEAN's role. If ASEAN remains united, Thailand gains diplomatic space to reduce pressure from both Washington and Beijing. If ASEAN becomes divided, Thailand will face more bilateral pressure. Supporting ASEAN Centrality is therefore not merely diplomatic rhetoric; it is an instrument through which a middle state can preserve bargaining power (Sanglee, 2025; Venkatachalam, 2022).

The fourth factor is the expansion of great-power competition beyond the South China Sea. Trade wars, technological rivalry, supply-chain decoupling, green-energy competition, tensions in the Taiwan Strait, and digital standards all complicate hedging. Some issues may force states to choose standards, systems, or platforms that are not fully interoperable (Lim & Roberts, 2026; Zhao, 2025).

Effectiveness and limitations of the strategy

The fourth finding is that Thailand's hedging strategy has been moderately effective in protecting national interests. First, it helps preserve Thailand's strategic autonomy because Thailand is not locked into one great-power camp and can select forms of cooperation according to changing circumstances. This is consistent with the broader literature on hedging as a strategy of preserving fallback options under uncertainty (He & Feng, 2023; Kuik, 2021, 2024).

Second, hedging helps protect economic interests. Thailand can benefit from China's markets, investment, infrastructure, technology, and regional connectivity while maintaining relations with the United States as an export market, source of high-quality investment, and technology partner. Such diversification reduces vulnerability to overdependence on any single great power (MFA, 2025a, 2025b; Swaspitchayaskun & Surakitbovorn, 2023).

Third, hedging reduces security risks. Thailand can avoid direct involvement in South China Sea conflicts while still supporting principles aligned with its interests, such as freedom of navigation, non-use of force, and respect for international law. ASEAN-led multilateralism also provides a forum through which Thailand can reduce direct pressure from great powers (CFR, 2024; Sanglee, 2025; Venkatachalam, 2022).

Nevertheless, hedging has important limitations. If U.S.-China competition intensifies, Thailand may face stronger pressure to choose sides, particularly over the South China Sea or the Taiwan Strait. If Thailand appears too close to China, it may be perceived as leaning toward Beijing; if it deepens security cooperation with the United States too visibly, China may view it as part of a containment strategy. Finally, if ASEAN loses unity, Thailand may lose a crucial institutional buffer against great-power pressure (Kuik, 2024; Lim & Roberts, 2026; Zhao, 2025).

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Thailand's policy toward the United States and China during 2020–2025 is best understood as a hedging strategy rather than indecision or neutrality. This strategy reflects Thailand's attempt to manage risks and preserve strategic autonomy amid intensifying U.S.-China competition. As Kuik (2024) argues, hedging allows middle and smaller powers to avoid excessive dependence on a single great power while maintaining beneficial relationships with competing powers. Thailand's approach is therefore neither hard balancing against China nor bandwagoning with Beijing or Washington. Instead, it involves maintaining flexibility across economic, security, diplomatic, and institutional dimensions (He & Feng, 2023; Figiaconi, 2025).

Regarding the first objective, Thailand's hedging strategy is evident in its simultaneous engagement with both great powers. Economically, Thailand maintains extensive trade and investment relations with China while also preserving strong economic ties with the United States and other partners. In security affairs, Thailand continues its longstanding alliance relationship with Washington, including military cooperation, while also developing defence and security cooperation with China. Diplomatically, Thailand avoids taking strongly confrontational positions toward either power and instead emphasizes dialogue, peaceful dispute settlement, and ASEAN mechanisms. This approach is particularly significant in the South China Sea, where Thailand is not a claimant and therefore has fewer incentives to directly confront China. Nevertheless, Thailand has an interest in regional stability, freedom of navigation, and respect for international law (CFR, 2024; MFA, 2025).

The second objective highlights how U.S.-China competition affects Thailand's economic, security, and diplomatic policies. Intensifying rivalry creates both opportunities and constraints. Thailand can benefit from competition for investment and economic partnerships, but excessive dependence on either side could increase its vulnerability to geopolitical pressure. The findings also suggest that hedging is becoming increasingly difficult in the technology sector. Digital infrastructure, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, data governance, and strategic supply chains can create long-term technological dependence and path dependence.

Consequently, Thailand needs sector-specific risk assessments and greater diversification rather than relying solely on traditional diplomatic balancing (Lim & Roberts, 2026; Zhao, 2025).

The third objective concerns the role of ASEAN Centrality in supporting Thailand's strategic autonomy. ASEAN provides Thailand with an institutional framework through which it can manage great-power competition collectively rather than confronting either power alone. Supporting ASEAN-led dialogue and regional mechanisms enables Thailand to maintain diplomatic flexibility while reinforcing principles such as peaceful dispute settlement, freedom of navigation, and international law (MFA, 2025a; Poonkham, 2024). ASEAN Centrality therefore functions not only as a diplomatic principle but also as a strategic instrument for reducing the risks associated with great-power rivalry.

Overall, the findings indicate that Thailand's hedging strategy can remain effective only if it is credible, consistent, and diversified. Thailand should establish a stable policy baseline based on strategic autonomy, diversified partnerships, ASEAN Centrality, respect for international law, and avoidance of excessive dependence on any single economic or technological system. As Pujol (2024) and Kuik (2024) suggest, credible hedging does not require confrontation with either great power; rather, it requires clear principles that define the boundaries of Thailand's flexibility. Thus, Thailand's strategic autonomy depends not on choosing between the United States and China, but on maintaining sufficient room to maneuver while strengthening ASEAN-based regional cooperation.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Thailand's hedging strategy between the United States and China in the South China Sea during 2020–2025 represents a flexible form of strategic balancing aimed at protecting national interests while avoiding excessive dependence on either great power. The findings demonstrate that Thailand has sought to maintain constructive relations with both the United States and China while using ASEAN-led mechanisms, diplomatic engagement, and international law to preserve strategic autonomy. This approach has enabled Thailand to gain economic opportunities, maintain security cooperation, reduce the risk of being drawn into direct confrontation, and preserve greater flexibility in its foreign policy choices. The research also highlights that hedging is not without limitations. As U.S.-China

strategic competition becomes more intense, Thailand's ability to maintain a balanced position may face increasing pressure, particularly in areas such as advanced technology, supply-chain security, the Taiwan Strait, and the South China Sea. Therefore, the effectiveness of Thailand's hedging strategy will depend on its ability to diversify partnerships, strengthen ASEAN unity, uphold international law, and respond flexibly to changing geopolitical conditions.

Overall, the findings support the argument that Thailand's foreign policy should be understood not as passive neutrality, but as active neutrality centered on national interests. Economic engagement can create opportunities, security cooperation can expand strategic options, and ASEAN can function as an important institutional buffer. The significance of this research lies in showing how a middle power such as Thailand can navigate prolonged great-power rivalry without committing fully to either side. If Thailand can sustain this principled balance, hedging will remain a valuable strategy for protecting national interests and maintaining strategic autonomy in an increasingly uncertain regional order.

Suggestions

This research also contributes a new perspective to the Body of Knowledge by conceptualizing Thailand's hedging strategy as "active neutrality." Rather than viewing neutrality as simply avoiding alignment, active neutrality emphasizes proactive engagement with competing powers while prioritizing national interests, strategic flexibility, and regional institutions. This framework helps explain how a middle power can simultaneously cooperate with major powers in different areas without becoming fully dependent on either side.

Suggestions for Public

For the public, greater awareness of international relations and Thailand's strategic choices is recommended. Citizens should critically evaluate information about U.S.-China competition, avoid polarization, and recognize how geopolitical developments can affect Thailand's economy, security, technology, and employment.

Future Research

For future research, scholars could compare Thailand's hedging strategy with those of other ASEAN middle powers, such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, or Singapore. Future studies could also examine Thailand's responses to specific issues, including the Taiwan Strait, technological competition, supply-chain restructuring, and maritime security. Longitudinal research beyond 2025 would further determine whether active neutrality remains sustainable as U.S.-China competition evolves.

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