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at the Crossroads of the Thai Internal Conflict

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Thailand in Sino-US Rivalry at the Crossroads of the Thai Internal Conflict

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The political crisis in Thailand started in the final years of the Thaksin Shinawatra administration (2001-2006), which finally led to a military coup in September 2006. But it was not the last coup Thailand had experienced. In May 2014, the military staged another coup overthrowing the elected government of Yingluck Shinawatra (2011-2014). Yingluck is sister of Thaksin. Months before, anti-government protesters took control of business districts in Bangkok while putting pressure on Yingluck who was attempting to pass an Amnesty Bill that could set her brother free from corruption charges. The protests paved the way for the military to once again intervene in politics and suggested that the army's political interests seemed to align with those of the protesters. Currently, Thailand is under the custody of the military regime of Prime Minister General Prayuth Chan-ocha, former army chief and leader of the coup makers. The enduring political crisis has effectively shaped the contour of the country's foreign policy, especially in its relations with the great powers. The crisis has also provided a vital platform for these powers—in this case, the United States and China, to compete with each other in order to influence the behaviour and policy of Thailand at a time when the country has been experiencing political turbulence. It is however imperative to explain in a wider context the role of Washington and Beijing in Thailand's protracted crisis and their competition for power and supremacy in Southeast Asia. Thailand continues to serve as a "strategic depot" for the two great powers to consolidate their sphere of influence in this part of the world. From this perspective, it can be argued that the Thai political situation has further intensified the level of competition between the United States and China, which has in turn readjusted the overall balance of power in Southeast Asia. This paper examines the different approaches of the United States and China in dealing with the Thai crisis. It asks: Which approach is more effective in the attempt to win the Thai influence? It investigates the way in which the competition between the two great powers has come to dominate Thailand's foreign affairs. In the final section, the paper briefly discusses the standing of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Thailand's polarised politics and seeks to elucidate whether Thailand has been able to exploit its position in ASEAN to dilute the overwhelming power of the United States and China over its domestic and foreign affairs.

The Eagle versus the Dragon

Ian Bremmer has rightly observed that the United States and China are growing dangerously hostile towards one another. He questioned: Could this be worse than the Cold War?¹ The fact that the "list of irritants" in Sino-U.S. relations has grown in past years seems to validate Bremmer's point. For example, back in 2010, burgeoning bilateral tensions almost led to a

trade and currency war. U.S. Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner claimed that China's refusal to rapidly increase the value of its currency was hurting America's economic recovery. Rejecting the claim, Chinese leaders stressed that the United States was wrong to blame China for its own economic woes.² On top of this, the United States accused China of failing to protect the intellectual property of foreign companies. But economic issues were not the only flash points in Sino-U.S. relations. The two countries disagreed over sanctions against Iran in regards to its nuclear programme. The United States kept a watchful eye on the political development in North Korea—a country which has enjoyed a special relationship with China. Meanwhile, China criticised the United States for interfering in the Sino-Japanese conflict concerning the dispute over the ownership of the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands—the issue that stole the limelight during the 17th ASEAN Summit in Hanoi in late October 2010. In the Southeast Asian context, the United States was uneasy about the closeness between the Chinese leaders and their counterparts in Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos. Besides, the resurgence of the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, which involve China, Taiwan and four members of ASEAN—Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines, has threatened peace and security in the region. The United States perceived the ongoing conflict as a threat to its own interests: the right to freely navigate the area of disputes. Then U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called the conflict “a leading diplomatic priority” for the United States during the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting in Vietnam in July 2010.³ In 2012, China proved that its influence in Cambodia was well established when Beijing was able to convince Phnom Penh not to come up with a solution to the South China Sea Crisis. This was the first time in ASEAN's history when a joint communiqué was not released toward the end of the conference.

But these problems are merely symptoms of an illness in Sino-U.S. relations. The real cause of the problems lies in the power struggle between the two powers, one that has maintained its status as the world's sole superpower and the other that has emerged as a new challenger to the current international order. In this essay, it supports the general argument that there is a tendency that China's rise, economically and militarily, will inevitably shift the regional order in which the United States has helped sustain since the end of the Cold War. John Mearsheimer argued in 2005, “A much more powerful China can also be expected to try to push the United States out of the Asia-Pacific region, much the way the United States pushed the European great powers out of the Western Hemisphere in the nineteenth century.”⁴ Southeast Asia has evidently become a battlefield in the fiercely competitive power game between the United States and China, as they both have tried, through different methods and strategies, to retain their domination over countries in the region.⁵ There is a possibility that China may use its newly gained capabilities to defy the American claim to leadership, particularly in Southeast Asia, and to reestablish regional hegemony of its own. Indeed, China has already extended its influence on neighbouring states that have been dominated by the U.S. interests previously, including Thailand.⁶

Intervention versus Pragmatism

In May 2010, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell, during his brief visit to Bangkok on his way to Naypyidaw, proposed a meeting between representatives of the Abhisit government and leaders of the pro-Thaksin red-shirted United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD). Defending his initiative, Campbell reflected on his country's growing concern about Thailand's violently escalating conflict, stating that this was because Thailand was a United States' treaty ally. But the traditional elite were not convinced. They viewed it as a move to manipulate the political situation in Thailand. Immediately, Thai Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya rejected Campbell's role as a peacemaker, calling it a plot to meddle in his

country's domestic politics.⁷ In the end, the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok managed to arrange a working breakfast between Campbell and Jaturon Chaisaeng, former Thaksin cabinet member and a red-shirt leader, and Noppadon Pattama, former foreign minister and Thaksin's legal adviser, without government's representatives. The meeting deeply infuriated the leaders in Bangkok. They were astounded by the seemingly changing policy of the U.S. government which had previously been openly supportive of the traditional elite. Throughout the Cold War, the United States had forged a close alliance with the military, the bureaucracy and the palace, in their combat against the communists.⁸ These intimate ties were however coming loose following the change of political landscape in Thailand in recent years. Realising that there were new players entering the Thai political domain not aligning themselves with the traditional elite, the United States embarked on diversifying its policy options and, at least on the surface, reached out to the red-shirted faction so as to ensure that its interests would not be affected if the political proxies of the red shirts faction won the next election. Shawn Crispin argued that the United States adopted an "interventionist approach" in order to manoeuvre the Thai political situation to its own advantages; and in doing so has befriended, as much as irritated, both sides in Thailand's conflict.⁹ For example, while Campbell's initiative may have symbolised the United States' sympathy toward the red-shirted movement, it was also reported that the U.S. intelligence officials eavesdropped on Thaksin and warned the Abhisit government against possible sabotage during the red-shirts' rally, supposedly at the order of Thaksin.¹⁰ This report disappointed the red-shirted leaders who felt that the United States could not be trusted. This interventionist approach was again evident in the aftermath of the 2014 coup when the United States has imposed a number of sanctions against Thailand, hoping to use them to conform the behaviour of the Thai military state.

On the contrary, China has strictly upheld a non-interference policy vis-à-vis Thailand. Since the coup of 2014, leaders in Beijing have concentrated on "making money rather than enemies" and are content to stay neutral in Thailand's polarised politics. Crispin noted that China's pragmatic diplomacy throughout the recent Thai crisis stole yet another march from the United States' interventionist approach, as both countries have become locked in a subtle, but intensifying, competition for increased influence in Thailand and the region.¹¹ While certain Thai political players are watching the United States through suspicious eyes, they feel more comfortable with China's position in the conflict. Panitan Wattanayagorn, former government's acting spokesman in the Abhisit administration once said:¹²

Our interests and international relations are becoming more complex. We see advantages in the competition between superpowers. The United States has high stakes in Thailand and they actively pursue their interests...China is less active and uses an indirect approach and its handling of this situation was no different...China-Thailand ties are becoming more and more dynamic and China is very pragmatic, but very keen in getting information and reacting.

The above statement was reaffirmed by the Chinese Ambassador to Singapore, Wei Wei, who stressed that China may be anxious to learn what has been going in Thailand, but it adhered to the principle of non-interference. He told this author, "This is Thailand's internal affairs".¹³ The clash between the two approaches signifies a compelling rivalry between the United States and China. Already, China's non-interference approach has proven to be effective in cementing its ties with Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar, and has now been met with a favourable response from the Thai elite who have insisted on handling their own internal problems without outside pressure. The United States may have been a strategic partner of Thailand, but Washington's hands-on approach has widened the gap in this partnership. Meanwhile, China has quietly bid to capitalise on that gap, presenting itself as an impartial

power in the Thai conflict. *The Asia Time* reported, “One Chinese official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, suggested that the United States had blundered by intervening so overtly in recent Thai events and credited his embassy with taking a more nuanced approach to the crisis.”¹⁴ Moreover, China has no pretence about promoting human rights and democracy. This firm posture has to a great extent guaranteed that China would not push for political reforms in Thailand, nor it would criticise the red-shirted pro-democracy agenda.

Competing Diplomacies

Thai-U.S. relations have in the past years turned somewhat erratic. The period saw the United States awarding major non-NATO ally status to Thailand.¹⁵ It also witnessed gross human rights violations in Thailand which were a subject of concern of the Bush and Obama administrations.¹⁶ Whereas economic relations have remained one of the core elements of this bilateral relationship, the FTA negotiations were derailed by Thai domestic political factors. Thailand is indeed the oldest ally of the United States in Asia. The 1833 Treaty of Amity and Commerce set off this relationship which proved to be crucial in subsequent years when an American friend was needed to pull Thailand out of dangerous situations and to help it ward off enemies. For instance, the United States protected Thailand from demands of war reparations by Britain in the aftermath of the Second World War.¹⁷ It also granted generous financial and military aid to Thailand in the containment efforts against communism during the Cold War. In return, the Thai state was obliged to cultivate an anti-communist reputation to satisfy the U.S. government in order to justify the American aid grant.¹⁸ The mutual benefit allowed the United States to reconstruct an anti-communist Thai state which openly condoned the rise of militarism. In 1982, the Thai and U.S. forces commenced annual joint training exercises “Cobra Gold” to symbolise the U.S. military presence in Southeast Asia.¹⁹ From this historical point of view, the United States has found it “legitimate” to frequently intervene in Thailand’s domestic and external affairs, primarily to protect its own power position in the region.

It is important to note that the Thai-U.S. security alliance has remained the fundamental element in their relationship. This security alliance in the modern era is governed by two core agreements: the 1954 Manila Pact and the 1962 Thanat-Rusk Communiqué. The Manila Pact has its roots in the Cold War and involved eight countries—Australia, France, Great Britain, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand and the United States—and was committed through the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO), a supposedly identical twin of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), to stem communist expansion. SEATO was eventually dissolved in 1977 but the Manila Pact provisions committing the United States to protect Thailand from communism remain in force. The Thanat-Rusk Communiqué expanded this undertaking. It was signed by Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman and his American counterpart Dean Rusk. It pledged each country to come to the other’s aid in the event of any external attack. These have underpinned Washington’s military support to Bangkok through arms, training and education. More essentially, they have given the United States a wide range of comparative advantages, especially in terms of scope and room to advance its interests vis-à-vis Thailand. China certainly does not have an equivalent defence treaty with Thailand which could be utilised to “legally” push its strategic interests while Beijing is dealing with Bangkok on a variety of issues.

The two agreements have equally benefited Thailand and the United States. On the Thai part, the kingdom gains most from the access to training and exercises essential to professional development of the armed forces. Thailand currently hosts approximately 60 U.S.-led military exercises annually through the Cobra Gold series. Its main benefit from the

alliance also lies in the access it provides to doctrinal support, education opportunities and advanced equipment sales. In the case of Thailand being confronted by external threats, U.S. support would undoubtedly prove vital. Likewise, as defence expert Robert Karniol argues, the United States also benefits from extensive training sites and facilities in Thailand. There is also Bangkok's wider support—cooperation in combating terrorism, helping contain arms proliferation, hosting U.S.-led regional relief operations and sending peacekeepers to certain locations. As a result, Thailand was supposedly obliged to hand over suspected Russian arms dealer Victor Bout to the United States in November 2010 since the bilateral security alliance indicates the need for both countries to work together in the area of arms trafficking. While in recent years the United States has not pressed the Thai government to acquire more facilities and access under the security treaties in the way in which it has been doing in the Philippines, it has allegedly turned Thailand into a secure destination for situating secret interrogation facilities inside a Thai military base where terror suspects from Pakistan and Afghanistan were held captive. In sum, bilateral activities through existing defence agreements have brought various advantages to each partner while promoting broader bilateral cooperation.

But the current circumstances in Thailand have greatly complicated the United States' interventionist approach, as it could never fully satisfy one faction in the conflict without displeasing the other. The complication multiplies as China's rise poses as a challenge to the United States' hegemony in the region. Demoralised by Thailand's increasingly intimate courtship with China, the United States has exercised its supposedly legitimate right to interfere in Thai affairs as part of competing with China for Thai influence, while making use of its firm strategic partnership with Thailand as its own comparative advantage. Thailand and the United States have had a comprehensive relationship covering all important areas relating to politics, economic, security, defence, education, health and human security, science and technology, sustainable development and the environment. Both have had a forum for consultation and dialogue on their bilateral relationship called the "Thai-U.S. Strategic Dialogue". Both also agreed to draw the Thai-U.S. Plan of Action which was to be a roadmap for moving forward the bilateral relationship. And certainly, the United States possessed one thing that China lacked — some moral authority. And for this reason, the United States once again has employed its intervening approach in the Thai political situation to firm up its position in Thailand and to fend off the influence of China.

Evidently, immediately after the coup, an army of Western countries voiced their concern about the disappearance of democratic space. Subsequently, they imposed "soft sanctions" against the junta. In the case of the US, as a treaty ally of Thailand and according to its laws, the US is obliged to penalize the Thai junta for undertaking a coup that overthrew an elected government. This is true with regards to any country receiving military aid from the U.S. when it experiences a coup. On the day of the coup, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said in a statement, "I am disappointed by the decision of the Thai military to suspend the constitution and take control of the government after a long period of political turmoil, and there was no justification for this military coup. [...] We are reviewing our military and other assistance and engagements, consistent with US law."²⁰ Accordingly, the US government suspended financial assistance to Thailand by \$4.7 million halting joint programs for Thai police training, which included firearms handling and a trip to the U.S. for senior officers.

Already, Thailand was excluded from the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC)—the largest international military maritime exercise in the world—held in June 2014 in Hawaii, in response to spiraling human-rights abuses in the wake of the military coup. In her interview, then American Ambassador to Thailand, Kristie Kenney, disclosed, "We take very seriously the whole human-rights aspect to this coup in Thailand. One of the things our government has

done is look at our military engagements.”²¹ In addition to sanctions, the United States adopted several punitive measures to punish the Thai junta. In July 2015, Washington announced that, owing to the continued allegations of human trafficking especially in the Thai sex and fishing sectors, Thailand was to be relegated to the lowest rank in the US’s Trafficking in Persons Report (TPR) for the second consecutive year, the same category as Syria, Iran, and North Korea.²² This announcement was another blow to Thailand’s reputation and this could result in further economic sanctions both at the government and business levels. It should also be noted that during the U.S. Independence Day party hosted by Chargé d’Affaires Patrick Murphy in Bangkok on 4 July 2015, none of the coup makers were invited; this was meant to send a strong message of the U.S.’s rejection of the coup. And now, it is clear that while the Cobra Gold went on, but it was downgraded as part of the US soft sanctions against the Thai junta.

The American position towards Thailand triggered other democratic nations to use international sanctions as a way to pressure the junta to loosen its firm grip on power. The European Union initiated its own sanctions against the NCPO by announcing that it would freeze ongoing bilateral cooperation, including the suspension of all official visits to and from Thailand. In more specific details, the EU has halted its Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Thailand, which was finalized in November 2013, but was yet to be ratified. The Agreement was designed to strengthen cooperation in a variety of sectors including “tourism, employment, education, migration, transport and environment.” It also aimed to promote a political dialogue between the two sides. Additionally, the EU has shelved the negotiations with Thailand on the Free Trade Agreement.²³ Bilateral trade between the EU and Thailand stood at 32 billion euros, or \$42 billion, in 2012. Such a move would cost Thailand many business opportunities in Europe. The EU has also imposed a travel ban for all members of the NCPO. The Council of the European Union released its statement on 23 June 2014, urging the military to restore the legitimate democratic process and to respect and uphold human rights and fundamental freedoms by freeing all political detainees. Failing to do so could result in “further possible measures” against the NCPO. The EU has been known for its periodic uses of sanctions to address a myriad of issues. In the context of Southeast Asia, the EU had long imposed stiff sanction measures against Myanmar when it had been under military rule. As a part of the EU’s attempt to change the behavior of Myanmar’s regime, it exploited international platforms to alienate the generals in Nay Pyi Taw, such as exclusion from the ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting) process. The results were of course a mixture of successes and failures. Meanwhile, the Australian government, on 31 May 2014, issued a statement confirming the postponement of bilateral military operations with Thailand. It said, “Australia has postponed three activities for coming weeks in Thailand: a military operations law training course for Thai military officers; a reconnaissance visit for a counter improvised explosive device training exercise; and a reconnaissance visit for a counter terrorism training exercise. The Australian Government has also put in place a mechanism to prevent the leaders of the coup from travelling to Australia.”²⁴

Obviously, the US has shown that it wanted to become more assertive in its relations with Thailand. In January 2015, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel visited Thailand and met with Foreign Minister General Thanasak Patimaprakorn, as well as former Prime Ministers Yingluck and Abhisit. His tour in Thailand turned controversial after he urged the military government to lift the martial law and to return power to the Thais soon. Also his remarks came in the aftermath of Yingluck being impeached in a case of her mishandling of a rice-pledging scheme. Observers believed that the United States wanted to send a strong message of its disapproval of the military government, its slow political reform and its harassment against the opposition. Immediately, Russel’s comments were harshly responded

by the junta. Prayuth called Russel's action as interference into the Thai domestic affairs.²⁵ Meanwhile, ultra-nationalists expressed their anger against the United States; they stormed the Facebook pages of the US Embassy in Bangkok and of President Barack Obama, sending repeated messages of Thailand being an independent country and will not take an order from the Americans. At the same time, the Thai Committee of Foreign Affairs summoned the Chargé d'Affaires Patrick Murphy even when it had no right to do so. The Thai reaction caused much concerns for Washington. In return, the State Department summoned the Thai ambassador to Washington warning that the drama could cause a huge impact on bilateral relations.²⁶

The US's current position regarding the Thai situation has deeply infuriated the leaders in Bangkok. They were astounded by the seemingly changing policy of the U.S. government, which had previously been openly supportive of the traditional elite. Throughout the Cold War, the US had forged a close alliance with the military, the bureaucracy and the palace, in their combat against the communists. These intimate ties were however coming loose following the change of political landscape in Thailand in recent years. The United States realised that there were new players entering the Thai political domain who are not aligning themselves with the traditional elite. Therefore, it sees the need to diversify its policy options and reach out to the red-shirted faction as part of its obligation to promote democracy, but more importantly to ensure that it will not put "all eggs in one basket." This was evident in the fact that the US diplomats have visited more frequently the remote regions of the red shirts in Thailand. Again, I argue that the United States has adopted an "interventionist approach" in order to manoeuvre the Thai political situation to its own advantages; and in doing so has befriended, as much as irritated, both sides in Thailand's conflict.

China's tactic has been cautious and very diplomatic. Thailand and China established its diplomatic ties in 1975. Throughout the latter half of the Cold War, Thailand and China formed a loose military alignment against the advancement of Vietnamese communists in Indochina.²⁷ After the end of the Cold War, bilateral relations have remained healthy thanks to the absence of territorial disputes, the firm ties between the Thai royal family and the Chinese leadership, and the well-integrated Chinese community in Thailand. Thaksin, a model of successful Thai-Chinese, took advantage of his Chinese ancestral roots and a new surge in public awareness about China to craft a China-favoured policy to satisfy domestic enthusiasm for a closer relationship with Beijing. A 2006 poll showed that more than 70 per cent of Thais considered China as Thailand's most important external influence.²⁸ The Sino-Thai FTA, the first between China and an ASEAN country, took effect on 1 October 2003. The FTA was invented to slash tariffs for fruit and vegetable flows in each other's market. Thailand claimed that, as a result of his initiated FTA, bilateral trade reached US\$3.1 billion, a 23 per cent increase in 2007 when compared with that of 2006.²⁹ Thailand has subsequently constructed an alliance with China in a similar way as it has done with the United States. The Cobra Gold exercise lent its form and purpose to Thailand's military rapprochement with China.³⁰ Since the early 1980s, Thailand has purchased armaments and military-related equipment under this partnership at "friendship prices", much of which effectively amounted to, in the words of Anthony Smith, "military gift aid".³¹ Although some of these armaments from China were merely scrap, they symbolised close military ties between the two countries. Sino-Thai military links are among some of the most developed in the region—second only to Myanmar, China's quasi ally. To demonstrate such close links, the Marine Corps of China's People's Liberation Army trained with Thai Marines in an exercise which lasted for three weeks (26 October-14 November 2010), in the Gulf of Thailand. Some analysts claim Thailand is

intentionally balancing its military and financial dependence on the United States by nurturing better relations with China.³²

At a deeper level however, Sino-Thai defence exercises and other military exchanges, although progressively advancing over the years, have quantitatively and qualitatively lagged far behind the U.S.-Thai security relations. In early 2010, China proposed joint military exercises to the Thai leaders with an all-expenses paid buffet of air, naval and land drills throughout Thailand's jungles and coasts. Patrick Winn of the *Global Post* asserted that the People's Liberation Army even suggested a replication of America's centrepiece exercise, a full-on coastal assault led by amphibious vehicles, gunships and helicopters circling the Gulf of Thailand. Despite its ambition, the People's Liberation Army still lacks the American gear and expertise that Thailand now enjoys, Ian Storey argued. Storey, a fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, also noted that a typical Cobra Gold exercise—summoning 12,000 troops and spanning two weeks—dwarfs the largest Sino-Thai drill: a 2005 naval operation that ended in less than four hours. Basically, China does not possess the same military capabilities as those of the United States, and certainly lacks sophisticated military know-how to lure Thailand away from its American friend. It may be true that the overall Sino-Thai relations have greatly improved over the years and that the scale of Chinese military exercises with Thailand will probably increase in the future. But Thailand's relationship with China is different from that with the United States. It is much less about security, but more on politics and business. Although China has rapidly modernised its army in the past decades and augments its military budget annually, it will take a while before the country could confidently challenge the US' military supremacy in Thailand. In any case, it is expected that Thailand will not allow its defence ties with China to be similar to the Thai-U.S. military relations. Surachart Bamrungsuk, a military specialist at Chulalongkorn University, averred that Thailand remained highly protective of Cobra Gold and its friendship with the United States. Because of incomparable values and firm commitment on the part of the United States as stipulated in the two key defence agreements, Bangkok will likely not attempt to jeopardise its military ties with Washington. Yet, at the same time, the Thai government sees nothing wrong with nurturing an intimate relationship with China in order to diversify its policy options.

Quietly, Thailand is sliding into China's warm, embracing arms. Most Thai cabinet ministers and powerful businesses in Thailand have significant investments in China. Thailand's Charoen Pokphand (CP), one of Southeast Asia's largest companies, has been doing business in China since 1949. Bangkok Bank still has the largest foreign bank branch on Shanghai's Bund waterfront, only recently have a few other foreign banks gained token footholds on China's preeminent address.³³ Activities between Thai and Chinese business conglomerates are regularly conducted, with the exchange of visits and the sharing of business information. Thailand has also welcomed China's soft power with arms wide open. More Thai students are now keen to learn Mandarin, prompting China to dispatch a large number of language teachers to Thailand.³⁴ Clearly, Thailand's foreign policy toward China has been implemented on the basis of a win-win formula, based on their principal rule of "respecting each other's sovereignty". To confirm this, Thailand decided to expatriate nearly 100 Uighur migrants back to China—an exercise that might have appeased the Chinese leadership but bearing a huge cost on Thailand's internal security.³⁵ On 17 August 2015, a bombing took place near the Erawan Shrine in central Bangkok killing 20 people and injured 125—an act that seemed to link with the Uighur terrorist network.³⁶ In return, Beijing has avoided intervening in the Thai domestic crisis. Business is still a key word in this bilateral relationship. China has hoped that it would be able to cooperate with Thailand on mega-projects like building the high-speed train, in competition with other prospective investors, like Japan. The project costs as much as \$23 billion.³⁷

Consequences on Thai Foreign Policy

Standing in between the two approaches—interventionist and pragmatic, Thailand has refreshed its traditional diplomatic strategy: playing one power against the other in order to maintain a degree of autonomy in its internal and external affairs, just like it once pitted the British against the French during the colonial period. Accordingly, Thailand is in the process of strengthening its ties with China to neutralise the United States' hegemonic position in the political domain. Likewise, it is seeking the United States' protection against any foreseeable threat that accompanies China's rise. Taking into account the complication of Thai politics, a question must be asked: Is the Thai strategy functioning well? In many ways, this strategy has proven beneficial to certain parties in the Thai conflict and for Thailand in the context of international politics. America's interventionist approach has driven Thailand further into China's orbit. Closer relations between Thailand and China are being celebrated at the expense of a growing disagreement in the Thai-U.S. partnership. Reportedly, the United States was unhappy with certain Thai moves, including the Thai decision to hold a joint military exercise with China. Whereas the United States made known of its dislike of Thaksin, a position that has brought about a sense of resentment among his red-shirted supporters, China continues to be friendly with the former prime minister as well as his opponents. Through the Thai crisis, China has allowed Thaksin to get in and out of the country, and every time assigned a high-ranking diplomat to look after him throughout his visit.

However, Thai-Chinese relations are not without problems; and this is how the United States is able to assert its role and entrench its influence in the kingdom. Beijing may have gained Thai influence with its non-interference policy, but some members in the red-shirted camp have been talking about the persistent economic and social disparity and the unfair distribution of national wealth, which they believe, is under the control of the wealthy Thai-Chinese elite. It is too early to determine if this assumption would cause an impact on Thai-Chinese relations. But certainly, China's rising economic power has already threatened its overall trade relations with Thailand. The impacts of the Thai-Chinese FTA could be measured by the increased trade volume at 27 per cent for Thai exports and 14 per cent for those of China. However, Thailand's trade deficit with China stood at US\$2 billion one year after the FTA was implemented.³⁸ A rapidly growing two-way trade is heavily weighted in China's favour while poor Thai farmers and manufacturers, often identifying themselves with the red-shirted movement, have struggled to compete with China's cheaper products. In the realm of regional politics, the image of a Chinese threat has the potential to eclipse China's effort to build trust, and thus to gain influence, in the wake of the Thai crisis. As a result, Thailand has stepped up its game to compete with China's rising threat. For example, Thailand's contract farming programme in Laos was said to be initiated to offset similar projects between Laos and China. Currently, Laos produces corn, soybeans and cardamom under contract farming for export to China.³⁹ Laos itself has been seeking to reduce its dependence on Thailand and reaching out to China as well as Vietnam to help rejuvenate the moribund economy. After diplomatic normalisation in 1988, China has overwhelmed Laos with financial and technical assistance in an attempt to pull Vientiane into its orbit and away from Thailand's influence. The United States' presence has to a great extent delayed China's advancement of its influence in the region and is therefore complementary to Thailand's policy of balancing China. In another instance, Thailand has cooperated with ASEAN and the United States in counteracting the perceived Chinese threat, particularly in the case of territorial claims in the South China Sea.⁴⁰ Although Thailand is not one of the claimants, it supports the signing of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in 2002 which stresses the need to resolve the territorial and jurisdictional disputes by peaceful means, without resorting to

the threat or use of force, through friendly consultations and negotiations by sovereign states directly concerned.

Ultimately, Thailand is obliged to accommodate with the United States and China, especially if this could mean protecting the interests of certain political factions. But it is also willing to set one power against the other so as to contain its scope of political crisis and to allow greater room for manoeuvre in its foreign affairs. Thailand is therefore not expected to make any sudden lurch away from the United States and toward China, or vice versa.

A Role for ASEAN?

In April 2009, the red-shirted protesters stormed into the venue of the ASEAN Plus Three Summit in Pattaya and forced the cancellation of the meeting. Leaders of various member countries had to flee the scene, some via the hotel's roof and other through the backdoor exit. That incident raised a quintessential question of whether non-interference principle should continue to be tightly upheld. So far, some ASEAN members have insisted on maintaining such principle, apparently to protect their own power interests at home. The Thai government rejected the plan of the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand to host a press conference on human rights violations in Vietnam because this could be considered as interfering in Vietnam's affairs.⁴¹ At a deeper level, Thailand is well aware of its own controversial human rights record and thus strongly endorses the non-interference rule to shield itself from outside criticism. Meanwhile, none of ASEAN nations came out to condemn the coup of 2014. It seems once again that democracy is an odd fellow of this organisation.

Moving away from Thailand's domestic politics, ASEAN members have entertained different worldviews and adopted different strategies to suit their national interests. It can be argued that, unlike during the Cold War where a common enemy could easily be identified, ASEAN has been unable to produce a coherent standpoint in a myriad of critical issues confronting the organisation. Some perceive China as their biggest threat, while others may not share the same perception. Some maintain their suspicion of the U.S. presence in the region, while others regard Washington as an indispensable force that guarantees regional security. Is Thailand ready to rely on ASEAN to counterbalance the United States and China? The answer is rather downbeat. In fact, the existing crisis has compelled Thailand to become more inward-looking. Successive post-coup governments have been preoccupied with safeguarding their own political survival. As a consequence, their confidence in ASEAN mechanisms has reached its lowest point. The Abhisit government rebuffed ASEAN's offer to mediate its conflict with Cambodia at the peak of the territorial dispute over the Preah Vihear Temple, and insisted on managing the issue on a bilateral basis. The Yingluck government was too preoccupied with safeguarding its own position from political storms at home and thus neglecting the importance of foreign policy and ASEAN. It might be true that the U.S. reengagement with ASEAN and its new membership of the East Asia Summit (EAS) form a part of the organisation's strategy to dilute the Chinese's influence on the region. And in theory, Thailand should be able to take advantage from this same strategy, employing the hands of ASEAN to keep the United States and China at arm's length. Unfortunately, Thailand has failed to exhibit its leadership in ASEAN. Similarly, ASEAN is incapable of representing itself as an alternative source of a well-integrated regional power that could stand shoulder to shoulder with the United States and China.

NOTES

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- ¹ Ian Bremmer, "China VS America: Fight of the Century", *Prospect*, Issue 169 (22 March 2010) <<http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2010/03/china-vs-america-fight-of-the-century/>> (accessed 27 October 2010).
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- ⁵ Wayne Bert, *The United States, China and Southeast Asian Security: A Changing of the Guard?*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 83.
- ⁶ Jörg Vogelmann, "The Ascent of China as a New Superpower and the Relationship with the Hegemonic United States: Rough Power Politics or Peaceful Economic Cooperation" (M.A. Dissertation, Universität Stuttgart, 2008), P. 2. Also see, Zalmay M. Khalilzad, et al, *The United States and a Rising China: Strategic and Military Implications* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1999), p. 70.
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- ⁸ See, Daniel Fineman, *A Special Relationship: The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947-1958* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), p. 3.
- ⁹ Shawn W. Crispin, "US Slips, China Glides in Thai Crisis", *Asia Times Online*, 20 July 2010 <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/LG20Ae01.html> (accessed 28 October 2010).
- ¹⁰ "UDD Submits Letter to US Embassy", *Bangkok Post*, 17 March 2010.
- ¹¹ Crispin, "US Slips, China Glides in Thai Crisis".
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ In a private discussion with Chinese Ambassador to Singapore, Wei Wei, on 11 October 2010, Singapore.
- ¹⁴ Crispin, "US Slips, China Glides in Thai Crisis".
- ¹⁵ Thailand was awarded this status in 2003. As the United States' major non-NATO ally, Thailand was now eligible to participate in certain counter-terrorism initiatives, get a priority delivery of military surplus (ranging from rations to ships), access loans on equipment and materials for cooperative research and development projects and evaluations, use American financing for the purchase or lease of certain defence equipment, and receive reciprocal training.
- ¹⁶ These included the war on drugs (under the Thaksin administration in 2003), the conflict in the Thai south which has erupted since 1994, and the current violent confrontations between the pro- and anti-government forces which culminated in May 2010.
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- ¹⁸ Daniel Fineman, *A Special Relationship: The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947-1958* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), p. 97.
- ¹⁹ Michael Connors, "Thailand and the United States: Beyond Hegemony?", edited by Mark Beeson, *Bush and Asia: The US's Evolving Relationships with East Asia* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 131-132.
- ²⁰ See <<http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/05/226446.htm>> (accessed 31 August 2015).
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- ²² Erik Parpart and Petchanet Pratrueangkrai, "Thailand Stays on Tier 3", *The Nation*, 28 July 2015 <<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/national/Thailand-stays-on-Tier-3-30265370.html>> (accessed 31 August 2015).
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- ²⁴ See <http://foreignminister.gov.au/releases/Pages/2014/jb_mr_140531.aspx?ministerid=4> (accessed 31 August 2015).
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- ²⁶ In my private discussion with an officer of the State Department, via email, 12 February 2015.

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- ²⁷ Sukhumbhand Paribatra, *From Enmity to Alignment: Thailand's Evolving Relations with China*, ISIS paper no.1, (Bangkok: Institute of Security and International Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1987), pp. 18-19.
- ²⁸ Joshua Kurlantzick, "China's Charm: Implications of Chinese Soft Power", *Policy Brief*, vol. 47 (June 2006), p. 1.
- ²⁹ Source: Department of East Asian Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand.
- ³⁰ Ian Storey argues that Sino-Thai military relations have a long way to go before they start to rival that between the United States and Thai militaries, who conduct more than 40 joint military exercises every year. In, Ian Storey, "China and Thailand: Enhancing Military-Security Ties in the 21st Century" *China Brief*, vol. 8, no. 14 (Washington D.C.: The Jamestown Foundation, 3 July 2008), p. 7.
- ³¹ Anthony Smith, "Thailand's Security and the Sino-Thai Relationship" *China Brief*, vol. 5, no. 3 (Washington D.C.: The Jamestown Foundation, 1 February 2005), p. 1.
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- ³³ David Fullbrook, "So Long U.S., Hello China, India", *Asia Times*, 4 November 2004.
- ³⁴ "The Soft Power of Happy Chinese", *International Herald Tribune*, 18 January 2006.
- ³⁵ Amy Sawitta Lefevre and Pracha Hariraksapitak, "Thailand Sends Nearly 100 Uighur Migrants back to China", *Reuters*, 9 July 2015 <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/07/09/us-thailand-uighurs-china-idUSKCN0PJoE120150709>> (accessed 31 August 2015).
- ³⁶ See <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34105249>> (accessed 31 August 2015).
- ³⁷ Kate Hodal "Thailand's Ruling Junta Approves China Rail Links Worth \$23Bn", *The Guardian*, 1 August 2014 <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/01/thailand-junta-approve-china-rail-link-23bn>> (accessed 31 August 2015).
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- ⁴¹ Pavin Chachavalpongpun, "Curbed Freedoms: Hypocrisy at New Heights", *Bangkok Post*, 29 September 2010.

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